**Chapter 13**

**Prisoners of Immortality**

“*No one ever said challenging the Gods was a safe hobby. That’s half of the reason I’m doing it, to be honest*.” Attributed to Perseus Jackson, authenticity never confirmed.

**14 June 2006, Poseidon’s Barrack, New Byzantium, New York, United States of America (de jure)**

Bianca only managed to enter the Barrack of Poseidon once Zoë the Hellhound had profusely licked her.

This was why naturally her first destination was the big fountain, in order to clean what could be cleaned. Bianca would love to say she was going to remove her Hellhound-smelling clothes, but the same Underworld-born would wait for her on the way back.

More than once in the last days, the former Dread Empress wished she had known better than to say the four-legged female dog would take her orders over those of Poseidon’s bastard son.

All the while the black-haired boy feigned to not notice her presence as he sunbathed on his green-blue deck chair, drinking his lemonade in a crystal glass.

“Enough playing, Jackson!”

This was apparently the wrong to say, she realised it a second too late.

“My dear, it is you, not I, that I could see playing with Zoë until a minute ago.”

Bianca gritted her teeth. As always, trying to give orders didn’t result in anything intelligent or useful. And unfortunately, the daughter of Hades couldn’t even slap him; his damn hydrokinesis parried any strike long before they could touch his skin.

“I want to know what your future plans are.”

“I have many, many plans!”

“The Sea of Monsters, Jackson!”

“Ah, *those* plans...” the green-eyed Demigod yawned in what was absolutely an exaggerated fashion. “No.”

“No?”

“No. Believe me, knowing them in advance would absolutely ruin the fun.”

“I am the most powerful and experienced Demigoddess of this Quest!” Bianca seethed. “My advice is absolutely critical before you begin making permanent plans!”

“This is a very illogical reasoning,” Perseus Jackson once again yawned, before drinking the rest of his lemonade. “Your plans, if you will excuse me the rudeness, *suck*, your Most Dreadful Majesty.”

“My plans are genial!”

The daughter of Hades received in turn a look which was definitely promising an ocean of mockery.

“I conquered Calernia in ten years! Can you boast having conquered a continent in your life of Tyrant?”

“No,” the infuriating black-haired boy said cheerfully, “but it would have been way more impressive if the conquest in question had not been lost in five years...”

Bianca grimaced internally. Of course he was making that kind of argument...

“My plans work. If not for your intervention, my ascension as a Goddess would have been assured!”

“Yes, it would have,” temporarily, a smile formed on her lips, “and you would have forged a perfect prison for yourself in Hell.”

“What are you speaking about?”

“My dear,” Perseus abandoned his glass to the gargoyles before slightly modifying his sunbathing position, “you didn’t take a lot of things into account for your plan. By focusing on *a* victory and neglecting everything else, you built the foundations of your downfall...again.”

“I would have been the ruler of the Underworld, and have all its armies following my orders to the latter. Olympus would have trembled seeing my undead regiments emerge on the mortal plane.”

“Yes, they would have...and to resist the threat, they would have united like never before. By presenting the first and credible threat in millennia, you would have instantly given the Olympians a threat to reform their crumbling order.”

“I had Hera on my side,” Bianca said peevishly.

“No, Hera was fulfilling her vengeance dreams...and she would have betrayed you as soon as it was convenient for her own ambitions. Frankly, the outcome of the divine war you would have unleashed...you would have been banished back to Hell, except unlike your father, you would have no chance of leaving it anymore. And since you were an unknown force in the tapestry of the Pantheon, the usurpation of the Dark One’s power would have moulded you into a second copy of your genitor, albeit one which would be female and have some additional sorcery knowledge. Nothing more, nothing less.”

Her fists tightened until it hurt.

Bianca wanted to scream he was wrong, and that her plans were perfect. She wanted to slap him and prove by a vigorous monologue that she had accounted for everything.

Unfortunately, she couldn’t. The truth was, the former Dread Empress had indeed spent countless hours preparing for her ascension, and not much for what came after. After all, since she was going to have all the gold, the resources, the armies, and the influence of her genitor, why would she make small arrangements when the Underworld would be hers soon?

This...this may have been a mistake.

Bianca breathed out.

“Assuming you are saying the truth...couldn’t you have found a way to save my reserves of Orichalcum? This had an incalculable value, and it is the only method of immortality a Demigoddess can possibly acquire easily-“

“Ha! Good one!” The daughter of Hades frowned. “Haven’t you heard what Luke Castellan was sent stealing a few months ago? A golden apple of the Garden of the Hesperides! Assuming you haven’t heard, your Most Dreadful Majesty, they bring immortality to the mortal soul who eats them.”

The son of Poseidon gave her a splendid and malicious grin.

“So please, oh Mistress of Dark Spells and Demonic Secrets, don’t tell me there is a single method to gain immortality.”

As Dread Empress Triumphant, she had been caught flat-footed very few times. During this second life, and especially since her ritual went awry, it was happening all the time...and she blamed the Demigod in front of her.

“Is it really so simple?”

“No,” Perseus acknowledged, “eating a golden apple gives immortality and eternal youth, but you don’t gain anything else. If you are a weak Demigod, you will be condemned to be a very weak deity with no domain of note and a list of prerogatives more fitting for a beggar than a ruler.”

The green-eyed boy shrugged.

“As far as immortality methods go, it has potential, but I think there needs to be...improvements added to it. And one can’t forget there is a not-so-gentle one hundred-headed dragon guarding the tree where those golden apples are growing, of course!”

“Of course,” at this rate of insanity, Bianca feared she was going to become insane long before celebrating the four or five years-birthday of her evasion from the Lotus Casino. “Then tell me. If the Orichalcum is unavailable and my chances to usurp the Lord of the Underworld are doomed to failure, should I try to usurp a throne which is not associated with darkness or the realm of the dead?”

