**Chapter 18**

**Cold like Death**

*We were not ready.*

*The opening of Hell’s Reach and the battle against Chrysaor in the outskirts of a bloody maelstrom should have let us realise this.*

*But we didn’t really acknowledge it. We believed that if we followed Jackson and didn’t make any mistakes, everything would be fine in the end.*

*After all, during the Great Quest to return the Master Bolt, the only Demigod who died was Scipio Varus, and he was an assassin everyone was relieved to see perish.*

*But the Sea of Monsters was not the Labyrinth.*

*The opposition was way stronger than during our First Quest.*

*And the death of one Huntress should have been all the warning we needed to admit all mistakes would be paid in blood and death.*

*Jackson really tried to warn us.*

*The best of us listened with one ear, at best.*

*This proved really bad, because we had tried to ignore one more piece of information: Perseus Jackson was – and still is – not omniscient. As our mad leader had told us, while he was the son of Poseidon, he had never visited the Sea of Monsters.*

*The Forge of All Perils was going to be our first reminder that if we didn’t begin to take the Great Quest seriously, we were all going to die in mere days.*

Extract from the Chapter 2 of *Seas of Madness: Chronicles of the Suicide Squad Volume 2* by Annabeth Chase, daughter of Athena.

**2 December 2006, approaches of the Forge of All Perils, Sea of Monsters**

This time, the Huntresses tried to stay away as far as they could from the aquarium.

And no, no one sane was going to pretend it was a coincidence.

Luke was wondering if the man-hating servants of Artemis had learned their lesson when their mad leader entered.

It was at this moment that the centre of the war room they had all gathered into open, revealing a curious device which instantly created an incredibly realistic representation of the mountain-island the *Inevitable Doom* was waiting near.

“The Forge of All Perils, Demigoddesses and Demigods!” Obviously, Perseus Jackson strolled in his...what would you call it, seriously? A pirate uniform to kill all pirate uniforms? There was a lot of orange, a large coat with many golden decorations, and a ridiculously huge pirate tricorn. “And if my plan succeeds, our new base of operations.”

If the intention was to impress the Huntresses, then clearly it failed.

“This island is covered in ice and snow,” Phoebe, daughter of Eris, countered in a belligerent tone. “Whatever metallic forges exist under the frost matters very little. You don’t have the power to vanish this, son of the Sea God or not!”

For once, the leader of the Suicide Squad nodded and didn’t mock the words of Artemis’ officer.

“Indeed. I freely admit this amount of ice and snow is a bit beyond me.” And then the grin was back. “Fortunately, it just so happens that the Forge is a marvel of volcanic engineering, and the former owner used ingenious systems to pump into the caldera hundreds of kilometres beneath the sea floor. Open the magma valves, pump the lava into the conduits, and let the furnaces growl with the power of fire and molten metal; I can assure you that in a matter of hours, the ice and the snow will only be a *souvenir*.”

As Jackson spoke, the three-dimensional representation of the mountain-forged was separating several sections to show the interior of the frozen volcano, and Luke was not afraid to acknowledge the structures it presented were really beyond everything New Byzantium had.

This was really a God-level Forge, with enormous pipes able to handle colossal flows of magma, and then extract the priceless ore from it, before transforming it into hundreds of thousands of weapons, and maybe more.

Why by the Gods-

“This can’t be that simple,” Ethan Nakamura said before he could. The son of Nemesis crossed his arms and presented an expression of absolute calm...which didn’t fool Luke or anyone having been involved in the previous Great Quest.

“Speak everything you have on your heart, my treacherous lieutenant!”

“It can’t be that simple.” The black-haired son of Nemesis repeated. “The God of the Forges and Fires was captured inside one of his own industrial redoubts because his production lines are incredibly valuable for the Council and everyone associated with Olympus. The Triumvirate had help; but they had to fight two Gods and incredibly strong defences to claim the metallic bounty of Forge MP-42. And they may be traitors, but they aren’t completely stupid. If such an important Forge can be reactivated so easily, they would have done it in a hurry, no matter the cost in Drachmas...or Denarii, I suppose.”

The green-eyed Demigod slowly clapped his hands.

“It is an astute reasoning, my treacherous lieutenant. Yes, there is a little something to do before taking possession of the Forge of All Perils.”

“And what is this ‘little something’? One Huntress hissed aggressively.

“Well, killing the squatter, of course.” The pirate-clothed Demigod shrugged as if it was normal. “I note you didn’t ask why there was so much ice and snow in a Zone Mortalis known for its tropical weather and temperatures. So let me answer it before you open your mouth: yes, the squatter is creating this aura of frost and cold to make himself comfortable.”

Luke had met several enormous monsters in his life of Demigod. One of them was guarding the Golden Apples of the Hesperides, and was sufficiently big to crush several skyscrapers without really trying if unleashed inside a city.

But changing the weather was a really, really impressive feat...and it promised nothing good. In fact, it was really understating the size of the problem.

“Jackson,” the thief heard himself asking. “What is hiding inside this Forge?”

“**Fimbulvetr**.”

The word meant nothing to Luke, but it seemed to make the world a little darker when uttered. And by the way Annabeth gasped, it meant something really bad.

“This is the term the Norse gave the three years-long winter which would herald the coming of Ragnarok,” the daughter of Athena revealed.

“Yes.” Perseus nodded as if it was no big deal. “But the Norse warriors were quite mistaken. In a not-so-rare mixing of the Pantheons for the time-“

The Lieutenant of Artemis hissed angrily.

“Oh, come on!” The son of Poseidon rolled his green eyes. “I am not revealing enormous secrets here!”

“You will not speak of things that must be kept secret,” Phoebe declared with loathing filling her voice, and though Jackson was a madman...he evidently wasn’t going to challenge her on that front.

“Fine. To keep it simple, the Norse warriors mistook the forest for the trees. It must not have helped that those who went to see the phenomenon closer died in violent demises without returning. They believed it was a winter phenomenon when in reality it was a monster.”

“And what type of monster are we speaking about?” For once, they had the full attention of Clarisse...that was saying quite something.

The answer of Perseus Jackson was blunt and to the point.

“A Drakon.” The son of Poseidon spoke. “Or if you want to be the long and fully accurate version, the ‘Ancestral Drakon of Ice and Frost.”

For several seconds, everyone tried to digest the news. Ultimately, it was the son of Hercules who shrugged first.

“Okay, that is a very big lizard,” Richard Grant reacted with his usual arrogance. “Drakons, Dragons, once you stab them in the eyes, there are not that many differences...”

“I have to disagree, respectfully,” the smile was thin, and the eyes of the son of Poseidon were very calculating. “A Dragon would be a nightmare to kill here, due to its mobility. With the speed and the aerial dominance it gives them, Dragons can pretty much dictate the pace of the battle, and we would have to disperse all forces inside and outside the island. Furthermore, if a dragon abandoned the Forge temporarily and decided to return later when we would be distracted, there is not much we could do to pursue the flying reptile.”

“That much is true,” Bianca di Angelo, clad in a new robe with black fur, admitted with ill-grace. “But I saw several undead Drakons in my father’s domain. You forgot to add that what they lack in mobility compared to the Dragons, the Drakons compensate it with raw power. They can’t fly and as a result, they are armoured juggernauts. I’ve never heard of an Ancestral Drakon, but the climate-altering skills the monster possesses clearly hint it is way more dangerous than the ‘average’ Drakon.”

Perseus Jackson...shrugged.

“As my treacherous lieutenant so justly remarked, if everyone could do it, this Forge would be creating a Legion’s worth of weapons for the Triumvirate as we speak.” The pirate hat was placed upon Leo Valdez’s head, who yelped in surprise. “For the record, this is a titanic monster. I have not his exact size, since he stayed sleeping here for a long time, but I have acquired enough lore to confirm his breath is a maelstrom of ice and cold magic that will kill unprepared Questers within seconds by transforming them into blocks of ice. The name, which is best to not repeat too much, means ‘mighty winter’ in Old Norse. Assuming you avoid the ice breath, the main body of the Drakon radiates cold to such a degree that death can claim you within minutes. Moreover, it generates a lot of ice every minute, so the battlefield continuously changes in its favour.”

“And you want us to fight that monster?” Luke didn’t know who had spoken among the Huntresses, not that it really as important, given how livid they were. “You are completely mad.”

Naturally, this assertion was greeted with the disrespect it deserved.

“No, dear Huntress.”

Was Jackson going to be reasonable? Nah, that was a stupid question.

“*I* am going to fight the Ancestral Drakon.”

The Minotaur, who had done his best to stay out of his view – clearly a feat given how huge he was – snorted very loudly.

“Sorry, Asterius. Let me amend my words. *Asterius and I* are going to fight the Ancestral Drakon. We have prepared for this; this is our trial, the cornerstone of our plan for the Sea of Monsters.”

“Madness,” Phoebe snapped angrily. “Without Lady Artemis or someone approaching her hunting talent, you stand no chance.”

“Madness, you say?” Perseus bared his teeth, and just like this, the madman was truly back in his full glory. “This whole Quest is madness. We have journeyed through Hell, and even this was only barely sufficient to give us a few days of advance on our pursuers. The vanguard squadrons of the Triumvirate fleet can’t be more than a week away of cruise from this island, no matter how much I surprised them by sailing towards the Forge of All Perils. We need a game-changer, or we are going to be exactly in a position our Roman predecessors were: hunted across the Zone Mortalis, desperately short of ammunition, and prey to far more dangerous opponents than this Drakon will ever be.”

“Our goal is not to slay that Drakon,” the Chief Huntress replied stubbornly.

“A mere glance of the Sea Titaness in our direction was enough to create a maelstrom,” the leader of the Suicide Squad reminded her bluntly, “if you decide to sail for the island where she keeps Amigo’s father prisoner, by all means. I will just warn you there are ways far less painful to commit suicide.”

“So you say.”

The more Luke thought about it, the more impressed the son of Hermes was that Perseus hadn’t fed the Huntresses to various monsters the moment they entered the Sea of Monsters.

“So I say,” the black-haired madman declared amicably, “now that it is said, let’s go to the specifics. Asterius and I will be part of the Drakon-hunting team. We will accept volunteers, of course.”

“And why we would be so stupid as to volunteer?” Ethan asked.

“Because, my treacherous lieutenant, there is one point Drakons and Dragons have in common: they love to gather a hoard of priceless treasures.”

Luke at this moment knew he wasn’t going to volunteer. If Jackson tried to tempt someone with the rumour of untold riches, it was that the fight was going to be hellishly difficult.

“Unfortunately, it is far too late to land ashore today, and the storm exhausted us. Let’s go to this sleep, tomorrow I will explain you my glorious strategy.”

Yes, it was right to not be reassured at all...

**3 December 2006, approaches of the Forge of All Perils, Sea of Monsters**

With the sheer amount of fog around the *Inevitable Doom*, there wouldn’t have been any hope to see the dawn, but Bianca knew nonetheless Jackson had woken them at an ungodly hour.

But since for the first time the son of Poseidon was willing to reveal his plans, the protests were few and far between.

“As you can clearly see,” Perseus told them with the sort of intent gaze he almost never used, “the two main entrances of the Forge of All Perils are the ‘Indomitable Gates’ and the ‘Sea Gates’. They are extremely fortified. The metal is an alloy which combines Adamantine and Celestial Bronze. And the Drakon was vigilant enough to close them behind him before burying them under several layers of ice. To be blunt, we might be able to break through, but at the cost of most of our ammunition stocks.”

“And if we dig a tunnel of our own?” Leo Valdez asked, as dishevelled and dirty as ever.

“The Drakon will hear us coming that way and prepare a few nasty surprises.” The leader of the Suicide Squad barely raised an eyebrow, having clearly anticipated a question like that.

“That...that doesn’t leave a lot of options.”

“In fact, it leaves only one.” A red line appeared on the representation of the mountain. It began on the beach or whatever this island had on the shore...and it went several hundreds of metres above sea level, high on the dormant volcano’s slope. “The high furnaces of the Forge are not blocked; I have been able to verify that yesterday via drone reconnaissance.”

“This is mountaineering.” Ethan Nakamura remarked. “I hope you brought the adequate equipment, otherwise this climb is going to be perilous for you...and your friend the Minotaur.”

“It is, and I have.” More evidence the Tyrant had clearly prepared this affair for days before they sailed from New Byzantium.

“And then what happens? Your party rushes to challenge the dragon?”

“Yes, and no. We will raise as much ruckus as we can. Part of my plan includes another party. Several Demigods must reach the control room and open the magma valves.”

“Danger?”

“Minimal,” Perseus answered. “My strike force will, as I said before, raise hell to attract every sentinel and patrol the Drakon might have left behind. Still, it is best to be careful. I have chosen my heroic lieutenant Castellan for his gate-opening skills, the daughter of Her Owlishness to push the right levers, and Amigo of the Forge to make sure no block of ice impedes your progression. My drunken lieutenant will play the bodyguard, of course.”

“Wait a minute!” Dakota protested. “You told us you were only accepting volunteers!”

“Yes, volunteers for the Drakon fight,” the mad grin made its first appearance of the day. “Opening the magma valves is a perfectly ordinary mission. As such, the presence of everyone I just mentioned is mandatory. I thank you for you ‘volunteering’, my dear drunken lieutenant.”

The son of Bacchus muttered something extremely rude under his breath.

“Alexia. Kimiko. You will go with them.” The Huntress-in-chief immediately ordered.

Everyone in the war room waited to see if there were more ‘volunteers’ coming, but no one opened his mouth.

The images of the ‘mountaineering expedition’ may have something to do with it. The Demigods who had just been commanded to open the magma valves were not going to fight the monstrous Drakon, but reaching the high furnaces on the slopes of the volcano promised to be an adventure by itself, and that was assuming there was no enemy opposition...which was extremely unlikely.

“We need a blocking force.” Perseus Jackson continued. “It is extremely unlikely the Drakon will try to flee when Asterius and I confront him. But the longer the battle rages and the worse the victory chances of our opponent, the higher the chances the Lord of Frost will think it is best to make a tactical withdrawal. This is why my dear sorceresses have volunteered for this duty.”

Bianca glared at the son of Poseidon. She certainly didn’t remember volunteering for that, but protesting would not change the mind of the other Demigod.

“I will need several frontline warriors, of course. My treacherous lieutenant?”

“I will be their shield,” the son of Nemesis grumbled.

“I will be with him.” Clarisse La Ruse immediately followed. “Mountaineering is not for the children of Ares. But if the Drakon shows its ugly head through the gates, it will regret it for the last seconds it will have to live!”

“Me too!” The penguin joyfully proclaimed.

“No. The two penguins are with me.”

“Hey! What happened to ‘volunteers only’?”

“They don’t apply to penguins’ duo and comic reliefs. You are both.”

By that point, Perseus Jackson should have begun by ‘I will do what I want when I want’, and it would have been more honest...

At least it urged a lot of Demigods to declare for the ‘Blocking Force’ mission. In addition to Lou Ellen and Bianca plus their two ‘bodyguards’, Michael Yew, Miranda Gardiner, Drew Tanaka, Antigone Barbara and Nick Coleman ‘volunteered’ their arms and weapons for this duty.

And of course, there were the Huntresses...

“Ellen and Jena, you will go with them.”

“And that leaves the Drakon-slaying mission, I suppose?” Richard Grant’s arrogant voice annoyed her ears. “I will be with you. I slew a Dragon before, I want to be here when this Drakon will die.”

“So will I,” Bella Medina, the daughter of Scotus, intervened.

“You spoke of great treasures,” Fergus Cook showed a carnivorous smile. “I love treasures.”

“Revenge begins here.” Douglas Smith, son of Volturnus, said soberly.

“We don’t have a choice, do we?” the larger penguin said in a tone reeking of lamentation and despair. “We are so going to die...”

“Shut up, *cursed male*.” The Huntress-in-chief was prompt to remind him of his place. “I will be part of this mission. Kalinda, Eudoxia, and Jade will be part of this Hunt.”

“As you wish.”

The fact the son of Poseidon accepted so easily confirmed that Bianca had had little doubts about: Perseus Jackson was going to eliminate Phoebe and some of her fellow man-hater Huntresses. The daughter of Hades was ready to eat one of her spell books if she was wrong.

“Now that the volunteers of the Drakon-slaying mission have made themselves known...” a penguin loudly scoffed in the background. “I am going to issue a few massive warnings.”

“We know the fight is going to be perilous, Jackson.” Mr. Muscle aka Richard Grant was prompt to remind them why he was a contender for Arrogant Champion of the Century.