“I think,” Perseus Jackson answered in a tone which conveyed for the first time some seriousness, “it wouldn’t be prudent at all. Even if your ascension was interrupted, the ritual began and left an invisible mark which wasn’t removed. Furthermore, you bathed in all the rivers of the Underworld. This reinforced the symbolism and the ties to Hell. And of course you were already a child of the Rich One...”

Perseus Jackson didn’t say she should have considered her options for far longer before trying to usurp her father. But his green eyes said it for him.

“What is done...is done.” Bianca cleared her throat.

“Excellent answer!” the son of Poseidon congratulated her. “Now, you have two possible paths ahead of you. The first is to try to boost your power and try to forge a new ascension as the Goddess of Hellish Sorcery, Necromancy, Dark Arts, and all that gory stuff the mortals think of when they utter the words ‘black magic’.”

The former Dread Empress blinked.

“That’s a possibility?”

“Yes, it is.” The younger Demigod assured her. “Magic is an incredibly broad field, and the Titaness of Magic has an eye on your father’s hand, so your ascension would have a chance of being approved very quickly, possibly within the decade.”

“And the disadvantages?”

“Well, the fact magic is impressively versatile and powerful domain in its own right...there are major and minor Goddesses both in the realm of the dead and the living. Depending on how you played your cards, you would be a servant or a minor player in their games...and you would be likely forced to swear allegiance to the mother of Lou Ellen in very short order.”

Instinctively, her mind rebelled at the idea. For all her two lives, Bianca had tried to climb up to the greatest throne imaginable, it wasn’t to be the servant of someone with no hope of breaking the status quo. She could tolerate having powerful allies; she wasn’t going to end up as someone slave. It was better to be the ruler of Hell than a slave in Heaven.

“This first path is unacceptable.” The daughter of Hades declared. “What is the second?”

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“What did you to say to the Lightning Thief, Jackson?”

“Absolutely nothing of importance, I assure you, lovely daughter of Aphrodite!”

Drew knew it was a lie the moment she’d heard it.

“I know that’s wrong. She wasn’t even paying attention to the fact Zoë was licking her hands. By the Pit, the girl even petted your Hellhound unconsciously! She wouldn’t do that unless she was lost in her thoughts.” The dark-haired Demigoddess took a deep breath. “I seriously hope you did not push her to do something stupid, like stealing another major Symbol of Power.”

“Would I really do that?”

“Yes, as long as it is entertaining,” the daughter of Aphrodite said as she removed her sandals and let her feet plunge into one of the small pools which seemed to be everywhere inside the Poseidon’s Barrack. As the warmth of summer began to take its toll, the structure was a fresh source of cold which was worth its weight in gold. “Oh, and that it hurts some Gods on Olympus, I suppose.”

“You, members of the Suicide Squad, are beginning to know me entirely too well,” Jackson said, as he imitated her, his feet and half of his legs being immerged within a couple of seconds. “We need to step up your training, Drew.”

The son of Poseidon calling her by her first name made her abruptly pause. Fortunately, she soon found a retort.

“Truly? And what sort of physical torture I am going to endure? Spear? Axe?”

“I was thinking about daggers,” the green-eyed boy smirked, “long daggers, to be precise.”

As always with Jackson, the turn taken by the conversation was not predicted beforehand.

“What?”

“Long daggers, yes,” the Demigod began to manipulate water so it formed a dolphin shape in his hands, “you may continue to practise your bow, but let’s face it, right now your best weapon is Charmspeak; this is what I will train you upon for several weeks. You don’t need more than a long dagger after that if you are able to convince your opponent to bare his throat in your presence.”

Her imagination had no problem conjuring the vision of a man advancing towards her with a stupid expression and a shower of blood erupting.

Drew Tanaka shivered.

“Yeah, but that strategy won’t be always possible in the palaces the Suicide Squad’s adventures will lead us too and that you seem bent on destroying. And I’m not even speaking of a battlefield.”

“That’s a good point,” Perseus Jackson conceded.

“And let’s be serious,” the current holder of the Belt of Briseis stared directly at the green eyes, “with a dagger and Charmspeak, I’m useless against any immortal enemy.”

“You want to be immortal, daughter of Love?”

Drew hesitated, before saying words which would have been unthinkable for her months ago.

“I did once for all the wrong reasons. Now I want it again, because I think it is the only way we will manage to survive to celebrate our twentieth birthday.”

“Then you are far wiser already than many immortals,” her leader complimented her genuinely, before his expression took a far more dangerous and feral expression. “That said, you’re absolutely correct that sooner or later, the survivors of our little party must become immortals if they are to survive. When I named our group Suicide Squad, it was not entirely by jest. Though I remained confident some of us would survive the Quest to find the Master Bolt, the Olympians and the rest of the opposition will know no rest until we are killed. In the short-term, they may give us a few months of indecent wealth, decadence, and outrageous parties. In the long-term however, they will send us to glorious and deadly Quests until one is our doom, or some beings on Olympus will use the absence of diplomatic immunity and strike. In both cases, they win, we lose.”

The water Perseus manipulated fell again into the pool with a loud splash.

“Anyway. If you really want, I can forge you a path where your actions will lead you to an apotheosis as the new Goddess of the Hunt and the Moon, Lady Drew Tanaka. You will have to train with your bow from dawn to dusk, though.”

The daughter of Aphrodite felt a headache coming, as typical when one tried to fight against the madness spread by the son of Poseidon.

“I thought this throne has already a Goddess fulfilling the basic obligations...and a usurper Empress aspiring to be a Titaness too, now that I remember this little party in the Circus Maximus.”

“Details,” Perseus Jackson rolled his eyes, as if Artemis and Julia Drusilla were absolute nonentities in terms of divine might and influence. “Unlike them, you would be far more in synchronisation with the powers of the Moon where love is concerned, since the Olympian Goddess is a virgin, and the aspiring God-Empress has only a single lover.”

Drew nodded, but she heard everything that wasn’t said too. So far, her only lover had been Achilles. Taking different lovers Quest after Quest would lead her onto a road where she was going to be...very much like her mother as far as men were involved.

And if the Asian-looking Demigoddess was honest with herself, she didn’t want that.

And there was something else.

“I am not sure I want to walk there. And while a bow is one of my best weapons, I am neither exactly excelling at it, nor dreaming about wood targets and arrows in my sleep. Archery is something I am familiar with, but it’s also something I can do without.”

As the words passed her lips, Drew knew it was truly her honest feeling, not a pathetic excuse.

“If this is what you feel, then it is best to stop there,” Perseus agreed surprisingly easily, before smirking when he saw his surprised expression. “What? I won’t force anyone to become something he or she doesn’t want to be as an immortal.”

It was quite telling the mad Demigod added ‘as an immortal’ at the end...

“Yeah, because you don’t want to deal with an endless grudge from one of your treacherous opponents,” the noise the Demigod could be approval or something else; Drew didn’t really care. “And before you propose it, I’m not exactly in the mood to plunge myself into a sarcophagus of pure evil like the Lightning Thief was so eager to do.”

“Good to know, but with said sarcophagus in the possession of the Lord of the Underworld, I haven’t the Orichalcum necessary for a repeat of that plan anyway. No, what I have in mind avoids boring repetition of usurpation. As I mentioned before, they are old prisons the Olympians have erected, and some of them are in one Zone Mortalis or another, because mortals are curious, and well-protected Seals can still be destroyed if one idiot is able to concentrate enough explosives in a single location.”

“And the one you want me to open is in the Sea of Monsters?”

“Precisely,” Perseus grinned.

Drew was opening her mouth to ask as for the identity of the prisoner and why Perseus thought this would help her when the sky over New Byzantium went from a perfect blue to being covered in clouds the colour of midnight.

“That’s...you didn’t have anything planned to antagonise him, Jackson?”

“No,” the son of Poseidon loudly sighed. “We really live in unpredictable times...and whatever happened again, it’s not my fault. I can only blame Hera...”

Yes, why would she expect him to blame someone else?

**14 June 2006, Council Room, Olympus**

Yesterday, Apollo had been convinced the future looked bright. The odds of a civil war were getting slimmer and slimmer as the number of Olympian parties increased. His worries about Zeus taking Persephone for wife were apparently for naught; his genitor had just decided to go fornicating with Nike.

While it was not necessarily a good judgement in his opinion – said Goddess was a fury in bed, but also outside of it when she felt scorned – at least the God of the Sun had his reassurance the Master of Olympus wasn’t going to abandon his womanising ways for any Goddess, be she his daughter or not.

There were plenty of other reasons to celebrate life, of course.

And then this morning the summon for an emergency council meeting had disturbed him as he rode his radiant Lamborghini.

It took only mere seconds to arrive on Olympus, and about half a minute to reach the Council Room.

Apollo already knew it was going to be bad. The thunderous clouds were absolutely massive, and the lesser Gods and Goddesses he met were doing their best to stay away as far as divinely possible from the heart of Olympus.

It was only when he saw the two empty Thrones that the God of Poetry and Music understood it was going to be really, really bad.

As Hera’s Throne had been removed from the Olympians’ seat of power, there was no conceivable reason why any throne should be unoccupied, not when Dionysus always arrived last, and his half-brother was behind him.

Hephaestus and Ares should already be here, the latter trying to antagonise the former...and everyone else. The God of War may be another of his half-brothers, but he wasn’t someone Apollo spent his time with.

“**Athena**,” Zeus’ voice boomed in ‘angry mode’, and just like that, all hopes that this month and the next would be peaceful were ruined beyond doubt. “**Give me your report**.”

“**Yes, father**.” The Goddess of Wisdom answered. “**About eleven hours ago, Forge MP-42, one of the main industrial complexes owned by Hephaestus in the Sea of Monsters, was attacked and conquered by enemy forces. There exists enough data and evidence to confirm between forty and sixty percent of the naval assets involved were mustered by the self-proclaimed ‘True Triumvirate’ of the Roman traitors**.”

“**The defences of the God of the Forges are methodical and powerful**,” his little sister said with ill-grace. “**They should have delivered a devastating defeat to any invading force, especially if most of it was involving mortal Legionnaires**.”

“**It should**,” Athena’s gave the slightest alteration to her voice, “**except the ‘True Triumvirate’ Legionnaires have found some unexpected support from the Titaness of the Seas**.”

Apollo gaped, and the feeling of shock was shared by at least half of the Council.

“**What? There must be a mistake**!”

“**There was no mistake**,” the Goddess protecting Athens since the Antiquity continued emotionlessly after his outburst. “**Ares and Hephaestus were present on the island of Forge MP-42 when the attack began. They tried to counterattack, but all evidence supports the fact they have been defeated and taken prisoner by Thethys after a one-sided beating. The three mail-automatons Hephaestus managed to break through the barrier of waves blockading his domain in the Sea of Monsters were heavily damaged, and I needed many hours to decipher the information into a barely-usable format. In the mean time, none of my attempts to establish communication contact with Forge MP-42 and my two brothers have been successful. Logic dictates Ares and Hephaestus have lost the island as well as their freedom**.”

The Goddess of Owls and Olive Trees could be a very cold strategic at the worst of times, but no matter how emotionless and frigid she could be, Apollo didn’t have an argument to say she was wrong.

The thrones of Ares and Hephaestus were absolutely empty, and since they would have come in Roman forms if they’d been able to, it implied the entirety of their essences had been captured.

Naturally, there was a lot of screaming and other sonorous explosions after. It quite reminded him the theft of the Master Bolt...except this time, it was far, far worse. A symbol of power going missing was not good, but it had happened from time to time in history; there always were some thieves who set their eyes on the biggest prizes of their Pantheon. But two Olympians captured on the same day? It was a catastrophe of a magnitude rarely seen since the Fall of Troy.

And that it was a Titaness who had handed them such a defeat was immensely frightening too.