“This is not about this, my dear muscular lieutenant. This is about the loot.” And a second later, the son of Hercules caught in mid-air...it looked like...a can of paint?

“Seriously...spray-paint can?”

“Yes, spray-paint can.” Perseus affirmed. “I couldn’t verify beforehand, but given how Drakon and Dragons are similar, it is incredibly likely all artefacts, gold, and the valuable relics inside the Forge of All Perils are considerably cursed. Once the Drakon will be no more, cancelling the curses will be an arduous but feasible task. So you will claim the loot beforehand with this permanent paint. We will all have one colour for each member of our strike force. Mine is orange, if one is wondering-“

“Don’t care,” Richard Grant replied. “As long as you respect your oaths.”

“I will.”

“And if we want to take our just rewards beforehand?” Fergus Cook asked, with a tone that told Bianca that this particular Demigod was going to try to disobey at some point.

“It’s your funeral.” Perseus replied just as bluntly before watching most of the Suicide Squad for long seconds. “I will remind everyone that for all my Hydrokinesis and my resources, I am just a mortal. The draconic curses are legendary for their viciousness and their power. The drakonic curses have a good chance of being worse. If you’re cursed because you did something I warned you against, don’t complain after the disaster.”

“We will take it under due consideration.”

Asterius the Minotaur grunted. Yeah, even the bull-headed being had noticed there were going to be problems...

“And we hope your plan is worth these warnings.” If you were ready to gamble it was a Huntress who was speaking, you would be absolutely right...

“I won’t lie,” the son of Poseidon immediately countered. “My plan is extremely good, but this is an Ancestral Drakon we are speaking about. We must kill it before the magma heat convinces it to think the island is way too warm for a cold reptile of its size. We must also...err...vigorously convince it that destroying the Forge isn’t something it can do before we slay it.”

“Details?”

“No, that would spoil the surprise!” At least there were things that never changed...

Bianca rolled her eyes.

“Anything else that must be considered before we go to our cabins and equip ourselves for our duties?”

“Yes.” The green-eyed Demigod took a deep breath, and the former Dread Empress knew that whatever he was about to say, many people were not going to like it. “I leave to the discretion of the Blocking Force if they want to, but for the Magma and Drakon-hunting missions, I urge you to wear the X-Suit I sent to all of your cabins a few minutes ago.”

“And what is...a X-Suit?”

Jackson showed them one. Bianca blinked...then she felt herself blushing. From what she saw, it looked like an integral suit of white latex...

“What perversion is this? You want us to be clad in this...this...odious-“

Perseus Jackson sighed. Loudly.

“Before anyone asks me, this is *MY* X-Suit. Yes, I’m aware it is revealing, tight, extremely revealing...and you can barely wear your underwear underneath it. There was no orange model available either.” The son of Poseidon grimaced. “But it is the only kind of suit I was able to obtain that can protect us from the frost breath of the Drakon.”

“I don’t believe you,” Phoebe said flatly. “None of my Huntresses will participate in this...perversion.”

“The Enemy,” and you could hear the capital ‘E’ from his voice, “is infamous for an attack that is best described as ‘magical ice ray with a temperature of absolute zero’. Even entering the Forge of All Perils, given how imbued it is with the monster’s power, is a risk of enduring nasty frostbites. The X-Suit offers high-quality protection against hellishly cold temperatures and ice-based threats, be they magical or not, while allowing a Demigod or a Demigoddess to have a high mobility in one of the most dangerous environments-”

“No. And your perversion will be reported to Lady Artemis.”

Perseus shrugged and abandoned the subject. Yet given how he looked at the Huntresses, Bianca was certain the warning was genuine. Mad he may be, but the son of Poseidon had genuinely warned everyone.

Sigh. That meant Bianca was going to have to wear this...this X-Suit. It was unlikely the Blocking Force would need to confront the Drakon, but if they did...the daughter of Hades had no wish to return to Hell today. But it was really too much to hope there wouldn’t be compromising photos taken...

“Yes, yes. Any questions?”

“Yes, I have one.” Dakota cleared his throat. “What are all those black dots that have just materialised on your island’s map? You know, the one that are near the beach we’re supposed to use for our landing purposes?”

“Oh that?” Perseus grinned. “Don’t worry, it’s just the welcoming committee.”

“The what?”

“The welcoming committee!” The grin of madness and mayhem was back. “A small battalion of frosty skeletons that must have been animated specifically to greet us on this nice morning of winter!”

“This is not funny!” A Huntress barked.

“This is your opinion. Personally, I call them ‘my warm up’...”

**3 December 2006, the black beach of the Forge of All Perils, Sea of Monsters**

KABOOM!

“And now Asterius, our special move! SEA BULLHORN!”

Said like that, it might be quite ridiculous.

But while a penguin slamming a detonator might seem funny, the explosion which shook the beach of black sand was quite the real deal.

Over thirty skeletons were blasted apart, a rain of bone bits falling upon certain rocks hundreds of metres away.

And then Asterius the Minotaur ‘surfed’ on a gigantic wave and slammed into the surviving skeletons.

Pirates sabres were broken; a tattered black flag fell from its pole. The blue magic in the skeletons’ orbits died out.

When the wave receded, there were no undead warriors left standing.

KABOOM!

“Rico, stop the explosions!” Perseus ordered. “Or you will be in charge of the demining operations for days to come.”

The smaller penguin of the duo emitted a sound of disappointment...someone was getting way too enthusiastic with his ‘duties’.

Lou Ellen watched attentively the sky and what parts of the island were visible now that her magic had blown away the morning fog. And she found no trace of any enemy. That didn’t mean there were none alas, just that they were wise enough to hide now that the ‘skeleton battalion’ had perished.

Without waiting for a command, the daughter of Hecate began to gather the axes, sabres, daggers, flintlocks, muskets and all other weapons with a telekinetic spell. She didn’t even need to be reminded of Perseus’ warning to know these weapons were massively cursed. Many of them had the colour of the frost, and those which did not were giving her a vibe of ‘very bad, touch at your own peril’.

“Let’s hope you are right and the Lightning Thief can indeed conduct a grand ritual of purification.” Lou Ellen said as Perseus arrived by her side. “Who were these men and women when they were alive, by the way?”

“They were the doomed pirates of Francis Drake. Well, some of the doomed men he lost during his expeditions to the Sea of Monsters.”

The sorceress glanced at the neutral expression of the Suicide Squad’s leader.

“From the books I read, Sir Francis Drake was an English corsair.”

“A corsair in one country is a pirate is another,” Perseus replied philosophically. “And make no mistake, my dear sorceress lieutenant, Drake was considered a pirate by the Spanish authorities...and the very fact he tried to seize untold riches in the Sea of Monsters prove he had the intention to be a very successful adventurer...one might even say, the *King of Pirates*.”

“But he knelt before the English Queen in the end.”

“I suspect this had to do with the successive failures he met in the Zone Mortalis. In his time, the Caribbean was where the Sea of Monsters could be found...and it was as dangerous as it was today.”

Seen like that...yes, it made sense. Of course, it also answered one of the questions she had been asking herself.

“Since we sure as Hell didn’t locate this island with the drones, I assume you were made aware of the Drakon’s lair by the diaries left by some of Drake’s survivors.”

Perseus smiled, evidently pleased she had made the connection.

“I plead guilty. And as I have no reason to hide it anymore...I managed to acquire one of the logbooks written by the hand of Drake himself.”

“One of the logbooks?”

The green-eyed Demigod gave her an innocent expression.

“Drake sailed a lot while he was alive...and the logbooks or good copies from them are really valuable. I was not the only one asking around for those relating his adventures in the Sea of Monsters.”

And to say the Roman Expeditionary Force had not even bothered doing that before the squadrons departed New Byzantium...

Lou Ellen changed the subject.

“My fire spells were incredibly weak when I cast them.”

“It gets worse the closer you are from the Drakon.”

“One of the reasons why you volunteered us for the ‘Blocking Force’?”

“That was one of the reasons, yes.” Perseus breathed theatrically, which, since he had yet to don the ‘helmet’ of the X-Suit – though ‘sealed white balaclava’ might be more appropriate – was a very loud sound. “There is also the little problem that this fight is going to end at close-quarters. Drakons are so tough that long-range attacks are useless. These reptiles, alas, are fiendishly intelligent. They will use some parts of their body devoid of vital organs to shield themselves, trusting the regeneration skills will remove the problem in due time. That’s why I am using a different array of weapons, by the way.”

Following these words, the son of Poseidon opened the extensive luggage he had left on the black sands before the fighting erupted, and when it opened, it revealed...a Trident.

“Please tell me it isn’t *the* Trident.”

The Suicide Squad’s leader chuckled.

“I am afraid this wasn’t an option.” The Trident flew in his right hand without a magical incantation. “Still, it is a very good weapon.”

“Celestial Bronze, Imperial Gold...and something else?” Each of the Trident’s fork was made of a different metal...how interesting.

“Stygian Iron,” Perseus commented while picking some grenades, bombs and other magical artefacts she had seen before. “I had to be creative; there is much I ignore about the Drakon.”

“Drake’s logbook didn’t give any clue about what was waiting inside the Forge?”

“I’m afraid those men of Drake who decided to go inside the Forge are still there. A pirate life is not exactly a safe profession.”

A scalloped shield painted in pure white colour came out of the luggage, and for this one, Lou Ellen could feel the magic.

“There are serious enchantments on this shield, Jackson.”

“I hope so, given how much it cost to convince a certain Goddess to apply them.”

That the sentence was whispered was certainly not a coincidence.

“A Goddess?” Lou Ellen replied with the same lack of voice intensity.

“You are an intelligent sorceress, my dear.”

A shield with protection against frost and cold-type attacks, the X-Suits...and of the Goddesses that had visited Perseus when they were back from the First Quest...yes, it wasn’t that difficult to know who was helping.

“Goddesses are hardly known for their limitless generosity.”

“I know.”

This was...reassuring. Reassuring and interesting. Either Jackson had something he felt that the Goddess in question wanted to gain at all costs, or there was a betrayal waiting to be triggered. Knowing Perseus, it could be one or the other.

“The Huntresses have refused to wear the X-Suits,” the daughter of Hecate told him when it was obvious no more revelations were coming. “They have covered themselves in a lot of animal furs instead.”

And it gave you an idea of what the Hunt tracked and killed every year. Apparently, it could be summed-up with ‘everything’. Bear, fox, wolf, castor, otter; whether it was a super-magical mythical breed or not, the servants of Artemis would not spare it.

“I warned them; I am not going to waste my saliva for the rest of this island’s Quest.”

“For the moment, the furs seem to keep away most of the cold. They have some blessings upon them...and some other enchantments I don’t know.”

“The cold will get worse.” This was spoken as an implacable statement. “I didn’t provide a duo of penguin-sized X-Suits just because I wanted to be funny, you know.”

“Oh, I know. Otherwise you would have neglected your accomplice the Minotaur.”

The fur and every part of the body – minus for the time being the bull head – had been encased by the material looking like white latex. If anything, this had been really the last confirmation Lou Ellen needed. The penguins were more the comic-relief, for all the explosions they made. The Minotaur was the real muscle, and if Asterius was protected to such standards, then the Drakon was indeed terribly dangerous.

“You’re not wrong about that.”

“I just wonder,” the daughter of Hecate smiled, “if you have considered everything the introduction of the X-Suits would do. Like what walking and fighting in these tight uniforms would do for a son of the Messenger God and the Goddess of Strategy...”

Perseus turned his head...and for the first time, there was the shadow of a surprise on his face. Yes, Luke Castellan was looking at Annabeth Chase with an expression that informed everyone he had acknowledged she was indeed a young woman...

Obviously, this wasn’t the advantage of these ‘X-Suits’. While from the outside, they indeed looked like tight suits of white latex that covered them entirely while leaving very little to imagination. But once you were inside, you really felt comfortable; there was no sensation of warmth, but there was no sensation of cold either. It was as if you were in the middle of a very pleasant summer weather...despite the fact the current temperature on the beach was at minus three degrees Celsius.

“What will happen will happen.” The son of Poseidon said philosophically. “I just hope they will remember to open the magma valves before kissing.”

Lou Ellen felt amused...and then decided there was no better moment to stake her claim. The daughter of Hecate let her sorceress’ robe fall to the ground, and underneath, there was only the X-Suit.

The young sorceress wasn’t going to lie; she was extremely satisfied that Perseus’ eyes were focused on her and entirely her for the next seconds.

And when she took two steps forwards to kiss him, the kiss was reciprocated. It was powerful and filled with vitality...and when they separated, Lou Ellen felt it had lasted for too little time.

Whistles and amused comments from the ‘public’ provided by the rest of the Suicide Squad convinced her it would not be wise to do it a second time. Certain devices to ‘immortalise’ the moment were already prepared...

“Come back alive, Perseus.”

“I will, Lou Ellen. I will.” The grin was not maniacal for a few seconds...though the madness returned when his eyes turned towards the penguins. “Rico! Skipper! You are going to be in the vanguard for this mountaineering expedition! Accelerate your preparations, or Asterius will motivate you! Cook, choose a better weapon, having it plated in gold is not an intricate quality! Grant! The special equipment! Hurry, the days are short and we have a Drakon to slay!”

**3 December 2006, somewhere not far from the summit of the Forge of All Perils, Sea of Monsters**

“Who would have thought it was possible? Huntresses in distress!”

The worst part was that Perseus Jackson had likely waited hours to deliver that bad pun...

“And a penguin in distress too!”

Jades grimaced as a few more footsteps allowed her to see Phoebe and Eudoxia dangling several metres below, with the mountaineering rope they were all tied to the sole reason they were still alive. The ‘snow path’ had ceded under their feet, revealing the cold precipice they had so imprudently marched towards to.

Fortunately, the beast...the Minotaur and Jackson were already in action. Despite having enormous ‘mountain bags’ on their backs, the two had handled the initial shock without flinching, and now they were using all their strength to return Phoebe and Eudoxia to where the rest of the force had stopped...along with the penguin that had been dragged away after them.

“This is the twelfth time today!” said male-turned-animal moaned once he had some solid rocks under his fins. “I expect compensation for that, Boss!”

“You will get it!” The focused expression and the absence of jokes from the son of Poseidon, along with the sheer effort the Minotaur and the other males were making, were evidence enough that the rescue effort was hardly easy. “And...done!”

Eudoxia was the first to be rescued, then Phoebe.

If it had been her, Jade would have offered her thanks, she was not prideful enough to believe she could have saved herself from that sort of perilous situation.

But Phoebe was never going to utter something complimentary to a male...and she proved it immediately.

“You sent us on the wrong path, Jackson! I am going to-“

“I said RIGHT after the antique stairs, Huntress! RIGHT! Not LEFT!”

“NO! YOU SAID LEFT!”

“He said right,” Bella Medina supported Jackson. “We all heard him.”

“Yes,” the bastard of Hercules nodded. “So stop shouting, I want to avoid another avalanche...please.”

“I am not going to tolerate-“

“And at the risk of enduring a dozen or so insults,” the white-clad son of Poseidon said, his eyes invisible behind the sort of faint orange lenses that were part of his ‘X-Suit’, “I will remind you there is a reason I placed the penguins in the vanguard at the beginning, and why I am going to return them again.”

“Oh, great!” The bigger penguin sobbed. “More death rides!”

“That’s the spirit, my Emperor penguin lieutenant!”

“They are slowing us down!”

“Huntress...in case you don’t have noticed, the penguins are far lighter than you are. When one falls into a precipice or another hole, everyone will be able to endure the shock and prevent those who follow from being propelled over a cliff. When you did, however, you took one of your huntresses and a penguin with you, and it could have been incredibly worse!”

Phoebe, predictably, glared murderously at Perseus Jackson. If it impressed him, there was no sign of it.

“Now no more mistakes. We are very close from our point of entrance.”

“You were saying the same thing one hour ago, *male*!”

“Ah, but one hour ago, were you able to see this?”

The Earthshaker’s legacy pointed his hand, and all followed his gaze...and indeed a few hundred metres away, there were cylindrical structures that had were half-covered in snow, yet they remained eminently recognisable.

There were three of them, and Jade’s heart beat faster.

“The high furnaces...”

“Yes, the high furnaces. Now be careful. There is certainly going to be an ambush before we reach them, and the last section is going to leave us extremely exposed to the wind.”

The latter was verified before Eudoxia finished a curse wishing Jackson had been drowned at birth...which was really rude, as he had just saved her life.

The harsh wind struck them again.