“**SILENCE**!” His genitor roared as the ruckus didn’t appear to decrease in the slightest. “**SILENCE**!”

At last, some measure of calm returned...but by the expressions on everyone’s face, it was obvious the astonishment and the violent emotions were simply temporarily placed out of view, not forgotten.

“**You will behave as Olympians worthy of this Council**,” the Lord of Thunder spoke grouchily. “**Now that you are aware of the situation, I want to hear your ideas as how to the armies of Olympus will react. Athena**?”

“**We must immediately cancel the Quest for the Sea of Monsters and place all our divine forces on a war footing**,” the Goddess of Architects and Strategists promptly answered. “**This is not a matter for Legionnaires and other heroes anymore; a Titaness is an opponent they have no hope of defeating on their own. And the Sea of Monsters has not been claimed by any deity, for all the islands who are holidays resorts of someone. Immortals can fight there; I say we muster our armies and bring the fight to the ruler of the Coral Palace**.”

“**I am not confident there will be any support among my Atlantean subjects for this course of action**,” Poseidon shook his head while caressing his beard. “**It it had been her husband, it would be different, but *she* is very popular**.”

“**One might say you were far more enthusiastic when your reputation was in line, *brother***.”

“**And one might say you are too eager to see insults and proof of treachery when they are none, brother**.” The God of Earthquakes gave a very non-brotherly glare to the Master of Olympus. “**I will not risk a civil war beneath the surface of the waves before we are given more evidence than broken mail-automatons. *She* stayed neutral for millennia. Why would she change her near-eternal stance for treacherous mortals unworthy of prostrating themselves before her**?”

Poseidon’s Trident struck the floor, and an enormous wave later, the ruler of Seas and Oceans was gone.

“**Without his might, a war in the Sea of Monsters present considerable risks**,” yeah, Athena, continue to state the obvious...

“**Given the...sub-optimal state of Olympian finances Hera is responsible for**,” the Lord of Thunder’s teeth were gritting and projecting blue sparks everywhere, “**it is best we refrain from declaring war, at least for the next few months. The Titaness is the aggressor here. We will use the Ancient Laws to our advantage; the Demigods will be given a Quest to free Ares and Hephaestus. Avoiding direct confrontation, it will be the mortal Roman traitors against our Legions, and the training of our loyal Demigods will triumph once more**.”

Dionysus grimaced in a very obvious manner after reading one of the messages thrown by Athena.

“**You disagree**?”

“**If the information is true, the opposition will be led by traitors who have fought at Actium in the past, father. Is it really a good idea**-“

“**They lost at Actium**!” The Master of Olympus said impatiently.

“**Err...yes, they did. But we had Agrippa, a military genius in charge of the Navy which defeated. And they weren’t supported by a Titaness...**”

“**Don’t tell me**,” Artemis sniffed disdainfully, “**that you want this ungrateful son of Poseidon and his ridiculous company of murderous idiots to command the Legionnaires in the Sea of Monsters**?”

“**In fact, that’s exactly what I was going to suggest**,” the God of Wine emptied his golden cup several times after saying the words. “**They have the experience of surviving a Zone Mortalis. Their leader is a son of Poseidon, and last time I checked, the Sea of Monsters has a lot of water. And they also inflicted a significant defeat against one of the delusional ‘God-Emperors’, why not a second**?”

“**It is**,” Zeus spoke in a tone where his anger was roused and deafening in its intensity, “**completely and totally out of the question. I will not rely on a band of potential traitors to fight other traitors. I will not give the son of Poseidon the opportunity to twist my orders and disrespect my authority while abusing of the Ancient Laws for his disloyal ambitions. The survivors of the last Great Quest are staying inside the boundaries of New Byzantium. This is not debatable**.”

Apollo cleared his throat before intervening.

“**In that case, father...may we not remove a few goals from the list of ‘to-do-things’ for the expeditionary force we want to send? The Sea of Monsters is an immense archipelago, and if the Titaness we are concerned about really solidified its presence around the Solomon Islands like Athena said, this will be an immense sea zone to search for. Expecting a Cohort based on half a dozen ships to confront enemy fleets and sea monsters will be perilous enough; if we ask them to go for the Golden Fleece, I fear it will be far too much, no matter their motivation and their loyalty**.”

“**Apollo is right**,” Venus gave him a sultry look, returning in her purple armour as she picked a strawberry from a basket of fruits and ate it with an ecstatic expression. “**And we mustn’t forget that if it is really Marcus Antonius who is commanding the Triumvirate’s fleet in the Sea of Monsters, his favourite strategy will be to assemble the largest fleet of all the known seas and oceans before offering battle. His strategic prowess may be a bit sub-par**-“

“**The man is a brute**,” Athena murmured.

“**But he learned how important logistics were, and he had two millennia to learn from Actium**,” the Goddess of Love and Patron of Rome finished. “**We best send as many Questers and Legions as we can feasibly deploy in the Pacific**.”

“**No**,” Zeus countered, summoning his Master Bolt in his hand to give even more weight to his words. “**We will not send Questers when the recent examples have proven they’re more loyal to their purses than the idea of paying respect to their betters! We will rely upon the Legions**!” Flash after flash, Zeus began to disappear as he transformed into Jupiter. “**But I hear your reservations. We planned to send one Cohort to secure the Golden Fleece, and one will be sent. We will simply add another Cohort, whose goal will be to free my sons**!”

“**Father**,” Athena warned, “**the training of the Cohorts has barely begun! Officers and Legionnaires are not ready to be sent to the Caribbean, never mind the Solomon Islands and the gateway to the Sea of Monsters**!”

“**Then the training will be accelerated**,” the Master of Olympus proclaimed, and the imperious glare told Apollo and every member of the Council no objection would be tolerated. “**Tell Hercules the Expeditionary Force must be ready to leave by Independence Day. And if any of you aren’t satisfied with the deadline, you can go help him and train them yourself**!”