Once more time, Jade wished she was wearing one of those white ‘X-Suits’. Perverted they might be in appearance, but the daughter of Scotus and the other Demigods of the group weren’t complaining. They weren’t feeling cold. Each time they demanded a pause, it was to drink or eat something; in the meantime all Huntresses had been forced to add layer after layer of fur, and numerous amulets supposed to protect them from the cold.

And then there were explosions in the snow, and it began all over again.

“AMBUSH!”

With the wind raging, using their bows was impossible....again. Jade drew her short sword, and just in time: an ugly reptilian head appeared in her field of vision, and her blade parried a blow that would have decapitated her. Fortunately, this was the end of the surprises: the monster gaped as if it couldn’t believe someone could be that quick, and the next strike saw its ugly head fall on the snow, along with a profusion of blue-coloured blood.

The next enemy was far more conventional. It was another of those skeletons, albeit one decorated differently. The young Huntress dispatched it easily.

And suddenly, she had no more opponents, and a few metres away, Perseus Jackson finished exterminating them with a blast of water from its Trident.

“I think we are going to call these reptiles ‘Frost Iguanas’.”

“A good choice, short one.”

“What are they, really?” Douglas Smith asked as their progression resumed and they began the few last turns to the high furnaces.

“If I have to guess, parasites,” the son of Poseidon replied.

“Parasites?”

“It isn’t unprecedented. Many big animals have symbiotic relationships with other species. They get rid of ticks, and the smaller bird or animal get a free meal and temporary protection.”

“But those ‘Frost Iguanas’ are really big...” Turning back to see the abandoned corpses laying the snow, they had to be two-thirds of a teenager’s body.

“The Drakon isn’t exactly small.”

“And the undead? Shouldn’t the Rich One be offended by this vile necromancy?”

“They aren’t true undead.” Bella Medina consented to explain. “Their souls have long been claimed by Death.”

“And that makes it better?”

“Yes. These bags of bones really have no skill. They are just mimicking the shadow of a shadow. Only the formidable ice magic imbuing this island allows them to manifest like this in the first place.”

“I’m more worried,” the bastard of Hercules grunted, “by the fact these ones had conquistador armours and weapons. You told us the pirates of Drake were the ones who wanted to claim this island’s riches for themselves, Jackson!”

“Indeed, I did, my best of the best lieutenant! But I never said they were the only ones to come here. I said I had the logbook of Drake’s expedition.”

“Translation: you ignore how many Questers came here before us!” Fergus jeered with an expression Jade didn’t like at all. “For all you know, the treasure has already been claimed.”

“Oh, I very much doubt this, my dear greedy lieutenant. The Drakon is alive and protecting its hoard...and if the audacious adventurers had managed to steal some of the treasures, they would have boasted about it. Human nature works like that.”

Finally, the wind stopped screaming, and they were in a far less exposed position.

Unfortunately, the space the penguins and the Questers had stopped was sufficiently close to give you a perfect view on the furnaces’ ‘entrances’.

The more Jade looked at them, the more they were looking similar to gigantic maws eager to claim their lives.

“Now comes the first part!” Perseus Jackson said with exuberant cheerfulness. “Who wants to go down first?”

“Shut up *male* or we will use our weapons to enforce punishment!”

Jade had been hesitant to believe it, but now she was certain: Phoebe and the others hadn’t the slightest idea of what they were doing...

**3 December 2006, the Forge of All Perils, Sea of Monsters**

“There are too many of them.”

For once, the Huntress wasn’t wrong.

Then again, a broken clock was right twice a day, no?

“They are.” The son of Poseidon murmured. “Let’s take a few steps back.”

After an exciting descent and some minor shenanigans including a game of ‘push the skeleton into the closest pit’, they had arrived into a big hall that was a chokepoint for the Forge’s upper levels.

The Drakon must have agreed with this strategic assessment, because there were about fifty skeletons stationed here to prevent an intrusion deeper into the volcanic Forge.

This could have been a minor problem, in terms of threats. But since dear Fimbulvetr really, really didn’t want to be disturbed, there were over seven hundred ‘Frost Iguanas’ present too.

And not the runts they had fought outside between avalanches and ‘save the penguin’ incidents.

Those ones were bigger...they were all in horizontal positions right now, but Perseus could guess that if they did decide to go for a bipedal position, they would be larger than him. And their fangs and claws looked quite imposing, along with dashing blue crests.

“We must find another path,” Fergus Cook said, his fear clearly visible on his face. The looter, as Perseus had long suspected, was all bark when it came to loot, but the moment it came to fighting, he had no bite. “Yes, it might take some time but-“

“Out of the question,” Perseus interrupted him. This idea needed to be squashed mercilessly. “Castellan and his force are going to launch their own assault in twenty minutes. If we don’t play our part perfectly, this force will go after them.”

It had been a critical part of the plan from the very beginning, and it was becoming even more vital now. The Drakon was not stupid; all its dispositions proved it. The main Gates being closed forced every raiding or slaying party to climb the mountain and abandon its heavy equipment on the beaches. The ‘Frost Iguanas’ and the animated skeletons were here to make sure Demigods and other intruders would be forced to engage in an attrition fight.

“Waiting for them would have some advantages...” to her credit, the Huntress did her best to hide her teeth were chattering. “It is really cold here.”

“Minus eighteen degrees Celsius, and there’s some magical effect that makes it worse,” Perseus said cheerfully. “But who’s counting?”

The daughter of Eris glared. If eyes could kill, Perseus had no doubt he would be agonising by now.

He ignored it like he did many other things. The warnings had been spoken and utterly ignored. It was not his fault the Huntresses had decided to ignore his suggestions and refuse the material help that had been acquired after long and stimulating bargaining sessions.

“No wonder the predators of the Zone Mortalis and all lifeforms in general are staying so far away...”

Perseus walked back to the improvised camp where the rest of the Questers were waiting.

“I have made my decision. We are going to use Plan E.”

“Plan E?” A Huntress asked, her distrust evident to all.

“Plan E like Explosions.”

“I love Plan E!” Rico the penguin laughed maniacally. “Kaboom!”

“Jackson...” No one was surprised that Phoebe hissed angrily in the next three seconds. “There are too many monsters for us to get through, and this is assuming they are the only ones we need to fight.”

“Which they aren’t,” the son of Poseidon made a silent sign, and Rico Kowalski began to take out several explosive tablets from Asterius’ reserve.

“Which...they aren’t? How do you know it?”

“I assume we are dealing with a competent enemy, my dear Huntress. And competent enemies don’t place all their troops in the same location. That way, should a group of roguish and dashing adventurers like ourselves blow them up, the core of the army isn’t decapitated.”

“Err...well...err...this is true.”

“I’m so glad to hear you say it. Skipper, the Iguana corpses, please.”

“Here they are, Boss.”

Three corpses of Iguana were pushed before him.

Perseus smirked. When in doubt, it was best to rely on the classics invented by Catherine Foundling.

“What are we going to do, Boss?” one of his faithful penguin minions opened his beak. “I have to say, the fact it involved ambushing those parasites fill me with confidence this is going to be a wonderful plan, but-“

“There is no ‘but’, Rico!” Perseus grinned. “My plan is genial. I am going to animate these corpses via some short-lived variant of water Necromancy, you are going to stuff them with explosives...and then the animated construct is going to walk very slowly and very deliberately towards the nest of skeletons and Frost Iguanas.”

Perseus raised his arms and cackled.

“The Drakon believes cheating is fine, but the definition of cheating definitely eludes him! Behold my First Secret Invincible Weapon, the Undead Suicide Iguana! Behold!”

“You are...completely insane...” Phoebe managed to babble.

“Thank you, my dear.” The green-eyed Demigod turned towards Rico. “The first asset is going to destroy the nest. The two others will be used as a rearguard to give us a couple of minutes.”

Necromancy had been something he had dabbled in his previous life, and it was not difficult using it again for such a minor purpose. Stuffing the corpses with C4 and other nasty surprises was simplicity itself.

As the Iguanas were real Iguanas, there was no way for the reptiles to realise too early what was about to befall them.

And then there were the flames and the fury.

KAAAABOOOOOOOOOOOOOOM!

The ground shook. Many decrepit stone arches fell. Decapitated statues of ancient times were pulverised. An immense amount of dust engulfed all the corridors leading to the chokepoint.

“SUICIDE SQUAD! RUN!”

Perseus didn’t wait to see to see if they were obeying him. He ran.

Several times he almost tripped, as the stones of the Forge had been made incredibly slippery by all the blue reptilian blood that had been sprayed everywhere.

The halls that could have stopped their progression were crossed in a single minute, the rare surviving skeletons proving pathetic opponents.

Perseus ran, as in the distance, there was the familiar rumble of a small army realising its fortress was under attack. He had to make a decision...now.

“RICO! LEAVE THE UNDEAD IGUANAS! ASTERIUS, YOU CARRY HIM! GRANT! YOU HELP SKIPPER! DETONATORS ON SIXTY SECONDS!”

The penguins had been about to be left in the dust, and unfortunately, without comic reliefs, the path to victory would be way harder for him.

BOOOOOOOMMM!

KABOOOOOOOOOOOM!

The next explosions were indeed very impressive, and some pillars collapsed.

But it was not enough.

As they left the halls, they saw more and more iguanas arrive from every direction...just as they left the corridors and halls made of stone.

Dozens fell to his Trident, and Asterius made his own massacre of reptiles. The Huntresses and the other Demigods participated in the slaughter too.

And then they arrived in the heart of the volcano.

For all the schematics he had stolen, for all the theories espoused by Drake in his logbook, for all the testimony of his sister, the sight took his breath away.

“Oh, Gods...”

“Gods and Titans...this is a volcano that must have been old when the world was young.”

Before this immensity, before this abyss...you felt insignificant.

The black stone of the volcano had been shaped by near-incomprehensible forces into something that challenged imagination. And then the previous owners of the Forge had sculpted the rock to let the pipes, the rails, and every vital industrial parts they might need to forge tools and weapons.

And on top of this black volcanic decoration, a vivid layer of brilliant ice had covered everything.

“Behold my friends, the heart of what was the greatest Forge in the Mediterranean an age ago! Behold the Forge of All Perils!”

“The enemy is still coming!”

“Ah, yes...let them approach!”

“ARE YOU CRAZY?”

Why were they all asking this question?

Perseus closed his eyes and focused about a third of his strength. The power he wielded pressed against the ice, and as he threw several special grenades, it was sufficient to give him a nice quantity of water to play with.

“Consider this, Drakon,” the former Tyrant spoke, knowing Fimbulvetr could hear him perfectly, “my declaration of war.”

And then Perseus released the water and the magic.

He released *everything*.

The Frost Iguanas had been coming by the thousands. The skeletons, many armed like Conquistadors and Pirates, were in the hundreds.

When his wave struck them, they were pulverised or squished like they were insects.

They had been able to be surrounded.

Ten seconds later, there were only broken corpses, and the terrified hisses of the Iguanas he had precipitated into the volcanic abyss.

“Okay...” this time, he had managed to knock out some of the arrogance of Grant and Medina. “Err...was it necessary to make such a ruckus? I mean, everyone knew we were here, with the explosions, but-“

There was a loud sinister series of creaks and clangs, and at the edge of the ‘pier’ dominating the abyss, an enormous cage of metal appeared.

“Good news, dear partners of madness and mayhem: it seems my challenge has been accepted.”

“We are going to go down in the depths of the Forge with *that*?” Evidently, the idea seemed to displease mightily the Huntresses.

“My dear, it was a state-of-the-art elevator two thousand years ago!”

“I think...err...Jackson...that is exactly the problem...”

“Nonsense. But Rico and Skipper will go first and test its solidity, just to assuage your delicate sensibilities!”

“Boss, you really will have to triple our pay! We haven’t signed for this!”

Perseus grinned.

“What point of ‘the Suicide Squad is recruiting’ did lead to such confusion, my dear penguin lieutenants?”

**4 December 2006, Command Room, Forge of All Perils**

“CLOSE THE DOOR! CLOSE THE DOOR!”

The storm racing towards them was horrifying.

It was a tide of fangs and claws. It was an onslaught of hundreds of maws, bringing them cursed frost and death.

Fortunately, Dakota and Luke were there. Using all their strength, the two boys managed to move a door wing each, all the while Leo Valdez used his Pyrokinesis abilities to form a short-lived wall of flames that for all its briefness, delayed the attack of the reptiles by several seconds.

Annabeth launched several grenades in the mass of monsters...and her last vision was of the explosions and the splinters eliminating dozens of enemies.

Then the enormous door of the Forge’s command centre was shut down, and Annabeth fell to her knees, breathing in relief.

“Gods...oh Gods...and here I thought it was supposed to be an easy mission...”

“It would have been an easy mission,” Luke spoke coldly, and the daughter of Athena immediately watched him, because his tone was not friendly at all. “If *someone* had decided that instead of sneaking through the halls, it was a good idea to make a shooting contest of those crested reptilian foes!”

“Next you are going to tell us not to hunt monsters, while you are at it?” The Asian-looking Huntress mocked him.

Dakota McDonald had to act in a hurry and force Luke to lower his sword, else it would have certainly come to violence.

“Next time, throw yourself into the nearest pit,” Luke growled before turning away, “at least it will rid us of your stupidity!”

“You are saying that because you are *male*!”

Oh by all her mother’s stratagems, this idiocy had lasted long enough.

“But I am not!” Annabeth said forcefully. “And I say you are useless! Why are you here in the first place?”

Of course, the grey-eyed Demigoddess knew why those Huntresses had decided to participate in the Great Quest, but a question could have several meanings.

“We are here by the will of Artemis!”

“No. Why are you here in this mission in the first place? Luke unlocked the doors and several other obstacles. I deactivated plenty of traps and guided the party through this forge-labyrinth. Dakota has transported everything we couldn’t, including alcohol to serve as a reserve of fuel-“

“My poor drinks,” the son of Bacchus moaned, “your sacrifice will be remembered for all eternity.”

“And Leo gave us much needed fire and light when we asked for it.” Annabeth finished. “Why are we forced to tolerate your presence? You are loud, you’re picking fights we can’t afford to win, and most of the time, you’re unable to fight in a sound tactical manner!”

“The males’ influence is corrupting your mind!” the Huntress named Alexia hissed. “You know the cold is sapping our strength-“

“And whose fault is that?” Luke was right, by the Pit; if the Huntresses threw themselves in the nearest lethal trap, they would really be rid of the legendary stupidity of the ‘man-hating Cult’. “Jackson provided X-Suits. He warned you that it was going to be hellishly cold. You preferred your furs. Don’t complain now because you didn’t want to listen to him!”

“Those are clothes filled with perversion! Look at you!”

Oh yes, look at her. Annabeth made a graceful move, and suddenly, the eyes of Luke and the other boys were on her. Though she really only cared about Luke. Donning the X-Suit had made sure the hero of New Byzantium at last saw her as the woman she was. If Annabeth had known it was all she needed to do, she would have done it far sooner...though maybe not in view of all Byzantium, the latex-looking X-Suit was very tight and did not hide anything.

“I am not going to waste my time with you.” There was good news in the middle of the bad ones: all the temptation she might ever have felt to join the Huntresses of Artemis had been utterly crushed before being set on fire. Annabeth had though Nightshade was bad during the last Great Quest; this group of Huntresses had made clear the principal lieutenant was in reality a moderate. “Leo, I need your flames to defreeze this automaton.”

“Err...sure, but why this one in particular?”

“There’s a lot of alpha glyphs carved in his metallic shell.”

“Oh...yes, I suppose that’s a good idea,” the son of Hephaestus approved while shaking his head.

The Huntresses were ignored for the time being, and the Demigods went to work, surrounded by marvels of engineering.

For what was certainly not the last time, Annabeth wished that Jackson had stopped being mysterious and told her who was behind the construction of this titanic forge! Despite being millennia old, there were dozens of antique automatons there, all shaped to represent various species of fishes, and once Leo Valdez would have removed them from their prisons of frost, they would be able to resume their work.

At least, that was the hope. Annabeth knew she was smart, but learning how the thousands of levers and the mechanisms the size of an adult man worked was a bit beyond her league, especially when the time was limited.

Ice broke. And to her relief, when alcohol was injected into the ‘veins’ and Leo slammed flames upon the torso, the orca-sculpted automaton reacted.

“*Unit Alpha-One-One, returning to duty*.” Several blades began to emerge from hidden compartments. “*Provide the primary codes or suffer the consequences*.”

Annabeth swallowed and drew the piece of paper Jackson had given her.

“The Code is Kappa-Kappa-Omega-Theta. The Forge has been under enemy occupation for too long. I request the activation of Condition Extremis.”

“*Code correct*,” the automaton reacted, the blades returning to their hidden compartments, and Annabeth was deeply relieved. “*Analysis of the situation*...”

A lot of frost was pulverised, and several immense cog mechanisms began to grind against each other for the time in an eternity.

“*Situation requires Condition Extremis. Opening of the Magma Valves is to be granted Alpha Priority. Gamma and Delta Arsenals unlocked*. *Analysis...warning: the number of Questers currently present in the Forge is insufficient to achieve victory*.”

“Hey!” Dakota exclaimed. “We managed to reach the command centre on our own, and there is another party fighting its way to the chief monster. We have beaten the odds!”

“*Incorrect*,” the head of the metallic orca emotionlessly replied as more and more machinery began to return to full functionality, and the growling of fire and machines became akin to the beating of a heart. “*Based on observations of your skills and military capabilities, defeating secondary and tertiary level of opposition was given a 52% chance of success. Defeating the primary invader of the sacred forge has a 0% chance of success*.”

“We have accomplished the impossible before,” Annabeth said defensively. “Or more accurately, the crazy Demigod that proclaimed himself our leader is making a habit of accomplishing the impossible, just to infuriate the Gods and everyone else.”

“Never before has such an important truth being spoken...” Kimiko the Huntress grumbled.

Two more ‘mechanic wheel’ objects began to turn.

“*Human analysis is flawed. Projection of the primary invader ongoing*...”

Frost cracked, Leo blasted more fire to get rid of the ice, and suddenly, a mirror-like surface appeared at the centre of the room.

Annabeth marvelled at the sheer accomplishment of having created this kind of technological device millennia ago...but the sight the mechanical mirror showed stopped the admiration in its tracks.

It was as if an entire harbour and hundreds of ships were buried in a field of icebergs. That it was showing them one of the largest areas carved inside the volcano was beyond doubt. That the Forge had been a very successful affair was barely worth saying, given the enormous number of Greek and Roman merchant ships.

All of this was important.

And yet none of it mattered when the device showed them the Drakon.

“Oh my God...”

“-zilla.”

Annabeth blinked and gaped at Leo Valdez.

“What? He looks a bit like the giant lizard of the movies, no?”

“Yeah,” Dakota said weakly. “Yes, he does. We have to warn Jackson and the others. There is...Jackson is good, but between this monster and the Kraken of the hell sea, I would choose the Kraken...”

**4 December 2006, Trophy Halls, the Forge of All Perils**

Richard did not suffer from vertigo.

He didn’t.

But the journey in this cage, tossed in every direction possible by a semi-blizzard, regularly attacked by winged reptiles that had been quickly labelled ‘Lesser Wyverns’ by the madman...if the ground had not been frozen when they exited the cage, the son of Hercules would have kissed it.

But it was hellishly cold, and the blizzard was raging.

“Jackson! We have to make a pause!” Richard was feeling exhausted, and carrying a penguin on his back was really not helping. Seriously, how did the Minotaur manage it, with the quantity of weapons and ammunition the bull-headed ‘accomplice’ had in its mountain bag? “The Huntresses are lagging badly behind us!”

“I know. But we have to hurry.” The son of Poseidon had not a grinning expression for once; the orange lenses hiding his eyes were giving an appearance of ‘calm and focused’. “My dear heroic lieutenants have certainly re-activated certain vital functions of the Forge of All Perils.”

“And how can you know that?”

“Because the device we were supposed using to communicate between different groups is not functioning,” the answer was blunt, exceptionally. “Since it worked when we entered the Forge, the most likely scenario is that the Drakon is trying to break all our attempts to coordinate. And if we don’t hurry to face the chief opponent, we are going to let him the opportunity to have very nasty ideas. Like how can he reconquer the command centre of the Forge of All Perils while preparing deadly traps for us.”

That was...logical...and hardly pleasant news. But there could be another explanation.

“Maybe the device broke?”

“It’s Hermes-tech, Grant. I paid two thousand Drachmas for the set. Believe me, it doesn’t stop functioning for no reason...and besides, have you ever been to accuse me I am buying the cheap and disposable stuff when it comes to critical equipment?”

The older Demigod instantly shook his head. There were many things you could accuse Jackson of, but not being a cheapskate. The X-Suits alone were worth ten times their weight in Imperial Gold; you only had to look at the Huntresses to see the difference it made. They were constantly shivering and trying to keep themselves warm, while the rest of their force wasn’t bothered by the cold.

“Okay...okay, Jackson. You’re right. But if we don’t rest at least for half an hour now, all you will achieve will be to bring tired Demigods to the Drakon fight. If we don’t have some time to recover, all you will have is some exhausted warriors and Huntresses to fight something extremely dangerous. We need a good meal in our stomach, drinks, and some rest. And likely in that order...please.”

For several seconds, Richard Grant had to almost run to follow Jackson...until the son of Poseidon abruptly stopped.

“Fine. We are going to enter the Trophy Halls; the Docks and our primary enemy are not really that far away. They begin at the gigantic triumphal arch? See it?”

“I see it.” It had to be two hundred and fifty metres away or so.

“Then pass the word.”

“I will.”

The Minotaur, of course, seemed to be indifferent to it, but all other members welcomed it with visible relief, no matter how much their face was hidden by the magical variant of a balaclava or not.

Jackson had really pushed them hard, and the idea of eating and drinking from the ‘X-Containers’ they had brought with them raised the spirits enough to convince everyone for a last effort.

“By the way, why did you call it ‘Trophy Halls’?” He asked Jackson as they passed under the colossal black arch. “We have not seen much...much...”

Suddenly and without warning, he was walking on a river of gold.

No, Richard wasn’t exaggerating. There was ice and snow, clearly, as there had been everywhere, but the coins couldn’t be mistaken for anything else. And in the first hall he advanced into, there had to be...easily thousands of them.

“Ah, here comes the trap,” the son of Hercules was sure he heard the Suicide Squad’s leader mutter.

“A trap?”

“Remember what I said about curses?”

“Yes, of course, don’t grab...oh.” Richard swallowed heavily, feeling suddenly ill-at-ease by merely looking at the Drachmas and the Denarii, among other coins he recognised. “You mean they are all-“

“They are all cursed. I think these ones have been treated with...hmm...it looks like a Proportional Curse of Greed? Original, I have to say.”

“A Proportional Curse of Greed?”

“The more coins you grab here, the worse the curse will get.” The sober and very serious voice made limpid that no, it was not a joke.

“That sounds...bad. I suppose that after a few minutes, you think only of acquiring more and more coins, until nothing else matters.”

“That and worse. If you try to grab more and more coins, you will become so greedy until your mind is convinced the entire wealth of this Forge and beyond rightfully belong to you. And you will have no reluctance killing anyone who might get in the way.”

‘Bad’ was too weak a word, apparently. Perseus looked in the direction of a great...it looked vaguely like a temple, if you took into account he broken statues and the destroyed decoration.

“We are going to make our short pause here. The coins are bad, but I feel far worse curses waiting in the other Halls.”

No one was willing to object, though it may be more because of the sheer exhaustion they all felt.

At least it was getting warmer. While they ate and drank from the X-Containers – in fact it was mostly drinking, as the things had drinking straws to go from the protected container to your mouth – the blizzard had not pursued them here. But there was something oppressing in the air, and Jackson wasn’t able to communicate with either Castellan or the ‘Blocking Force’ waiting outside of the mountain.

There were no conversations: at best a few grunts and shrugs. Everyone was saving his or her strength.

It all ended too fast to anyone’s taste, honestly. Jackson was as good as his word: he gave them thirty minutes, and not one more second.

The expedition resumed its advance into new halls. And after three of middle sizes where they were treated to the sight of countless golden and silvery coins, the real problems began.

The coins were the real deal, but they were just coins. Loot, basic treasure, and all that stuff, but since they could only carry so much on their backs – something the son of Poseidon had taunted them with – the temptation was nearly nonexistent.

The new hall they entered was different.

First, there were the severed heads of two giant sharks to ‘greet the visitors’, and Richard honestly didn’t know which species of sharks could go so big; there was largely enough space for a human to be swallowed in one gulp.

Then the trophies offered themselves to their size. Plenty of them would receive a place of honour in any Demigod’s collection of defeated monsters: giant tusks, giant fangs, giant skeletal heads of Hydras...

And then there were the weapons.

Bejewelled rapiers had been abandoned next to massive axes. Two-handed swords were in the places of honour next to shields that might be appropriate if you were three metres-tall. There had to be seven or eight alleys in this single hall, and there was nothing but weapons. The old but still deadly hoplite spears were present next to the muskets, the bows were close to the harquebus, and the eighteenth century field guns were facing the crossbows. The gladiators’ weapons of the Roman Empire were everywhere, and there had to be enough in armours and other supplies to equip a Legion, if you did not mind the lack of coherence.

And all of it was cursed.

Richard might have not thought too much about it, if Jackson had mentioned it, but he did, and with every temptation...

Okay, Richard had never believed himself to be a sorcerer or a clever scholar, but he was sure of one thing: the metal wasn’t supposed to glint like that, whether torches or ice was close to it to reflect the weak light.

*Seize this weapon. Claim eternal glory!*

Voices in his head were telling him to grab this weapon or that weapon. The fact that until today, he had never had this kind of pressure inside his mind was enough to tell him not to listen to them. Yes, some of the swords were so beautiful they could have been used by Emperors or Consuls centuries ago. So what? He wasn’t an Emperor, and he needed a sword, not an instrument of parade.

The problem was that the moment he thought this, the weapons that were attracting his gaze were changing, as if the halls themselves were-

*Glory can be yours! This blade will slay a thousand foes for you!*

“Jackson,” the son of Hercules grunted, “is my mind playing tricks or-“

“No, the Trophy Halls are heavily cursed. The Drakon is close; the influence of the enemy grows.”

*Wealth! Glory! We can give you everything you ever wanted!*

It was weird, but it was reassuring. It was a struggle to walk, but the fact the penguins right before him were walking unaffected hurt his pride. Damn it, if two screw-ups that had not been smart enough to not provoke Goddesses were able to resist this, then it wouldn’t be said that he couldn’t!

*Turn around, Richard Grant! You are missing your destiny! You will become the King of Demigods!*

But it was hard. Oh yes, it was hard...and with Douglas Smith, they had to shout a Legionnaire’s song to clear their mind and motivate themselves with insults.

Damn the Drakon. This wasn’t the kind of battlefield he was born for.

But as they passed a curious decapitated structure which might have been an octopus with too many tentacles, the whispers died. The ‘grab this weapon’ temptation ceased as if it had never existed.

Richard Grant sighed in relief, and he wasn’t the only one.

“That was unpleasant.” He wasn’t going to complain, but he felt like he had aged ten years in this hall.

“It was worse than that,” Rico Kowalski was almost on the verge of crying. “Have you any idea how many explosives I had to leave behind?”

“Bah, I’m sure the mad Demigod that you call leader will give them to you once all the curses of this Forge are broken,” Jade the Huntress remarked, and the Minotaur behind her grunted in agreement.

“The short one is fond of explosives. We will use them.”

“You see?” their party’s Emperor penguin tried to comfort...his fellow penguin. “All will be fine and...wait a minute, where are the others?”

Richard Grant watched...and sure enough, the Minotaur was the last member of the group...when he definitely shouldn’t have been.

“A million scavenging sea monsters! Billions of bilious blue blistering barnacles in a thunderous typhoon! Coconuts! Dry-dock sailors! Earthworms! Freshwater politicians! Great horned toads! Heretics! Ignoramus! Jellied eels! Kleptomaniacs! Logarithms! Malefactors! Nest of rattlesnakes! Ostrogoths! Pachyrhizus! Quivering ectoplasm! Rug merchants! Subtropical sea-louse! Two-faced insects! Unspeakable varlets! Vegetarians! Whale bubblers! Young monkeys! Zombies! ”

The intensity and the sheer number of curses utter by Perseus Jackson was such that Richard Grant was left staring open-mouthed. He was in good company, that said. Expect the penguins, who had been religiously taking notes, everyone was staring at the son of Poseidon.

“Sorry,” the leader of the Suicide Squad said in a voice that wasn’t sorry at all.

“Well...for this once I understand your anger?” Douglas cleared his throat. “You warned them, and...err...I think they pretty much decided to ignore everything you said.”

“An astute observation,” there was enough acid in these three words to poison someone, and all around them, ice exploded, as Jackson’s wrath...he was really, really angry.

“Must I go after them, short one?” The Minotaur asked with a disdainful sniff.

“No. Your life is far more important than theirs will ever be.”

Richard grimaced, but unfortunately, as galling as it was to say...Jackson was right. The Minotaur was strong, obeyed orders, and did not screw up at every opportunity.

The same couldn’t be said of the five individuals that were left in the ‘Weapons Hall’.

Fergus Cook. Bella Medina. And three out of four Huntresses: Phoebe, Kalinda, and Eudoxia.

Those were their names.

And they had succumbed to the bait the Drakon had thrown before their noses.

Since Perseus had told them exactly what was waiting for someone grabbing a single coin, Richard hadn’t naivety in him to pretend the theft of a single weapon wouldn’t be bad enough. The question was ‘how bad was it going to be’?

Still, he had to ask.

“Jackson...is there a chance they can fight a curse for long enough to-“

“For long enough to what, Grant?” Perseus Jackson’s wrath seemed to have been expended, and now his voice sounded just...tired. “I’m reasonably confident that once it will be time to break the curses of the Forge of All Perils, the sorcerous lore of our daughter of Hades will prove invaluable. But her Dreadful Majesty is a sorceress, not a miracle-maker. Once the curses have embedded themselves in one’s flesh, it is extremely difficult to remove them. Sometimes it’s fundamentally impossible without killing the target.”

“Kaboom?”

“No, Rico, ‘Kaboom’ won’t help. Not in a thousand years.”

Watching the...the foolishness, Richard could very well believe it.

Fergus Cook had, like the greedy fool he was, taken a sort of knight’s shield that appeared to be made of Imperial Gold. As if it wasn’t enough, to a belt that hadn’t been over his X-Suit before, several bejewelled daggers of Celestial Bronze had found their place. And now he was trying to choose before a diamond-shining flail and a sword that looked entirely made of sapphires. The pile of gold near the shield wasn’t reassuring either.

Bella Medina seemed to not have fallen to the same level of madness, though the sword of darkness she now had in her possession were not of any nature to rejoice. The daughter of Scotus seems to have gone for a pair of elegant black boots too.

As for the Huntresses, they were worse than the Roman Demigoddess: they had grabbed a longbow each, and were now busy pilfering dozens of magical arrows. One might have gambled the leader would be more reasonable, but one would have thought wrong: the longbow Phoebe the Huntress had chosen for herself shone like moonlight and gave him very bad feelings. And of course, she had chosen to don...a brand-new armour, yes, just something that ‘minor’. It was something conservative, deadly...and it radiated something incredibly dangerous, for all the magnificent silver and bronze.

Richard turned rapidly away when it was clear she was beginning to disrobe. The other boys imitated him.

“Jackson,” Douglas began, “the bow and the armour, were they once wielded by Artemis...or Selene?”

“Difficult to say,” the son of Poseidon answered honestly. “I am too far away to examine the artefacts properly, and what I can ‘taste’ from these curses don’t really incite me to go closer. The only thing I can tell you is that of all cursed things in this little arsenal, I can assure you the armour and the bow are some of the worse things you could pick.”

“This is horrible,” Jade said, “but if you act early then-“

“Dear Huntress,” the black-haired Demigod said, “I think it’s time for us to have a vital conversation. The rest of you, wait here please. Keep an eye on our five imbeciles while staying out of range of the cursed halls, we will be back within a couple of minutes.”

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The room was filled with banners. Most of them looked Atlantean. Like everything, they were covered by a large layer of ice.

Jade pretty much ignored that to watch the son of Poseidon...who was for the moment presenting his back to her.

“You want us to have a ‘vital conversation’, Jackson. We are alone. What do you want?”

“A wise man told years ago that there were two things infinite, the universe and human stupidity, and he wasn’t sure about the universe.” The Earthshaker’s son did not answer her question, of course. “He was completely right.”

The eyes hidden behind the orange lenses of the X-Suit finally met hers.

“The Huntresses are never going to be the same.”

“I know,” Jade admitted, “but even if Phoebe and the others are cursed, the others will continue monitoring you and act if there is any sign of betrayal. We are loyal to the Hunt...I am loyal to the Hunt.”