**15 June 2006, Poseidon’s Barrack, New Byzantium, United States of America (de jure)**

By now, everyone knew the Barrack of Poseidon was not the location you wanted to visit if you wanted to keep your sanity.

Still, Lou Ellen had not imagined that on this lovely morning, she would be greeted with the improbable sight of Perseus Jackson giving a speech to the two penguins the entirety of New Byzantium was speaking about.

“You have come to the right place, I assure you!” The son of Poseidon bombastically continued as her steps passed the boundaries of the aquatic Barrack. “The Suicide Squad will welcome everyone, no matter how many tails, fins, horns, and hooves you have!”

“We want a cure, Jackson!” The biggest penguin shrieked in anger.

“The Suicide Squad will be an inter-species bastion of tolerance in face of insane odds!” The mad boy continued, utterly ignoring the furious retort. “We will be all united in the name of courageous stupidity and greed!”

Finally realising that listening to this crazy speech wasn’t going to transform back to their original human bodies, the penguins took their leave, and by Olympus and everything magical, they were really ridiculous trying to half-walk, half-waddle as best as they could.

“Hey! I haven’t finished my speech! I was about to promise them free mackerel!”

“I don’t think they came to have free mackerel, Jackson,” Lou Ellen sighed as she stopped short of the podium the gargoyles had found somewhere. “And I will remind you that if you keep increasing the numbers of Questers we will take with us, it won’t be a ‘Suicide Squad’ anymore, it will be more like...a ‘Suicide Company’. And the more we add, the bigger the monsters which will come after us.”

“Don’t be too dramatic, Lucinda,” the green-eyed mad boy scoffed, “those two penguins don’t register as Demigods anymore therefore hiring them will not only be a great move towards tolerance, it also won’t increase the high risk of our Quests in a noticeable manner.”

That almost sounded reasonable, by Jackson’s standards....

“And besides, I bought the rights of using ‘Suicide Squad’ in the divine and the non-divine world, I am not going to apply for a different name!”

False alert; the madness was back at full strength.

“That sounds like a tacit admission you really intend to increase the size of the Suicide Squad,” Lou Ellen drily commented as they passed under a tastefully-sculpted arch of some green-and-white stone representing dolphins and crustaceans.

“No,” the son of Poseidon replied cheekily, “it means I intend to recruit more...what’s the correct term in this world...ah, yes, I intend to recruit more *cannon-fodder* for our adventures. What we had at the end of the Quest to retrieve the Master Bolt are the twelve officers. Save Jake Mason, they’ve all accepted to continue on this glorious and absolutely satisfying path of limitless wealth. We have the leadership of the ‘heroes’. Now we need the useless troops which will make the name of the ‘Suicide Squad’ come true.”

“You are not going to hire a lot of people if you say a few will die a horrible death past the first days.” The daughter of Hecate rolled her eyes.

“No, no...” Perseus grinned again. “A majority will absolutely die, but that is a sacrifice I am willing to make.”

“This is still awful.”

“Certainly. But there is an abundance of Demigods, and greed is a powerful motivation, as I said before. That the Quests of the Bronze and Silver classification don’t pay at all isn’t helping.”

On this point, the blonde-haired Demigoddess couldn’t say Jackson was wrong. The children of Hecate were an exception – Olympus was never happy when one of them left the camp for too long – but the complaints the Questers weren’t paid enough compared to the risks they were taking happened three or four times a day without exception.

“Now,” the young sorceress spoke as they arrived inside the bar of the Barrack – and yes, the Poseidon Barrack was big enough to have quantities of ludicrous rooms like this one – with a huge fountain at the centre of it serving fruit juices and other beverages instead of water. “What kind of usurpation do you have in mind for the future?”

“Someone spoke with Drew,” the leader of the Suicide Squad hummed as he poured them glasses of orange juice and went to sit on an enormous marine-coloured couch.

“Yes. Is that a problem?”

“No, not at all.” The black-haired Demigod assured her. “But in your case, I can assure you I don’t plan for the usurpation of divine power...or more usurpation, really.”

“You don’t trust me with more power than I already have?” Lou Ellen raised an eyebrow.

“No, you are relatively humble after your little bath in the Styx. It’s just that we must avoid falling into the pit of predictable repetition. If one Demigod or Demigoddess follows a simple plan to gain power and immortality and everyone behinds him try to do the same, then it stands to reason that the failure of the first ‘hero’ will make sure those waiting for their turn will have their own plans turn to ashes in the same second as him or her.”

“That...that almost makes sense. But that means you have to imagine twelve plans, assuming you said the truth when you spoke of twelve officers.”

“I did, and you’re right.” Perseus gave her a serene but tired smile. “Fortunately, I am very resourceful. So to return to your question, I do not plan for an usurpation. I plan for an apprenticeship.”

The daughter of Hecate had not forgotten the words of Pasiphaë in the Labyrinth.

“An apprenticeship to someone waiting in the Sea of Monsters?”

“Yes.”

This meant Circe, since she was the only one of the Immortal Sorceresses to have a famous presence there.

This was not an idea Lou Ellen didn’t find enticing. But...

“Not that I’m complaining, but can’t you be my Professor, since you’re closer and in possession of large resources of magical lore?”

A gargoyle seemed to have waited exactly for that moment to slam a pile of books on the white table next to her, almost making her casting a defensive spell in surprise.

“Those are the spell books on the manipulation of elemental forces I have.” The son of Poseidon said bluntly. “I will give you a few other lessons before we leave. But don’t underestimate your talents. At the speed you’re progressing, you will soon be as capable as I am magically, except in Charmspeak, Hydrokinesis, and all the talents my lineage gives me an insurmountable advantage.”

“By your own words,” the pale blonde-haired Demigoddess asked lightly, “do you really need me to have a Professor?”

“Yes,” Perseus replied equally bluntly. “As it stands, you’re powerful enough to be a growing threat for all Olympians, yet you’re unable to defeat the weakest immortal without a powerful symbol of power to equal the scales.”