“I’m sorry, maybe I should have been more explicit, dear Huntress. Each and every one of you who entered the Forge...you are cursed. I didn’t suggest the X-Suits because I wanted to see everyone in tight white uniforms or some other nonsense. I wanted it because the interior of this mountain has been corrupted by a certain Drakon. Obviously, not touching or grabbing cursed weapons is a must-do if you want to avoid dying in an awful manner. But all of you Huntresses are cursed now. Only the ones who stayed outside with the Blocking Force avoided this fate...for now.”

Something inside her lungs urged the young Huntress to say the explanations were wrong.

But in the end, Jade fought against it. What would be the point? Jackson could lie, sure, but there was really no big gain for him. In fact, if it was true, he had lost a lot. Bella Medina and Fergus Cook had X-Suits, and thus were protected before these halls...but they had chosen to throw it away for powerful weapons.

“My Goddess’ blessing won’t be enough when this mad Quest is over?”

“The cold has seeped into your bones.” There was no grand proclamation of victory over her. “The Drakon is going to use it against you.”

“The Drakon...the monster is going to twist all the others.” The young Huntress didn’t make it a question, and the son of Poseidon didn’t say she was wrong.

“What do you propose?” She did her best not to shiver, for the sheer exhaustion she felt, the way the thirty minutes of rest had not done so much good...the ice in her veins...all was too easily explained. They had been cursed, in an insidious manner. “I have not brought the X-Suit you left in my cabin, and I doubt you brought it with you.”

“The X-Suit is more or less useless right now.” Perseus Jackson didn’t show it, so this was all the confirmation she needed that there would no salvation in ‘perverted clothes’, as Phoebe was so often saying. “It could have been using protecting you from the cold and the power of the Drakon, but it can’t do anything from the curse worming its way into your soul. It is a suit offering divine protection against the cold, after all; it can’t create miracles alone.”

Suddenly, the Demigod’s right hand had a...it was a snowflake? One part of it was black, one part was silver...and the whole seemed to be bathed in ice...and was it snow falling?

“It belongs to a Goddess.” Jade had seen enough objects belonging to Artemis to recognise a divine creation when she saw one.

“Yes.”

Jackson didn’t need to say more; the snowflake was not the Master Bolt of Zeus, but it was still a relatively well-known symbol, especially for the Huntresses, who killed monsters from spring to winter.

“What will it do?”

“It will protect your mind. And it will ensure that the transformation will preserve some of your humanity.” Jade didn’t really understand the last part, and her confusion was sufficiently visible for the Suicide Squad’s leader to explain further. “Once you will be fully transformed, you will be able to return to a human body approaching the one you currently have. You may not be able to keep this appearance at all times.”

“And the price?”

“You know exactly the price you will need to pay.” The Demigod placed the snowflake in her right hand. “Goddesses can give great boons, but only to those who serve them.”

“And if I refuse? If I call...the Lady of the Hunt?”

“The former is your choice. If you refuse, you refuse. I can’t promise this will be pleasant...the only thing I can really swear is that I will put you down during the Drakon fight if it is your desire. As for the latter...you can’t. Gods can’t enter the Forge of All Perils as long as the Drakon lives...or the Drakon invites them.”

Something troubled Jade. Those were true rules; the Demigods were so often used because they didn’t have to respect them. But these were rules for a *God’s Domain*. Not for a Drakon. Unless-

“Jackson.” Jade had believed herself to be very afraid before; she was wrong. Fear was consuming her heart now. “What are we going to fight?”

“The Ancestral Drakon of Frost, Ice, and Winter.”

It answered the question...and at the same time, it didn’t.

The mad Demigod hadn’t uttered the word ‘God’.

Yes, it wasn’t surprising how cursed this whole dormant volcano was. It was a Forge, a location of magma and fire. It shouldn’t have been so easily cursed, corrupted, and twisted.

And as servants of Artemis, they should have been far more resistant to the Cold Curse, Drakon or not.

But if they had infiltrated the lair of a *Drakon God*...

“Can you promise me something, Jackson?”

“That entirely depends on the promise,” obviously, the cheeky tone was back.

“Kill the reptile. Make sure it dies. I may not survive this, but I want it to pay.”

“As the Lady wishes.” Jackson bowed. “Now I need to return and join back the Suicide Squad. As for you...you have a choice to make.”

**4 December 2006, the Docks, the Forge of All Perils**

Douglas Smith felt something really bad was about to happen.

It wasn’t just because they had confirmed beyond doubt that five members of their twelve-strong party were complete imbeciles...and had offered zero apologies for disobeying Jackson’s orders.

This was bad, but the son of Volturnus had expected nothing else from Fergus Cook and the Huntresses. Bella Medina was a bit more of a surprise, but he didn’t know her that well to be surprised.

It was still reeking of something nasty.

The last halls had been undefended, and while Jackson had decided to use his Hydrokinesis to wash away the cursed artefacts present to tempt them to other halls, Douglas couldn’t help but think it was way too easy.

There were no monsters, and the traps that remained could be seen fifty metres away.

Douglas walked faster, and joined the son of Poseidon leading their column.

“How bad is it going to be?”

“You noticed.” The son of Poseidon replied serenely, making Douglas scoff.

“Jackson, we have been under attack for hours by countless reptiles. And suddenly, five idiots touch cursed objects, and the blizzard and the monster attacks cease? I am here for revenge, but I am not blind. And there’s another point I didn’t miss: you told us the curses were incredibly powerful and fast-acting. Yet none of the five morons are screaming in pain right now...this suggests to me two possible scenarios: either you were completely wrong about the curses, or they are going to be triggered at the worst moment possible.”

And given how insistent the voices of the Trophy Halls had been into tempting them, the son of Volturnus didn’t believe a single second there were no curses. That left the really bad scenario.

“You have made an extremely good situational analysis, Smith. If we survive this, I will place you under the daughter of Athena’s command.”

“If we survive this?”

“Castellan and the others have reached the command centre of the Forge. But it is not warming fast enough. The power of the Frost isn’t weakened enough. As you say, there is a massive trap ahead of us.”

“Shouldn’t we prepare a battlefield more to our advantage, in that case?”

“No. This would be a smart strategy...if I could be sure the Questers who reached the command centre would hold it for hours without problems. Unfortunately, with communications broken, I can’t confirm this is the case. Ah, here we are.”

There was another arch, where octopi and various sea creatures had been sculpted.

And then the walls ceased to be, and an enormous part of the volcano revealed itself to their eyes.

Once again, Douglas felt all tiny and ridiculous.

This was no natural cavern; the words seemed completely inaccurate given the sheer size of the bloody thing.

There was a ceiling, but it was so high above their head that it was difficult to see it...maybe over one kilometre, and that was more likely a conservative estimate.

They marched onto what had been an elevated plaza and saw the place Jackson had called ‘Docks’.

It was justified.

Hundreds of ships were buried in a sea of ice. Triremes, galleons, Viking longships, and many other types of warship and merchant ships were there. Once ago, before the Dragon came, this had to be an interior lake, where the Forge’s owners used as a natural harbour. The advantages were evident even for a novice: protected by the natural ‘walls’ of the volcano, the merchants and local population could bargain and trade as they wished; given the sheer size of the ‘Gates’ half-hidden by the frost, there was no way an enemy could break through without divine help.

And yet, the Forge had evidently fallen at some point. How-

“Ah, here it goes.”

Douglas hadn’t perfect eyes, but it was easy to see in the first seconds. They emerged from the snow. At first only pirate sabres and muskets were visible. But in one minute, the muzzles and the ice-coloured snouts of the Frost Iguanas joined them.

There were hundreds who appeared in the ‘first wave’. This was nothing but the vanguard. The snow rumbled, and then the true might of the ferocious reptiles revealed itself.

It was...it was a flood. There had to be thousands easily. No more than that-

“Ten thousand, give it or take,” Richard Grant said quietly, his arrogance nowhere in sight. “We have a problem.”

“Yes,” the son of Poseidon nodded, “because this is no ordinary rabble.”

He was right, unfortunately. Many of the Frost Iguanas didn’t rely on their natural claws and fangs: at least half of them had forged themselves crude shields and spears. Here and there the reptiles were unveiling banners, whose very presence seemed wrong somehow. Douglas didn’t recognise the sigil, but a reptilian eye painted in green didn’t seem like good news.

“Ten thousand against twelve,” Bella Medina chuckled. “That seems one for the legends of New Constantinople.”

Perseus Jackson didn’t answer, instead his fists began to burn in white energy...and in two seconds, two enormous ballista which were imprisoned in vast cocoons of ice were released.

“Attempting Primary Liaison. Condition Extremis!”

There was a low grumble...and then the siege engines began to shift and a line of fire magic seemed to burn in a conduit underneath the frozen stones.

“Our fellow Questers have given us a chance. Rico, Skipper, the ballista are yours. They have autoloaders linked directly to the Delta Arsenal, so you shouldn’t run out of ammunition.”

Douglas felt a bit reassured as enormous bolts with tips of Celestial Bronze began to materialise, and the penguins rushed towards them with malicious cackles.

That said, there were just two ballista.

Two siege engines, and the lizard army, supported by hundreds of skeletons, was everywhere in this lake of frost and ice.

And the Drakon was nowhere to be seen.

“Orders, short one?” The Minotaur grunted.

“I think it is time to use our Ultimate Combo.” Perseus Jackson used his Trident to strike his own shield in a defiant manner. “SUICIDE SQUAD! TO WAR!”

They shouted back. It was just madness. They were likely all going to die, submerged by an endless number of monsters. But this whole Great Quest was craziness incarnate anyway.

For once, cursed or not, they were all united in a single purpose. The monsters had to be killed.

Of course the reptilian army screamed back its hatred, and it charged them, in a sound that shook the world.

“SECRET ULTIMATE COMBO! OCEAN BULLHORN!”

Perseus Jackson and the Minotaur charged the Frost Iguanas like berserkers, and far faster than any mortal had any right to be.

The shock...the shock was akin to a tsunami slamming into a mountain.

The explosion sprayed enormous quantities of iguana’s blood, and the massacre began.

Douglas felt sure he wasn’t going to forget it, not for as long as he lived.

Such was the power of the attack that the enemy army was separated in two. Over a thousand monsters were already transformed into meat that fizzled out of existence, and the son of Poseidon was just beginning. A wave was summoned, and it slammed into the skeletons again and again, dispersing the bones.

“COME ON! WHO WANTS TO SEE ANOTHER AGE OF PIRACY?”

Everyone entered the melee, and immediately it was kill or be killed.

They were outnumbered a thousand to one...but they charged. They couldn’t stop at risk of being overwhelmed...and so they didn’t.

Suddenly the sky lit on fire, and the ballista joined the massacre.

Douglas slammed his shield into the heads of various Frost Iguanas, and decapitated dozens of heads. It was kill or be killed, and if he had any choice in it, he preferred to be the killer.

The bolts of the siege engines were devastating. Each time they hit, the created enormous furrows into the monstrous horde, and Jackson was exploiting them ruthlessly.

War. The frenzy of war had seized them all. There was no mercy; not that there had been much of that since they entered the forge. They were fighting at the edge of the lake, as behind them the stone was revealed as magma finally broke the cold aura, and ahead of them remained the lake of frost.

They were powerful. They fought like demons.

It wasn’t enough.

Kalinda the Huntress was the first to fall. Douglas didn’t know if it was the curse or her own arrogance, but she had forgotten that racing through the battlefield was her only chance...and before anyone could do anything, she was surrounded.

A spear impaled her from behind, the crude weapon being quite evidently more redoubtable than its appearance suggested...and then claws and fangs fell by the hundreds upon her. The screams were particularly horrible...and there was nothing they could do.

The Demigods gave everything they had in the minutes following it. The Minotaur was a hurricane of destruction, Perseus Jackson threw stalagmites at his opponents, killing hundreds with each blow. Their blades of Celestial Bonze and Imperial Cold drank the life of countless monsters. The ranks of the enemy were thinning.

And it wasn’t fast enough for some. Fergus Cook lost an arm, and would have lost his life if the Minotaur wasn’t here to save him. Minor consolation, the Frost Iguanas entered into maniacal frenzy when it came to eating the severed limb...something that facilitated their elimination.

But there was no one to save the other Huntress when a reptilian mace hit her head. Douglas knew it was a death blow before she hit the ground...and though the Huntress-in-chief exacted a merciful vengeance, it was not going to return Eudoxia the Huntress to life.

And then it was over.

The horde of the Frost Iguanas broke, having had enough. More than two-thirds of their numbers were slain, the skeletons were all disintegrated, and the banner-holders – who must have been leaders of sort – had been challenged and killed by Jackson.

The monstrous horde fled like Hell was coming...and while Jackson sent a last wave, no one pursued.

They were all trying to catch their breath.

By the Gods...what a battle...what a slaughter...

“Ballista penguins! Stop firing! Save the ammunition!”

“Yes, Boss!”

“Understood, Boss!”

“What a...I don’t find the words...” the huntress called Jade decided to use a nearby barrel as an improvised seat. “I can’t believe we managed to survive it...”

“Two of your sisters didn’t!” Of course, Phoebe the Huntress had to ruin the moment. Of course. “Eudoxia and Kalinda are dead!”

“And I lost my left arm,” Fergus Cook was in the process of receiving emergency healing from Jackson...and it didn’t sound pleasant, given the noises of pain which escaped his lips. “This battle was definitely no joke. They ate my shield...”

“I told you gold by itself is no first-rate protection.” The son of Poseidon chuckled. “The good news, such as it is, is that a few of the curses you were so stupid as to ‘collect’ were linked to your arm are gone now. They weren’t triggered, and the flesh is gone, so...success!”

“That’s...good news, right?”

“Well, it would be if you hadn’t ‘collected’ dozens of *other* curses,” the Suicide Leader’s squad said mockingly. “Still, you will live.”

“JACKSON, MY SISTERS ARE DEAD!” An arrow flew...and it was stopped by the axe of the Minotaur.

“**If you shoot one more arrow in my direction, Huntress, I will kill you**.” The son of the Earthshaker spoke. The cavern seemed to shake under the power of the voice. When he continued, it was in a more conventional tone...but no less threatening. “Many of your man-hating cultists are rapidly outliving whatever usefulness they ever had. Attack me once again, and your next journey will be Hell...the old-fashioned way.”

“Three of my sisters are dead, *male*.”

“And I am very sorry for your loss,” this was a lie, Douglas and everyone present knew it, “but this Zone Mortalis is called the Sea of Monsters. Those who have not the power, the skill, and a good dose of luck to survive...they don’t.”

Perseus sighed before turning back to the son of Liber.

“I have done everything I can for your arm, Cook. If everything works out fine, I will see in a few days if we can give you a metallic prosthesis straight from the Forge’s ateliers.”

“If everything works out fine?” Richard Grant repeated suspiciously.

“There is a monster left inside the Forge. I can feel the magma being pumped into several pipes...and yet this lake remained obstinately frozen. By all rights, the Drakon should have already attacked us, not left the work to its iguana minions.”

“Attrition, Boss.” Rico Kowalski proposed, agitating comically his fins. “We expended a lot of ammunition, and we need rest. If it comes out now, we’re going to be far more tired than we were at the beginning of this battle.”

“That’s sound strategy...if our opponent was a child of Athena. But a Drakon isn’t that. So why-“

“***Fimbulvetr will not come until I give him the authorisation***.”

The frozen lake ahead of them flashed green, and everyone retreated in urgency towards the zone where stone, not frost, was covering.

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This was *not* part of the plan.

The ‘final boss’ of this island was supposed to be Fimbulvetr. There was nothing bigger and more dangerous than the Ancestral Drakon.

Unfortunately, it seemed his calculations and plans were completely wrong.

It had been a while Perseus hadn’t been that outmanoeuvred...how refreshing.

The former Tyrant watched the lake of ice for several seconds, as the frost turned from white and blue to a very reptilian green.

“Who are you?” he asked at last.

“***I am the Sire of the Drakons***,” the voice was...primal and dangerous. This was evidently a deity speaking. “***I am the Betrayed Guardian. I am the Discordant Voice of the Depths***.”

The name rang true...and this was clever, because his knowledge was unable to link it to a real name of the Greek mythology.

“And you have decided to ruin my plans and ensure this Great Quest is a disaster.”

This time there was a sound...the voice was making the equivalent of a short laugh.

“***No, Perseus Jackson. If I had decided to ruin you, you would not be here. You would be dead. This Forge of All Perils, this volcano, this entire island, these foes you slew by the thousands; this was how I decided to test you and your companions***.”

“This is quite a lethal test, if you allow me the remark.”