“The same applies to you, Jackson.”

“True,” the green-eyed Demigod seemed to have anticipated the comment, like he did a lot of things. “And I have plans for myself. But the Suicide Squad needs something very badly...”

“For you to stop antagonising eleven out of twelve Olympians?”

The black-haired boy chuckled.

“That’s a good one, but no. What we need is *time*.”

The sheer seriousness with which the word was uttered told her how serious he was about this topic.

“Something tells me you’re not only speaking about earning a couple of years of immunity.”

“How wise of you.”

“Circe may not accept an apprenticeship under such conditions.” Lou Ellen hesitated before continuing. “And if I am left alone on whatever island of the Sea of Monsters she is using as a base, you will have absolutely no leverage to demand my return once the Quest and your plans are over.”

“Do not worry, I have prepared a lot of plans for dear Circe.” Perseus assured her.

“And that’s absolutely not worrying...” Lou Ellen snorted.

“Worrying? I thought powerful sorceresses sired by Hecate were above that!”

“That was before meeting you...” the black-eyed Demigoddess abandoned her chair and the pile of books behind her, and approached the couch. Then she pounced, and thanks to Styx’s ‘curse’, the son of Poseidon couldn’t fight against her physical strength.

Then her lips touched his, and Lou Ellen stole a kiss like he had stolen her first in the Underworld.

It was...truly powerful.

Of course the moment their lips were separated again, the infuriating Demigod had a reply ready.

“Perhaps I should be the student, if you’re willing to give such ‘lessons’...*Professor*.”

**15 June 2006, Hephaestus Forge MP-42, Sea of Monsters, somewhere near the Solomon Islands**

Ares woke up.

By itself, it was a bad sign.

When you were a God, you could be at one hundred locations at the same time, and the Lord of Warfare freely admitted this was something he abused the hell of it to monitor the myriad of conflicts and armed violence occurring around the world. By this implacable logic, while one part of his divine essence could take some rest, it was exceptional for a majority of who he was to fall asleep.

The memories of what had happened before falling unconscious flashed brightly in his mind, and the God of War immediately tried to move.

It didn’t work.

As his eyes returned to their usual intensity, Ares was able to see exactly why. His legs were disappearing under a mass of blue-green alga. The same was true of his hands and his forearms. The rest of his body was similarly neutralised.

Based on previous unpleasant experiences, the bloodthirsty son of Zeus could tell it was no Orichalcum chains which were keeping him prisoner. That was, if he said so himself, the good news. Ares knew what had happened to Hades, and he had no intention to let be dragged down to an altar like a pig in a cage.

Unfortunately as he watched the weapon-production factory around him, the Olympian God acknowledged it wasn’t going to help him. The forge of his brother was half-drowned in water, and the algae imbued by the power of the Titaness were something he had no hope of breaking as long as their owner stopped fuelling them.

“How the mighty fall,” a voice he remembered all too well was heard, and the metallic plate he was tied to went from a horizontal station to a vertical one slowly.

This gave Ares all the time of the world to watch Marcus Antonius’s face and grandiloquent red armour.

“**Ho, ho, ho**!” After some effort, Ares managed to put himself in the frame of mind to let his personality of Mars to take control. “**What a surprise...the last Triumvir, Consul of Rome, and Magister Equitum of his armies...the Great Marcus Antonius...the loser of Actium**.”

Predictably, Marcus didn’t miss the opportunity to use his fist again his nose.

It hurt.

But honestly, it did should have hurt a lot more if the former rival of Octavian Caesar was immortal.

As it stood, despite the algae keeping prisoner, his nose was intact a few seconds later, and Mars was confident not a single drop of his ichor had been shed.

“**I am surprised, though. I thought I would find you licking the shoes of Julius Caesar in Hades’ domain. You were his dog, if I remember correctly. And then you tried to replace him with Octavian**-“

The second blow hurt his jaw, but once again failed to do any lasting damage and pain.

“**Damn. My little girl is more powerful than you are. Could you strike like a true son of Rome, Triumvir**?”

The next blow came with a shockwave, but it was still extremely weak. If it was a contest to be decided by who was going to exhaust himself first, Mars would largely bet on Antonius being the loser...again.

But the Roman General who had won Pharsalus, Philippi, and so many other bloody campaigns laughed and struck him again and again.

“**It is pathetic**,” Mars laughed. “**Is it all the legendary Marcus Antonius can do after two thousand years of preparations? I’m really disappointed**.”

The fist was bound for one of his eyes...but stopped.

A second later, it was obvious whose arrival had convinced the Magister Equitum to stop his delusional beating.

She appeared in a simple dress which shimmered like a magical veil, but shone like a sun. At least that was his first impression, because the piece of cloth changed instantly into a red colour, before turning into a multi-coloured assemblage of silk and other matters.

Mars recognised the artifice. He had seen Venus use it countless times, after all.

But the woman marching towards Marcus Antonius and his ‘prison’ was not the Goddess of Love. His lover could change her appearance at will and sometimes loved to take an Egyptian look, but she had never used this one. And the long black hair, the tanned skin, the eyes, and, most of all, the nose were eminently recognisable.

“**Queen Cleopatra Philopator**,” Mars chuckled as the former ruler of Egypt changed once again her clothes, this time in a pink toga which looked absolutely delightful for his eyes and his other senses. “**I love what you’ve done to your hair...and the rest of your body. Now why don’t you discard the Magister Equitum, and we leave this sordid forge to begin more pleasurable activities**?”

“Ah, the proud Butcher of Rome...” the musical voice of Cleopatra was even more enrapturing than it had been millennia ago, which was quite a feat, “yes, *Carnifex* was quite an appropriate name for you.”

“**Does it mean you’re accepting my invitation for pleasurable nightly activities**?” the God of War didn’t know what she used for Perfume, but this was an interesting flowery smell, and it grew stronger as she was now almost able to touch him...

“No, of course not, utter imbecile.”