It wasn’t that he cared about the death of many Huntresses, nor the fact Fergus Cook had lost an arm, but the iguana army had not been a joke.

Perseus had to fight seriously, and the same was true about Asterius. The ballista support had also been critical at some moments.

“***If you were not strong enough to win this battle, then you have no chance to emerge alive from the next battles you will fight in the Sea of Monsters***,” the mysterious ‘Sire of Drakons’ dismissed the argument haughtily. “***And if you aren’t able to thrive here, you are of no interest to me***.”

“Fair,” it was at least more honest than Zeus sending him to a Great Quest while hoping he suffered a tragic accident along the way. “How did you know I was sailing for the Forge of Perils? Only one being had that information, and she swore on the Styx the secret would be kept until the Drakon was slain or we were all dead.”

His half-sister Rhode had provided so much vital information about the mechanical labyrinth of the Forge that this had been a risk worth taking.

“***I created the path which would lead you to acquire the logbook of Francis Drake***.”

This...this was very bad news. Assuming it was the truth, that implied the Sire of Drakons was a monstrously powerful Seer, Augur, or some kind of Oracle.

Because while delivering the logbook in an indirect manner could attract his attention, there had been fifty or so islands described in the logbook. Yes, the Forge of All Perils had figured prominently, along with Drake’s theories about it when his men never came back...but it wasn’t sufficient to *guarantee* Perseus would come. So unless the Sire of Drakons had trapped every island Drake ever visited, the problem was very big...

“But it is Fimbulvetr who is Lord and Master here. And the Olympians must have kept an eye on us.”

More than an eye, if they had some intelligent left in their divine essences.

“***The moment you approached this island, I made sure the Olympians would see nothing but what I allow them to perceive...and the deaths of those who fell in battle***.” The primal voice declared with obvious satisfaction...then again, if you had the power to do that, you could really feel smug. “***And as long as I wish it, I AM the Lord and Master here. Let me prove it to you***.”

There was...a magical pulse. It washed away the entire cavern, and it smelled like...metal and decay.

When it touched him, Perseus could feel nothing at all.

The same was true about the majority of the Suicide Squad.

But when it hit Fergus Cook, the son of Liber screamed.

“Jackson!”

“Stay away!” The daggers and the flail the moron had taken for himself in the Hall of Trophies were shining in a powerful golden light, and you didn’t have to be a Tyrant to know all the curses had just been triggered. “You can’t do anything to stop the curses!”

“STOP IT! STOP IT, I BEG YOU!”

The son of Liber screamed as his body twisted, and seemed to break and be twisted by invisible forces.

Perseus winced internally in sympathy...it seemed the ‘painless mode’ had been deactivated for this transformation.

“STOP IT! PLEASE!”

And then where the left arm had been severed, a large fin grew in its stead, the X-Suit rapidly engulfing the new limb in a gold colour.

Fergus Cook’s began to shrink. And as he shrank, his other arm turned into a fin, with the white of the X-Suit becoming glossy gold.

The feet were disappearing, replaced by appendages Perseus recognised...they were after all the same Rico and Skipper had.

The major difference with them is that everything was turning gold, both on the back and the belly. The shades of gold for the former were king of darker, while the ‘gold’ of the belly was close to white, but it was shades of yellow.

The curse-transformation had to last about two minutes.

When it ended, there was a miniature golden penguin in front of him.

The situation was grave...but deserved to be acknowledged with the seriousness it deserved.

“All HAIL! Suicide Squad, we have a new recruit for our Penguin Infantry!”

“NO! NOT A PENGUIN!”

“Until the end of this battle, your provisional name is ‘Goldie the Blonde’,” Perseus said magnanimously, “don’t thank me, I know-“

“I AM GOING TO KILL YOU, JACKSON!”

Unfortunately, the poor ‘Goldie’ had not the same balance as he did when he was a human...and by trying to rush him, he slammed beak first on the pavement.

The majority of the Suicide Squad reacted appropriately. They laughed and giggled.

Perseus turned back to speak with the entity using the green frozen lake as a medium.

“You have the skill and the power to back your words.” The son of Poseidon nodded respectfully. It had certainly not escaped him that a single curse had been triggered. Obviously, the Sire of Drakons couldn’t do anything to Kalinda and Eudoxia, unless he was Hades in disguise: they were dead, and their souls were beyond his reach now. But that left Phoebe, Jade, and Bella Medina in addition to Fergus Cook. And yet he had transformed only one to make his point...maybe something could be salvaged from the previous plan’s failure, after all. “You have my attention...and my eternal friendship.”

The same primal laughter shook the Forge of All Perils...which was good. Laughter was always better than fury, especially when you had someone who could likely incinerate the entire Suicide Squad with a spark of divine power.

“***You are interesting, Perseus Jackson***.”

“Thank you. What do you want?”

“***I want you to spread chaos across the Sea of Monsters***,” the Sire of Drakons spoke with some...relish? “***I want you to sail towards the most dangerous islands, challenge the greatest foes and curses the Olympians placed here for millennia. I want you to fulfil the bargains you have with the three Goddesses that named you their Champion. I want you to complete victoriously this Great Quest, so that the so-called Master of Olympus is forced to thank you while his essence is nothing but spite and jealousy***!”

Definitely some kind of Seer, Augur, or Oracle. That could give him a valuable ally...or an implacable enemy.

“I would have already done that without your intervention, Sire of Drakons,” Perseus said somewhat truthfully.

“***No***.” The powerful being immediately countered. “***You wouldn’t have. You use dangerous options, but you try to limit the risks to yourself and to your crew. I watched you the moment you sailed from New Byzantium. I know which courses you could have chosen***.”

That...it shouldn’t have been possible. Yes, the Sire of Drakons had foresight, but to study his moves so extensively and accurately, you didn’t need an Augur or an Oracle – which for the record had been extremely annoying to deal with in his previous life – *you needed a bloody spy among the Suicide Squad’s ranks*.

“Oh woe is me,” Perseus complained dramatically, telekinetically summoning his combat Trident again. “Suicide Squad, it seems we are betrayed!”

Perseus turned around and prepared for a strike.

Unfortunately, Bella Medina’s cursed sword was already transformed into a model of grenade which looked extremely nasty...and the dark shroud around it didn’t incite to optimism.

“Curse you,” Perseus said cheerfully, all the while summoning his strength to protect himself, “for your vile and unanticipated-“

KABOOOOOOOM!

“-betrayal...”

\*\*\*\*

Bella had not expected the grenade to kill Perseus Jackson, to be honest.

Still, even her low expectations weren’t exactly fulfilled.

The long trench the son of Poseidon created in the ice lake was way too theatrical to be an indicator of genuine injuries.

Something that was immediately confirmed as he rose from the frost, with no injuries whatsoever.

“Treachery! Scandalous, elaborate treachery!”

“What a monster...”

***I would hurry, if I were you. This boy is a comedian, but he won’t hesitate to rip you apart, if only to convince Olympus he is still half-loyal to them***.

*Yes, Sire*.

Bella abandoned weapons and all her possessions, and threw one of her explosive rings on a section of ice which had been left intact.

In a fraction of a second, a large pentacle revealed itself.

The dark-haired daughter of Scotus went to place her boot-covered feet at the heart of the smaller five-pointed star in the core of the pentacle. She cleared her throat. No mistakes would be tolerated.

Bella Medina *spoke*.

There were thirteen syllables. None of them belonged to any human language. All of them hurt her mouth and her tongue.

And when she finished, it was if she had fought ten battles and run a marathon.

Bella waited.

One flame of utter darkness began to burn where one of the stars ended. Then a second, a third, a fourth. And a fifth.

The flames coalesced, and soon joined each other, creating a circle of raw power that cut her from the rest of the world.

Black sighed in relief. It worked.

It was just in time, for Perseus Jackson struck with his Trident.

There was a loud thunderous sound, but the barrier repelled the attack effortlessly, before spraying black flames as a mechanism of defence. The son of Poseidon jumped away, avoiding once more what would have killed a normal Demigod.

“Jackson! Give the order and I kill this traitor!”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Grant. Have you seen the power imbued in this circle? We don’t have the firepower to break it in a few minutes...and if we did, I have the feeling we would all regret it. Isn’t that right, my new favourite treacherous lieutenant?”

“It’s completely correct,” Bella agreed. “Though I’m still pleasantly surprised to see you take it so well.”

Darkness swirled, and the feeling of power was amazing in the air.

“You can’t exactly be angry when you encourage your subordinates to betray creatively...otherwise you are just a huge hypocrite. I am not.”

“That’s...good.”

And then the boots, the cursed boots that had been waiting for her in the Trophy Hall, simply melted around her feet, as if they were nothing more than another layer of black latex.

It was sliding slickly and fast. For all the fact she had been warned in detail this was going to happen, there was a certain amount of surprise, watching it with her own eyes.

Bones began to crack loudly. Tendons were torn apart. The Demigoddess was quite relieved that there was no pain. Fergus Cook had screamed a lot, and while Bella desired her transformation, she wasn’t a masochist.

The toes of her right foot suddenly splayed apart. In a few seconds, it didn’t look human anymore. It did not hurt. It did not hurt, but she could perceive what was happening, down to the individual joint snapping. And it was...extremely weird. Her toes were elongated several times their original length, and there was an incredible pressure in their toenails...for good reason, as a second later, they pierced through the air as shiny black talons. Muscles and ligaments were stretched and woven anew to match her lengthening soles.

A moment ago, she had a right foot. Now it was more akin to something you would find a bird of prey.

Bella laughed and opened her mind fully to the transformation.

The black goo which had stayed more or less immobile began to envelop her other leg in its entirety.

***Excellent. Surrender fully and the transformation will be perfect***.

*Yes, Sire*.

***And answer the son of Poseidon’s questions. You won’t have much time after it***.

Bella watched with curiosity nonetheless as her left foot began to mirror her right. There were the familiar feelings of cracking bones and elongating digits...and it felt good. The symmetry was restored. Her feet were fully transformed into talons, and the black goo rushed to engulf her torso.

“Ask your questions,” Bella said as the changes burned inside her body, and smiled.

“Why? You did not look like one of my opponents, nor did you behave as one of the Demigods who believed in my ideas of madness. The arrogant beliefs were nothing but a charade, I know that now. So why?”

“I believe in your cause, Perseus Jackson.” She said as the majority of her white X-Suit disappeared, coated by the black fluids which altered the divine material beyond what was supposed possible. “I always intended to join your Suicide Squad. But what *He* showed me...if nothing was done, you were going to fail. It is not that you aren’t powerful and worth following; it’s just that the enemies desiring your doom are just too powerful for any mortal to overcome.”

“Interesting. But I have many plans, and the majority of them, I didn’t share them with you.”

“When *He* came...he showed me. *I was* shown *all your plans*. Do you understand?”

“I *understand*.” The son of Poseidon replied. And she was sure he did.

Her entire body tensed. Or rather, it would be accurate to say all her muscles tensed up. Bella was receiving new muscles, as the black substance wove itself between muscles fibres and she knew intimately how much her strength would be bolstered. The Demigoddess had been strong before, but the process altered her to a new level. The clear and lean outlines of muscles below the latex-like substance were simply amazing. For the first time, there was not just satisfaction, but pleasure.

“You would have likely survived this Second Great Quest without my involvement,” Bella tried not to moan in pleasure as she talked, “but you would never have survived your Third Great Quest. Your lieutenants wouldn’t be powerful enough, and you would not have been pushed far enough in your last reserves of ingenuity and determination.”

“This might be true, but what are your betrayal’s purposes?”

“I made a bargain with *Him*...I *am* the reward, should you impress him sufficiently.”

There was new pressure, and this time all her fingers cracked.

Bella watched calmly as they splayed apart, growing at a fantastic speed outward. As her digits lengthened, membranous webbing lined up the space between them. Like with her toes, the large black talons soon erupted from her fingertips.

It was *amazing*. Those weren’t amusing decorations; these were true wings, her wings, that were growing, and with them, she was provided powerful weapons.

“What else are you allowed to tell me?”

Tendrils of night colour shot around her, wrapping her, squeezing certain parts...her body was changing.

No, her body was sculpted into what she was destined to be. The X-Suit was no more, and instead everywhere there was a black shimmering skin accentuating what had replaced her Demigoddess body.

Bella felt sleek...and more confident than she had ever been. She gasped as behind her, a whip-like tail pushed out from the base of her spine.

“You will have to fight Fimbulvetr...and his power has been bolstered, so that it can do what you aspire. Don’t die...please.”

“I will do my best.”

There was more pleasure, and Bella welcomed it, both in her mind and her soul.

The black goo reached up to her neck to change her, and she felt the transformation begin within her head.

For several seconds, there was an enormous pressure in her mouth and her jaw.

This pressure ended as the release came...a release taking the form of a rapidly growing tongue, and she had to open her mouth in full to set it free.

The pleasure and the pressure combined, and one by one, her teeth were pushed out. All her teeth were removed by her new tongue...and a set of sharp fangs replaced them.

“Is the power worth the price?”

Bella felt honestly happy at the curiosity...and managed to answer as the transformation washed over her.

“If it wasn’t power...would there be a price?”

Every part of her body was now covered by the black goo...save the eyes.

Her face was pushed forwards into a snout.

And the instincts surged and washed over her mind.

Bella received all the feral urges of the new body she was given.

Ignoring the audience, the former Demigoddess growled and screamed, wishing the transformation to make her complete.

It was changing her mind, after her body. It was changing her soul...and she felt it was *divine*.

Bella felt the last of her humanity try to resist...and the goo wrapped itself over her eyes, blocking her vision. Writhing under the throes of the pleasurable transformation, she could feel her new ears forming on each side of her head. They were long and powerful, those ears. She could hear every member of the Suicide Squad...yes, even the ones outside the Forge of All Perils. She could hear every living being present on the island.

Her thin black lips peeled back from her pointed snout, baring her gums and fangs. Bella had believed her senses were powerful before; how wrong had she been. The power of her senses now made her feel like she had been deaf and deprived of senses before.

She opened her eyes again, and the mirrors of ice which had been created allowed her to see the two glowing white orbs that shone in the semi-darkness.

The power embraced her, caressed her, and then engulfed her before vanishing.

She screamed in bliss.

And then it was over.

Bella stared at her talons, her body, and her fangs. There was no suit, no second skin anymore.

What she felt, what she saw, it was her flesh and her bones.

She had assimilated the best traits of what had made her a Demigoddess, and now her Sire had perfected by remodelling it with the essence of the bat.

The last of her humanity was gone, and it was a relief.

She was lithe. She was powerful. The feral urges fuelled her, and her mind tightened around them, using them to give herself a new sense of self-control, while using them to master the body she had been given.

“***You are Bella Medina no more. From this day onwards, you will be known as Nocturna***.”

The primal language seized her, gave her purpose. She was given twelve other names inside her mind, and with each of them, Nocturna moaned in pleasure.

“***Say your farewells and join me, Nocturna. I have much to teach you***.”

“Yes, my Sire and Creator.”

\*\*\*\*

The dark magic receded, and Richard Grant stared in horror at the...*thing* Bella Medina had become.

The son of Hercules had seen plenty of Demigods transformed into animals; just the three penguins present in the vicinity were good examples of what could happen if you behave like an idiot with Gods nearby.

But those had been unwilling transformations.

There had been something...something reeking of heresy and blasphemy watching the daughter of Scotus discarding her humanity as if it didn’t matter.

And now they had a shiny black bat woman facing them inside the ritual circle.

It was giving him the urge to vomit.

It was not the transformation, it was, it was...

It was that she was positively *revelling* in her new monstrous nature.

“The Hunt will know no respite until we flay you and send your skin to our Lady’s Temple!”

The bat woman chuckled, a sound that seemed human...but you listened to the high tonality, it was well beyond it...and dangerous.

“Oh, Phoebe, Phoebe...” the long tongue of the humanoid bat swirled, as if it tasted the air. “I have gained enough power to not fear the Hunt anymore. There is only one Demigod of the Suicide Squad who can defeat me, and his name is Perseus Jackson.”

All eyes turned towards the son of Poseidon, who nodded once in a meditative pose.

“You would present a serious challenge in a fair fight. Of course, I don’t fight fair.”

The monster which had just been named Nocturna chuckled again.

“True. I must take my leave here.” The circle of sheer darkness began to weaken, and the five dark flames of the pentacle flickered and began to die out. “Farewell, Perseus. Farewell, Asterius. We will see each other again. As for the rest of you...muster all your strength and live...or die, I don’t really care.”

“KILL HER!”

The bat woman gave them an expression of...pity? And then her enormous black wings wrapped themselves around her lithe black body.

The lights died for several seconds. Darkness was everywhere. Then the torches and the weak lights reflected by the light returned.

And when his sword struck the interior of the pentacle, it found nothing.

“Hell and damnation!”

“The Hunt will have its revenge! You think you can flee like that? We will find you! WE WILL FIND YOU!”

The magic of obscurity faded away, as if it had been a bad dream...but it was not.

Bella Medina was no more, as Richard Grant felt deep in his guts that the daughter of Scotus was well and truly gone.

“Okay...” Perseus Jackson cleared his throat as he climbed back the stone stairs to put some distance away from the lake, which was beginning to lose its green shade. “Everyone, please calm down.”

“HOW CAN YOU TELL US TO CALM DOWN?” Phoebe screamed. “THE ONE WHO KILLED MY TWO SISTERS AND BETRAYED US GOT AWAY!”

The good news, Richard thought, was that she wasn’t accusing Perseus of their deaths anymore...

“Because it will serve no purpose.” The son of Poseidon faced the irate Huntress with a courage that was downright impressive. “Nocturna is getting further and further away with every second, and I don’t know where she is supposed to go in the first place.”

The Huntress glared murderously.

“And besides, given the sheer power her ‘Creator’ gave her, I am in no hurry to fight her.”

The seriousness in the voice of Jackson...seconds ago, Richard had thought he was humouring the bat woman, but now, it didn’t appear to be the case.

“Is it that bad?”

“We will have to invent a new name for what our betrayer has become.” Perseus spoke in an absent tone. “Right now, the best I can find is ‘three-quarters Goddess’. Does that give you an idea of how easily she would transform you into a pile of bloody fragments?”

“How is it possible?”

“Let me remind you that her father is a personification of darkness, even if the deity has faded enormously in power with the last millennium by lack of willing sacrifices. And then the daughter embraced the darkness again, accepting this new predatory form. I don’t know who chose the theme, the Sire or the Demigoddess, but it was an incredibly powerful symbol. And then there’s the source of power she summoned...”

His voice trailed off.

“And if she returns, what do we do?” Douglas asked.

“Why, you begin a pleasant conversation with the exquisite politeness due to a being that is above you in the food chain, and if she attacks, you run away like hell.”

The worst part was that there was no grin, no teasing, and no hint that it was a joke.

“What do we do now, Boss?”

Perseus sighed before giving a look at the lake...who had almost returned to its natural icy splendour.

“Ah, Rico. You and Skipper are going to run to the trebuchets on the upper levels. The ones using the ammunition of the Gamma arsenal.”

“But Boss, we want you to-“

The ground shook. No, it did not shake, it seemed to rise above their feet before crashing down...and many stones were thrown in the air, it appeared not to be far from the truth. The area was distorted beyond recognition.

“What...by the Temples of Olympus-“

Richard looked at the frost lake. Or rather what had been a frozen lake.

Because now, an enormous abyss had opened up.

And what looked like an enormous amount of gigantic blades were rising up from it. It felt like a forest of blades, one the likes you only saw in science-fiction movies.

It began to feel cold. For the first time, despite the X-Suit, they were feeling the cold!

“If you want to flee, I don’t blame you.” Perseus continued calmly, and unlike them all, the son of Poseidon had managed to stay standing, an extraordinary feat as earthquakes shook the entire volcanic cavern. “It is a fight that is a bit beyond you.”

“This is a nightmare!” Fergus Cook, his penguin beak giving off a hysterical tone. “Nothing can be...that...big...”

The beast emerged from the depths of the frozen lake.

Richard froze when he saw the head.

Technically, it was more or less an iguana minus the crest.

But no iguana had that sheer vibe of ferocity and toughness. Each black scale seemed to be made to break ten thousands of Celestial Bronze swords.

And the Drakon had many, many scales.

The head was beyond enormous. The fangs alone were the size of an adult Demigod. But the body which pulverised the ice was making a mockery of it.

Even the ‘arms’ were big enough to be compared to baobab trees.

Each section of the body was armoured to hell and back.

There were black scales, black scales, and spikes and natural spikes to cover more sections of carapace.

As for the ‘legs’, the skyscrapers of New York City seemed to have far smaller foundations.

The tail...the tail was long enough that a hundred cars were in length inferior to it.

The penguins ran away, using an old-fashioned train chariot to flee faster.

Richard wished he could do that.

But he was a son of Hercules.

He wasn’t going to shame his name and his line. He wasn’t a coward.

“Was...the Drakon...supposed to be that big?”

“No...” Perseus Jackson admitted. “He wasn’t...I was expecting a third of that, at best. Not what I see here...one hundred and fifty metres tall...and something like one hundred thousand tonnes?”

In other words, if the Drakon decided to play by doing a long jump head first, they were going to die so magnificently there would be nothing but red stains indicating they had been living beings in the first place.

“What do we do now, Jackson?”

“Only one thing, to do Smith!” oh, no, he knew that tone... “FIMBULVETR! MIGHTY DRAKON! LET ME SWEAR YOU MY ETERNAL FRIENDSHIP!”

The super-giant iguana shook its gigantic head as if it couldn’t believe someone could be that stupid...and then as its little reptilian eyes narrowed in a very angry manner, Richard cursed under his breath.

“If we survive this, I will kill you Jackson...bare hands only...”

“Promises, promises...avoid all attacks, be they frost or physical, my dear lieutenants. Given the sheer power it radiates, Fimbulvetr will need only one blow to kill you.”

And then the spikes on the spine of the monstrous lizard began to blare up with the colour of ice itself. It was as if a thousand Christmas trees had been illuminated, but in ice colour.

In fact, it didn’t do it justice, it was if an ice storm wasn’t conjured and-

“**RRROOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOAAAAAAAAAAAAAARRRRRRRR**!”

The roar drowned everything.

It was as if a hundred thousand roars had been added to each other until this one.

The maw of the lizard tyrant illuminated itself like a second sun, and the pipes which had been busy transforming the ice dozens of metres above their heads were covered entirely by a new ice age.

It was the apocalypse, in ice and roars.

It felt incredibly, disastrous cold.

There were earthquakes, monstrous mode. There were ice shards propelled by the thousands in the cavern.

Richard didn’t know he stayed standing.

He didn’t know, and he didn’t care, as his eyes stayed on Fimbulvetr, Ancestral Dragon of Ice, Frost, and Sheer Devastation.

“King of the Monsters...”

“It fits,” Perseus nodded. “All Hail the King!”

Richard glared. The son of Poseidon’s smirk disappeared.

“Weaknesses?”

“The head and the throat appear to be the only weak points, Grant. Don’t bother striking at anything else. Prioritise the eyes or the upper maw.”

“You think we can hit the brain in this manner?”

“It’s worth trying, at least.”

A Trident was raised in defiance. One large double axe, two swords, and two bows joined the symbol of Poseidon.

“SUICIDE SQUAD! LET US GIVE A FIGHT THE GODS WILL REMEMBER FOR ETERNITY!”

They screamed their anger and charged.

It was madness...but it was all they had left.

**4 December 2006, Command Room, the Forge of All Perils**

“Restore the battlefield video! I want to see what is happening!” Annabeth barked. In her guts, the daughter of Athena felt it was bad.

Jackson and the others had just won the battle against a large army of reptiles, and suddenly every automaton stopped working in the area of the Docks? If it wasn’t a bad sign, she didn’t know what it was!

“I’ve found it, the jammer!” Leo proclaimed. “I am changing the power flow...rerouting...now!”

The pyromaniac son of Hephaestus was as good as his word. Two seconds later, all the mirror-like surfaces serving as monitoring screens instantly lit up.

They revealed a scene straight out of hell.

The Drakon had risen up again, after they saw it hours ago diving into the lake and freezing it.

It was a tyrant among reptiles, a king of monsters, and a reactor of frost power.

And there were too few members of the Suicide Squad left standing to feel triumph.

Annabeth had seen Eudoxia and Kalinda die, but she was not seeing Fergus Cook or Bella Medina anymore...or the penguins, though what they could do against this kind of threat, she hadn’t the faintest idea. Perseus Jackson, Asterius the Minotaur, Douglas Smith, Richard Grant, Phoebe, Jade. There were six of them...against a Drakon which could likely kill them without paying attention.

Nonetheless, the Suicide Squad charged.

It was courageous.

It was utterly suicidal, and today they made the name of their force proud.

Fimbulvetr roared and blasted half of the lake with a hyper-laser expelled from its monstrous maw.

It missed the Demigods, but it generated a mountain worth of frost and-

There was an abominable screech, and the mountain was pulverised, as Perseus Jackson sliced it with his Trident, before transforming half of the ice into water and surfing on it.

But the Drakon was already reacting. Its enormous tail froze for a second, before going for a simple but devastating rotation in their direction.

Thousands of tons of scales and sheer fury ravaged the battlefield. It was death in its rawest form.

Perseus jumped, using the water to pass effortlessly over the enormous blades of the Drakon’s spine. The Minotaur literally...dug his way under the ice to avoid the tail...ad impossibly it worked. The two Huntresses made a series of impressive jumps, and managed to avoid annihilation in this instance. Richard Grant managed to force his way to the tail’s spikes by sheer strength and a few brutal jumps that any Olympic athlete would love to imitate.

But Douglas Smith was just not fast enough. One second, he was there. The second the tail crushed the area where he was, and when the frost dissipated over this area, the son of Volturnus was gone, as if he had never existed.

“This...what is this monster?” One Huntress gasped next to her. “It is...not possible...”

The counterattack began. The Minotaur and Jackson had an opportunity, and they exploited it ruthlessly.

The son of Poseidon provided the Hydrokinesis, the Minotaur the brute force.

The double axe of Asterius the Minotaur shone like a comet.

Fimbulvetr saw it, and tried to avoid it.

It was not fast enough.

The axe struck what could be best described as the ‘throat’ of the mega-reptile, and tore apart several layers of scales.

“YES! IT BLEEDS!”

A river of blue blood flowed out of the terrible wound. They could see the vulnerable flesh underneath. Perseus conjured several spears of water, and hurled them at the new weak point his ally had just made.

And they didn’t impact.

The water dissipated harmlessly against growing black scales which hadn’t been there a second before.

In fact, everything suddenly...the Drakon seemed to radiate more of this ice aura, and every sign of scarring or injury was disappearing from its black scales.

“*You didn’t know this was a Drakon-God*,” the alpha-automaton commented.

“Oh, Gods...”

“*Mortals do not stand a chance of victory against this type of opponent*.”

The Drakon used its hyper-laser of frost again. The battle raged...and Annabeth felt a bit of despair open in her chest.

**4 December 2006, the Docks, the Forge of All Perils**

They were losing.

They were losing very badly.

Douglas Smith was gone, reduced to nothing.

Richard Grant had disappeared, buried under a mountain of frost.

Unlike the former, Jade didn’t believe the latter was dead. Instinct told her the son of Hercules, as arrogant and vainglorious as he was, would not die so easily.

But that meant there were only four of them, and if Jade was honest, only two mattered: the Minotaur and Jackson.

Phoebe and herself? They were just trying to survive in the middle of the devastation.

“Goddess of the Hunt...Lady Artemis...we need your help! This is a divine monster! We need your help!”

Jade jumped, ran away from this infernal tail before she suffered an inglorious death.

Jade prayed and fought.

Surely, the Goddess was going to intervene.

She knew Artemis was listening!

She knew-

Fimbulvetr roared, and hundreds of stalactites fell in a rain of sheer destruction...and then the Drakon accelerated the typhoon of carnage by grabbing part of the lake and throwing it pretty much over the entire cavern.

“ARTEMIS!”

But there was no silver arrows, no salvation. Jade had to dive under a block of ice containing a frozen Greek trireme to avoid the quick death the monster had promised her.

And when she emerged, Jade was filled with a certainty.

Artemis was not coming. Not at this hour, not today...not ever.

And the certainty made Jade *angry*.

“We swore an oath to you!” the young Huntress shouted. “We are your servants, your silver archers! But it is not one-sided! When the monsters are God-Beasts, you are supposed to answer!”

But only the roar of the Drakon and the desperate attacks of a Minotaur and a son of Poseidon engulfed the cavern.

Artemis had abandoned them.

“Coward...” Jade snarled. “You said all males were useless, all females could be trusted. Well, I have news for you, your Divinity! Perseus Jackson knows countless things you never bothered teaching us, and it was a girl of all people who betrayed us! We are fighting in a Zone Mortalis! AND YOU ARE NOT HELPING!”

Wrath filled her entire being. Memories she had repressed in the depths of her mind.

“Judith and I were abused for years by our father! Did you know what he was doing and only came to kill him when you thought we had the strength and the spirit to join your Hunt? ANSWER ME ARTEMIS!”

It was cold, so cold.

There was nothing to protect her with...there was nothing left but an improbable duo of Demigod and monster, fighting against the King of Monsters himself.

And the Olympian Goddess didn’t answer.

“Coward! What kind of exploit can you boast about?” Jade placed back her bow on her back. It was not as if it could do anything with it, save throwing it at the Drakon in the hope the beast died out of laughter. “AN OATH WAS SWORN AND BROKEN! I DENY YOU! I DENY YOUR POWER AND YOUR DOMAIN! I LEAVE THE HUNT!”

“JADE! What are you doing?”

There was a flash of silver, and Phoebe was suddenly before her.

“What I should have done years ago!” the younger Huntress declared. “I see she has just blessed you. How convenient...she must have feared something...I wonder what?”

“Do you think you can betray the Hunt just like you did?”

“The Hunt never stopped betraying the girl I was,” Jade retorted. “I was just stupid enough to not see it.”

“Then you are damned.” The silver arrow began to shine like the Moon itself.

Jade opened her hands, empty...and suddenly there was a snowflake in her right palm.

There was a voice.

The cold drowned out everything, but this time, it was not antagonistic, it was...peaceful.

**Strength for strength. Loyalty for loyalty. Oath for oath**. **The journey will lead you through the ice and the snow. I can’t promise you it will be peaceful. But you and your friend will meet again**.

“Do it...but know that I will hold to your oath...Goddess...”

“What a pity,” Phoebe said in a thoroughly disgusted voice, “you held such promises...I will tell the others you died in battle against-“

She didn’t finish her sentence.

Not with the long white spear having just emerged from her chest.

“No...” Phoebe spat, and the silver radiance instantly vanished. “You aren’t supposed to be...”

“**I was invited**.” Khione, Goddess of Snow and Ice, said calmly. “**And unlike the pathetic child you call your Mistress, I do not hide on Olympus**.”

The spear was withdrawn, and Phoebe collapsed. She was dead when she hit the ice.

Jade immediately bent the knee.

The Goddess...the Goddess was radiant and armoured for war. There had been rumours of her visiting New Byzantium as an ice skater, but no sign of it was visible of it today. On this battlefield, she was in white plate, though it espoused her body in a very similar manner to the X-Suits the rest of the Suicide Squad had been given.

“**Rise up, Jade**.” Khione said gently. “**I am not Artemis. I want a warrior I can converse with freely. I do not need unwilling servants**.”

“Yes...yes my Lady.” Jade stood, and she felt more assured. Her furs disappeared one by one...and as they went missing, a tide of white-blue latex-like material covered her body. It was akin to an X-Suit, and yet she felt it was much, much more than that.

Not only it had an ice theme and black and white markings, it came far more armoured and enchanted.

“**Stay on the outskirts and bombard this Drakon with your arrows**,” Jade inspected her bow, and realised it had been changed too...it was now a majestic bow of winter, and the arrows shone with the power of frost. “**I think Perseus and his companion need my assistance**.”

“By your will, my Lady!”

\*\*\*\*

The battle at last was turning in their favour.

“That doesn’t mean, of course, that there aren’t points that couldn’t be improved...”

Like a certain enormous iguana trying to blast him away with its frost maw attack, for example!

Fortunately, this was the moment the penguins launched the salvo of incendiary projectiles and many automated siege engines of the Forge were reactivated.

For a brief second, Fimbulvetr disappeared in colossal explosions, and when it emerged from it, it was for the first time in fire...and the Goddess used the distraction to impale its tail with five enormous ice spikes.

Perseus jumped and ran until he was by the side of Khione.

“Your arrival was impeccably timed, Lady Khione.”

The Drakon roared in fury. This time, they had made it really, really angry.

“**I can’t stay long, Perseus Jackson. There is flexibility within the rules, yes. But I can’t fight for hours here. And the Drakon will not lose an attrition fight; we will be exhausted first**.”

“Logical,” he nodded, “this is a God we are speaking about, after all.”