The voice stopped being musical, and golden nails bit deep in his flesh.

To Mars’ real shock, this time his flesh didn’t instantly regenerate...and a drop of his immortal blood appeared.

By all rights, the nails of the woman who had taken to bed Julius Caesar once upon a time should be incinerated and the rest of her body should suffer tremendously...but the drops of ichor fumed and didn’t inconvenience her.

The nails withdrew. His flesh began to regenerate...but Mars’ eyes noticed how slowly it took. It would have taken far longer if a true Goddess had done it, but no true mortal could have wounded him so easily and with no divine weapon whatsoever.

“**Who are you**?” The God of War for the Roman and the Greek Pantheon thundered. “**You can’t be Cleopatra. Her Gods faded into irrelevance long ago, and her prayers died with Octavian’s conquest**.”

“First, he acknowledges you, then he tries to reject you, my Queen.” Marcus Antonius gave her a kiss which was certainly neither chaste nor innocent.

“His intelligence has much diminished since Rome became an Empire.” Cleopatra laughed in agreement before addressing him again. “Yes, I am Cleopatra, idiot. Yes, I died. But I was reborn. And though you didn’t want my return and your fellow Olympians were eager to proclaim every part of Egyptian culture as decadent and useless, the prayers of the Roman civilisation turned to me in the end, for Egypt remained the granary of your Empire for as long as it suffered under your tyranny.”

“**This doesn’t make you a Goddess**.”

“No,” the former Queen of Egypt purred, “it does not...yet.”

“The Triumvirate has forged an alliance with the mighty Titaness of the Seas,” Marcus Antonius informed him happily, “and while we weren’t counting on your presence, your capture is an extraordinary boon we would be stupid to refuse.”

“**Ha! And what are you going to do, rule as Neo Venus once you will have usurped the Goddess of Beauty and Love? You haven’t a twelfth of the power one needs to be considered a Goddess! Even Aphrodite in one of her weakest and peaceful aspects would beat you effortlessly**!”

“No, not as Neo Venus...I will rise as Neo Isis.”

Mars’ eyes widened and the noise of his teeth gritting against each other echoed.

“Yes, since you considered our great Goddess in your pantheon when your Empire reigned over the Mediterranean, it would be rude to refuse the invitation, no?”

“**This won’t work**!” The Roman God of War challenged them. “**And you have no Orichalcum to help you! Once I will be free, I will incinerate you, and all your ridiculous ambitions will burn! Antonius will be the first to burn...and you...you Cleopatra, I will make you *suffer***.”

The former Queen of Egypt gave him a look filled with hatred.

“The beast has dropped its mask. But...I compliment you upon your honesty. Now husband...”

“Yes, my love...”

Urgh, please, they weren’t going to copulate in his presence...oh please no! This was just adding insult to the injury!

**16 June 2006, New Byzantium, United States of America (de jure)**

Perseus had known the Goddess of Love would come to New Byzantium the moment he heard of Ares’ capture and who had done the deed.

It didn’t great foresight to predict it, evidently.

To be honest, the former Tyrant was pleasantly surprised that the immortal had waited for so long. It proved she was thinking with her head, not with her heart or any other part of her seductress’ body.

And when she appeared on the evening as he was able to return to his Barrack, the Olympian appeared as the martial aspect of Venus she was rumoured to use with increasing frequency.

This single point alone was...very interesting.

“**Vulcan and Mars have been captured**,” the hair were so brilliant and pale they were half-way through the shade of silver, but as the Goddess had materialised with a human height, Venus looked almost like a teenage girl...if teenage girls wore purple-gold armour which had the property to repel thousands of magical and physical attacks. Seeing no surprise coming from him, the Olympian sighed. “**You could act like you are surprised, Perseus**.”

“Why would I be? For all your attempts to keep it a secret in this fantastic city, the whole world likely knows of the latest problem Olympus is facing.”

“**It is true Zeus’ summoning hasn’t been exactly...subtle**.” Drew’s mother accepted after an instant of silence. “**And yes, he is poor at keeping secrets. Then again, everyone is known in a matter of hours those days. For example, the presence of Khione and Rhode was known to the Council before they left New Constantinople after you spoke with them**.”

“And is it going to be a problem?” That Olympus knew of it was anything but a surprise; when you made the entrances the Goddesses did and transformed two Legionnaires into penguin, there was...there was pretty much no discretion involved. The method employed was ‘refuge in audacity’; people would speak about this exceptional visit, but the spectacle they created arriving and leaving would be the topic of discussion for months, while what they discussed in Barrack Three wouldn’t.

“**No**,” the purple-armoured Goddess shook her head, “**though even if you add two minor Goddesses’ power to your own skills, you are going to be severely underpowered to face the might of a Titaness**.”

“I have no intention to challenge one of the rulers of the seas in duel,” the leader of the Suicide Squad replied sincerely. “There are divine laws preventing her from challenging me openly, which will do wonders for my life expectancy. And yes, as you justly remarked, my chances of winning a fight against the wife of the Sea Titan, even if she doesn’t take the fight seriously, are approximately tending towards zero.”

Most of the major Gods were out of his league, Trident or no Trident. If Perseus had had any doubt about it before the Quest to ‘recover the Master Bolt’, the fight against Persephone would have erased them in a hurry.

This was against a minor Goddess bolstered by her marriage and her title of ‘Queen of Hell’.

If his opponent had the power of a Titan at its beck and call, the chances of winning went from small to inexistent in a second or two.

And the Trident, in such an instance was more a hindrance than a boon, since it bolstered a great deal of water skills on the battlefield...were you able to guess which power Thethys used above all?

No, there was no victory to be won by challenging a Titaness. The entire Suicide Squad would die in an aquatic grave before managing to slightly wound her.

“We will need a major divine intervention if there is to be any hope of victory,” the former Tyrant said calmly without a trace of humour in his voice. There was a time for jokes, and it wasn’t it. “In the mean time, the main problem for any Expeditionary Force and Quester Party is likely to come from the Triumvirate.”