“**Your plan had a few holes in it**.”

“By this point, the plan is not worth the highly valuable parchment I wrote it upon,” the former Tyrant replied honestly. “If we don’t go for attrition, the only alternative is to strike at the head. It’s not a Hydra...kill the head, shatter the divine spark giving it life and power, and God or not, it will die.”

A new blast of frost and death came their way. Khione diverted it so that it missed them by several hundreds of metres...and it still felt like a blizzard was trying to freeze them.

“**I have not the strike power or the technique to do that**.” The daughter of Boreas admitted. “**And my new Champion is way too young to have that sort of talent**.”

“Fortunately, Lady Khione, you have me.”

“**For all your precociousness and the bargain we struck, you are not of Winter and Ice, Perseus Jackson. If I give you a spark of my power, even for a brief moment, it will *break you***.”

“I don’t say I’m looking forwards to it,” the son of Poseidon bared his teeth and grinned, “but you know what they say among the goblin tribes...only cowards live up to fifteen...”

“**You are mad**.”

“And proud of it.” The Drakon broke the ice spears restraining the immense tail and advanced again. “Let’s finish this. Asterius will open the way...I leave the rest to you.”

Khione nodded, and then her hand touched his left arm.

Kairos was no stranger to pain...but what he felt was agony.

But it was only pain.

His body shone in icy power.

“One last time. Whether they be Gods or all the monsters in Creation.”

\*\*\*\*

Perseus Jackson departed like a missile of frost colour.

Khione saw him depart with mixed feelings...before conjuring more ice spears to hurt them at the Drakon.

A Drakon which had grown way too big for her comfort. Seriously, what laziness had seized the favourite daughter of Zeus these days? This godly monster should have been slain long ago! The threat it represented was too extreme!

The Drakon proved it again as projectiles of magma from trebuchets and other machines struck it, and it endured the bombardment with only superficial damage.

But in terms of distraction, it had worked. The son of Poseidon had crossed several hundreds of metres. But now he was getting the full attention of his enemy.

The blast of pure ice energy came, destruction incarnate.

This was the moment the Minotaur struck again, and his axe must have gained some special properties of Drakon blood, for it created an enormous wound on the immense lizard’s torso.

Fimbulvetr roared in fury, surprise, and pain.

It tried to crush the Minotaur, but the son of Minos was far too fast, and avoid the clumsy paw strikes.

Perseus Jackson continued his race. He rushed towards the leg of the monster, and much like Hermes at super-speed, the speed fought against gravity....and speed won.

It was like a comet had taken human form...

Khione conjured more ice spears, which forced more distractions for the Drakon.

The son of the Poseidon reached the head...and as the maw opened, the Goddess of Snow saw him launching his Trident.

It was not just launching the weapon, of course. The spark she had given him, the Hydrokinesis, the power of the oceans, his Demigod legacy...everything went into this deadly strike.

The head of the Drakon disappeared into a colossal explosion again.

But this time, when the frost was banished, there was only a fountain of blue gore and carnage waiting.

There wasn’t even enough left of the head for a last roar of defiance.

Fimbulvetr, Ancestral Drakon of Ice, stayed immobile for several seconds, as his killer began his fall...and then the God-Beast fell too.

It was a mountain falling, but it fell far, far louder than that.

It was a thunderous sound that felt like the birth of a new Age.

\*\*\*\*

Khione had been right.

For one hundred and thirteen heartbeats, he had wielded the power of **Ice**.

And it had broken him.

Damn, it really hurt like the mega-iguana had decided to use him as a seat.

Perseus was not going to try to list all the bones broken, the tendons torn apart, the muscles crippled, and the organs about to fail. He was sure it would be easier to count the parts which were functioning correctly. Easier and way faster...

“That was very recklessly heroic of you, short one...” Asterius grumbled.

“Yes, yes it was. Thank you for the catch, my friend.” Just saying those words alone caused him more pain. Of course, in this instance, the good news was that he was able to feel the pain. Dead Demigods couldn’t feel pain. Ergo, he was not dead...hurrah. “Is that...a pool...made of the Drakon’s blood?”

“It is.”

“Throw me in it.”

Asterius grunted...and then grabbed him. A heartbeat later, and he was in the air.

Perseus uttered the word of command that removed his X-Suit. He landed into the pool that was made by the life-essence of Fimbulvetr.

The sensation was so cold that he couldn’t help but scream in pain. Then it began to feel more acceptable...though it stole a few of his breaths. But the former Tyrant could accept that. He could, because as he drowned into the blue blood of his defeated enemy, his bones began to be mended. Every part of his body which had been critically injured was healing. The divine regenerative properties of Drakonic blood had not been exaggerated at all, evidently.

Second after strong, Perseus felt a shadow of his strength return. He was able to move under its own power, at least. That was quite an achievement when a minute ago you were on death’s door. He was able to parody some swim moves. That was progress. It was likely going to take him weeks to truly recover from this arduous adventure...but the big part of the healing was done right now.

After some struggle, the green-eyed Demigod managed to move closer towards the edge of the ‘pool’...which had grown larger and larger while he was in it. From the Drakon’s corpse, immobile gargantuan shadow of destruction, the powerful blood was flowing in an enormous cascade to his right, with all the natural consequences it implied.

“You should come, Asterius. It is a bit freezing, but one can get used to it.”

“I’m staying where I am, short one!”

Perseus sighed. Sometimes he really didn’t understand how Asterius thought...

“**Was it your plan from the very beginning**?”

Khione entered his limited field of vision. Thankfully, the white-armoured Goddess was more amused than angry. Jade was by her side too.

“It was a contingency I hoped I wouldn’t have to use so soon.” Unfortunately, the alternatives were death or a long period of convalescence in one of the Zones Mortalis. This was like choosing plague and typhus. “But I was a bit too damaged by this reckless heroic attack, as Asterius called it...and so I had to imitate Siegfried.”

And yes, this was this legend from the other side of the Atlantic that Perseus had taken as inspiration. Treasures from Dragons and Drakons had to be purified before any use could be made of them. But the blood? The blood of these legendary reptiles was raw power in liquid form, and could make you invulnerable to all mortal and Demigod-forged weapons...with some drawbacks and exceptions.

“**You lost much in order to accomplish this incredible deed, Perseus Jackson**.”

Looking back at his reflexion, there was no need to ask what she was referring to. Perseus was older. He had always looked older than his true age, but this time, he was really older. At a guess, he had lost between one and two years of life. His looks couldn’t really be distinguished from a teenager of fifteen now.

“Power...it always comes with a price.” And while the price was not cheap...the power was worth it. The Drakon was gone, meaning the Forge of Perils was his to claim. The blood of Fimbulvetr was giving him the equivalent of a lesser Curse of Achilles, albeit one not as cursed as the waters of the Styx. That alone made the journey to this island an incredible success...no matter how many plans had been screwed up in the process.

“**Does the price come with an Achilles’ heel**?”

“I am not stupid, my Lady.” Those who didn’t leave a fatal weakness for the opposition to exploit generally tended to have the fatal weakness chosen for them by others in ‘destiny moments’. One had only to look at the hero Siegfried as a cautionary tale.

Seriously, having your weak point in the back where your eyes couldn’t even see it was a recipient for disaster if there ever was one.

His weak point, on the other point, was his navel. That way, he could don a cuirass or some other form of enchanted protection over his torso, paint it in orange, and have no one ask incredibly moronic questions.

The power poured out, and the blood suddenly began to burn in blue flames, as not only the magma pipes were finally able to warm up the Docks, but the Heart revealed itself.

The Heart.

It was describing the truth, and yet it did not do it justice.

It was a crystal of power turned into an organ. It was power turned into art. It was divine and elemental. It was ice and yet it was beyond that. It called frost and snow, but it remained a law by itself.

And it was coming slowly in his direction.

“You should come and take a bath.”

“**You could claim the Heart, you know**.” There was something in Khione’s voice...ah, she feared he was going to break the accord they had, now that he had the artefact which could let him ascend as a God.

“I could.” There was no point pretending the contrary; no one would believe the lie. “But you know the Heart is only one of tri-divine essence of the fallen Titaness of Drakons. If I ascended like that, I would be incredibly flawed...vulnerable...and beastly. You, on the other hand, have already divine essence. You will be able to counterbalance it...if you go with the plan, of course.”

Khione looked at him...and then decided herself when the Heart went to place itself in his hand.

“**Jade. Do not intervene. What is going to happen...is what must happen. Perseus and I have an accord**.”

Khione disrobed and marched into the pool of blood. It was good, because the contact of the Heart was really painful...the artefact was trying to drain him from his warmth and vitality.

“**You will speak with your father**?” For all her Goddess status, Khione seemed incredibly vulnerable as her white skin disappeared in the blue liquid, and her black hair were loosened. “**Tell him I regret what I did**.”

“I will pass the message.”

He used his Hydrokinesis...and the Pomegranate Seed fell in the life-essence of Fimbulvetr.

There was one heartbeat...and Khione caught it.

There was no hesitation. The Goddess of Snow and Ice put to her lips...and swallowed...before immediately coughing.

“**By everything polluted! The taste is awful**!”

Perseus chuckled.

“Well, it was for the stratagem, not the taste of the fruit...”

Khione used her powers to rise slightly over the blood’s surface, and presented her snow-coloured naked chest.

“**I feel it...do it. Do it, before**-“

Perseus struck. With his left hand, he used as much power as he could without burning himself, and he coalesced it into an incredibly deadly blade.

It cut deep the Goddess, and something not meant for mortal eyes shone.

Perseus closed his eyes, and his other hand pushed the Heart into the wound just created.

There was a gigantic explosion.

Perseus was caught in the shockwave, and once again, he blessed Drakonic blood for its regenerative properties, otherwise it would certainly have killed him. Again. Seriously, he needed to find calmer hobbies...

The black-haired Demigod was disoriented for several minutes. But at some point, he had to resurface...the regeneration speed was cut short, and the blood was getting hellishly cold.

As he left the lake, Perseus could see that this part had gone according to the plan.

There was a massive ‘egg’ at the centre of the ‘blood lake’. The scales of the egg were black, same as the ones of Fimbulvetr, but the joints between the scales? Those were burning in ice-coloured light.

Jade went to watch by his side.

“This is beautiful...the power, I can feel...the changes...”

Of course she felt them. Now that she was tied to Khione, the ex-Huntress was going to share some of the blessings of her divine patron.

“The King is dead.” Perseus proclaimed loudly. “All Hail the Future Queen! All Hail Khione, Lady of Drakons, Goddess of Ice, Snow, Blizzards, and Hell Winter!”

The blood flow diminished and ended. In mere seconds, the pool of blue blood dried up.

Then clouds of darkness appeared with a gust of wind, and created a vortex of darkness. It swallowed slowly but surely the egg before closing and disappearing.

“I don’t understand! What happened?”

“There are many beings which have zero interest in seeing a Goddess claim part of the Power of Drakons for herself. And unfortunately for her, Khione will be incredibly vulnerable when she’s in this transition stage. This is why I gave her the Pomegranate Seed. It allowed her to be claimed by the Lord of Underworld...who in exchange of her allegiance, will protect her during her long period of transition.”

It would also make Persephone insanely jealous, for while Hades had not made any kind of marriage commitment where Khione was concerned...well, women could be really frightening creatures.

“This is quite a complicated plan.”

“The previous one was way simpler. But a lot of betrayals ruined it. And...well, I had to adapt.”

He would have loved continuing this confirmation...but everything was melting...the lake of the Forge of All Perils was at last returning to its proper state.

Water was flowing in bright cascades, the temperatures rose, and Perseus admitted it was extremely pleasant after all this frost and cold.

There were so many pieces of wood beginning to float that it was child’s play to combine several of them and use them as a large surfboard. Then he used his Hydrokinesis to place Asterius and Jade on them.

A second later, for all his less-than-stellar health, Perseus could lead his trio towards the Forge’s docks...or whatever remained of them, at least. The apocalyptic battle had really ruined what millennia of Drakon domination had not.

A good surprise waited for them, in the form of Richard Grant, who was dragging himself out of the lake.

“This was utterly crazy...” the son of Hercules did not seem gravely injured, but his exhaustion was obvious. “Even for you, Jackson.”

“I know. But it leads me to a realisation.”

“A realisation?”

“Yes, a realisation.”

Perseus watched as three familiar penguins were returning to the Docks, running as fast as their limbs could bear.

In the distance, he could hear the great gates of the Forge of All Perils opening. Soon enough, the expressions of surprise of the Suicide Squad’s Blocking Force resonated, as they discovered the devastation first. Then they saw the corpse of the gigantic Drakon. There were acclamations, shouts of an incredibly varied number of emotions.

They were not the only ones watching, of course.

*They* were watching. Olympus was watching.

And the best part? Right now, they couldn’t touch him.

Thus Perseus did what he would never have dared a day ago.

“My lieutenants, partner-in-crimes, allies, betrayers, and profiteers of war,” the former Tyrant grinned, seeing no reason to hide his joy anymore. “The God-Drakon failed to kill me, like everything else. The logical conclusion can’t be denied. I AM INVINCIBLE! BWHAHAHAHAHA!”

Perseus was still cackling like a madman when a certain daughter of Hecate slapped him.

**27 November 2006, Dionysus’ Palace, Olympus**

Dionysus couldn’t stop laughing.

It was just too funny.

It was madness.

It was brilliant.

It was insanity at its finest.

It was...it was...

It was unprecedented.

“**All hail Perseus Jackson, Drakon-Slayer...or is it Godzilla-Slayer?**” the God of Wine watched for several seconds the mangled corpse of Fimbulvetr before shrugging. “**Let’s go with Godzilla-Slayer. It sounds better to my ears. Wow, what an epic battle! What madness! I think I am going to put it on all mortal social media and pass it as a movie under development! God-Tube and the rest are going to get absolutely crazy! I wouldn’t be surprised if we didn’t get our first five billion views in twenty-four hours**!”

There was a sound vaguely similar to the clearing of a throat.

Dionysus turned his head, and his eyes met Arianne’s. Sky and Hell, she looked even more beautiful than usual today...and she was rising an amused eyebrow at the holographic display showing the interior of the ‘Forge of All Perils’ – yes, the Perseus-given name had stuck.

“**I assure you, Arianne**,” the God of Debauchery and Madness placed a hand above the place where mortals kept their hearts. “**I played no part in this madness. I am innocent**.”

“**Oh, I know**.” His wife smiled. “**I can recognise your style, and this isn’t it**.” And then she raised a finger in an ironic finger. “**Still, I think you best prepare for the storm. You and every member of the Council. Your father went to fornicate with a few nymphs, but I am sure he is going to return to his Temple in a few minutes, and when he will...**”

There were many sayings about not tempting Fate...or the Fates.

Dionysus had just the time to reflect on how angry and unhappy his divine sire was going to be about those events when a terrifying scream of rage rocked Olympus.

“**HE DID WHAT? NO! NO HE WOULDN’T DARE! WHERE IS MY MASTER BOLT! WHAT DO YOU MEAN HE RESPECTED THE RULES? RAAAAAAAGGHHHHH!**”

On a scale from one to one hundred, they were at least at level 99: Enraged, Mad, and on a Major Rampage.

“**EMERGENCY COUNCIL IN FIFTEEN MINUTES! DO NOT BE LATE! NO EXCUSES WILL BE ACCEPTED! DAMN IT POSEIDON! WHAT WERE YOU THINKING CREATING THIS UNHOLY SPAWN?**”

Dionysus stopped breathing...not that he really needed to, but the thunderous voice had been...really, really powerful.

“**I have a feeling**,” Dionysus gave his wife a thin smile, “**that it is going to be a Council to remember. The Lord of Olympus is...a bit unhappy**.”

And since it was one of the understatements of the century – which had really just begun – why not add one another?

“**This Great Quest has not necessarily proceeded according to Olympus’ plans**.”

**Author’s note**: The madness will continue in the next update, which is tentatively titled: *Interlude 3 NOT Part of the Plan*.

**Suicide Squad - List of Fallen (by order of death)**:

*Judith – Huntress of Artemis*

*Kalinda – Huntress of Artemis*

*Eudoxia – Huntress of Artemis*

*Douglas Smith – son of Volturnus*

*Phoebe – Huntress of Artemis, daughter of Eris*

**Wall of Dishonour**:

Fergus Cook – son of Liber: now transformed into a golden penguin

Bella Medina – daughter of Scotus: traitor and betrayer, became Nocturna and discarded her humanity before deserting from the Suicide Squad

Jade – former Huntress: denied the will of Artemis, and swore herself to Khione

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