“**Marcus Antonius and Cleopatra**,” Venus nodded. Perseus was once again pleasantly surprised she was not raging and threatening heaven and hell...though the delay between the revelation and her arrival here meant the Goddess of Love had had the time to vent her anger. “**The former Egyptian Queen is likely to go for Neo Isis. I do not know which name the Triumvir is going to seek by usurping Mars**.”

“The problem is quite unlike the one the twins of the Moon and the Sun are facing,” Perseus acknowledged with a shrug.

“**If you weren’t...you...**” for the first time, the Goddess smirked, “**I would wonder if you took this matter seriously**.”

“You wound me, Lady Venus.” The Demigod placed a hand above his heart. “The thing is, I don’t have any idea how the famous ruler of the Lands of the Nile is intending to usurp you. You are unique among the Olympians in that you are both Goddess and Titaness, so the ‘Helios-Selene’ method is doomed from the very beginning. Vulcan-Hephaestus is your husband, and Ares-Mars your lover, but since the second Triumvirate General can’t usurp them at the same time-“

“**Marcus Antonius and Cleopatra are in love with each other**,” as the sun disappeared, the hair of Venus became a river of liquid silver, “**the same can’t be said from my marriage with my dear husband**.”

“Maybe,” Perseus agreed, “but it still represents no fatal weakness. You have a Domain and countless Aspects with no true weaknesses. And yet the legendary last independent ruler of Egypt still breathes and conspires against you.”

“**Do you think I should go ask her how she did it?**” Venus asked in amused voice.

“Oh no,” Perseus answered with the same irony. “Where would be the fun in that? No, my plan is far simpler. It implies forcing her to offer her some bait she can’t resist...and the great Master of Olympus has been kind enough to offer one.”

**17 June 2006, Fields of Mars, New Constantinople, United States of America (de jure)**

Hera had not disliked the colour orange before losing her divine powers.

To be sure, the rightful Goddess of Marriage and member of the Olympian Council had not hated it either. It was just...who would wear *orange* during a solemn and prestigious event? Disregarding that, who would try to wear orange in his or her every day’s life? Some stripes of orange could be fine depending the circumstances, she supposed, but everything from next to the heels was just as ridiculous as wearing some of the things Dionysus donned when he was drunk...which was most of the time, really.

“Let it not be said I didn’t warn you.” The fallen deity hissed between her teeth. “Jackson, I am going to kill you, even if it’s the last thing I will ever do.”

“Don’t be dramatic, Antigone! Those are the finest archery clothes in this world!”

“The garb is a crime against fashion,” Hera growled, her hatred fuelled by the disrespectful ‘identity’ Jackson had given her.

It was a full bodysuit. It was extremely tight, and part of it was some sort of smelly latex. It revealed her ‘teenage body’ to everyone within a kilometre. And at the risk of repeating herself, it was bright orange.

Hera couldn’t wait to remove it and burn it in the greatest pyre the Demigods had ever seen.

And when her powers and her divine aura were restored, the Olympian immortal would take great pleasure in enacting various laws making it a crime to wear orange in her presence.

Since Perseus Jackson always wore some orange on it, yes, her wrath would be free to incinerate this bastard less than a minute later. The world would thank her for getting rid of this pest, of that Hera was absolutely convinced.

“I disagree, my dear Antigone. Now that I’ve removed most of your acne with this ultra-expensive ointment, you look like a perfectly attractive young Demigoddess...who appears to wear orange. Look at how many Demigods are in admiration before your form!”

The ‘many Demigods’ naturally, were busy howling in laughter the moment they could see her. Had she mentioned this ‘orange bodysuit’ was horrible-looking and ridiculous?

The only part which had some truth was the one where he proclaimed having removed her ‘acne’.

And at this reminder, her fists tightened. It had not been enough for Zeus to turn her into a mortal; he had to disfigure and make her extremely repulsive to boot.

Not that she cared what the bastards of Byzantium and Constantinople thought, but it was another insult from her ex-husband.

The moment she had the power, Hera would take great pleasure torturing him for a few millennia before throwing him into the Tartarus Pit.

“This...this horrible orange bodysuit offers no protection whatsoever, Jackson!”

“Well, of course not, Antigone! An archer like yourself must rely on not being hit.”

“So you say,” Hera passed her hand into her hair...whose colour looked impossible to really describe. Was it mud with some streaks of blonde? Or was it tainted gold with withering tree leaves?

The abandoned Goddess hated her new hair.

When it came to it, she hated most of the ‘mortal body’ the hypocritical, arrogant, snobbish donkey on his golden throne had so ‘generously’ transformed her into with the help of the bitches calling themselves Fates.

“So I say,” the son of Poseidon smirked, and it was tempting to try to strangle him...unfortunately the last time yesterday she had tried that, Hera had found herself propelled into the sea rather violently, and the heterochromia-eyed ex-immortal had no desire to repeat the experience anytime soon, especially as the Fields of Mars were partially flooded with the river of New Constantinople. “Against what we’re going to fight against in the next months, my dear Antigone, I think anyone who has not bathed into a certain sea-river will not survive for long if he or she can’t dodge monstrous blows.”

“There are opponents no Demigoddess can’t dodge eternally, Jackson.” As much as she hated the bastard, Hera had a lot of experience killing Demigods and she knew what Olympus and other lesser factions could field to eliminate the mortals that fell in the ‘threat’ category. “There are many monsters which are never exhausted, and can track us for thousands of kilometres without resting. And the Sea of Monsters is nothing but a gigantic lair for them!”

“Yes, it is going to be a lot of fun for the Suicide Squad and everyone involved in this chaotic adventure!” The bastard son of Poseidon turned towards the grim-faced bastard of Nemesis who was waiting at the top of the hill where their observation post had been emplaced for the entire duration of the Legion’s war games. “Isn’t that right, my treacherous lieutenant?”

“Stop trying to contaminate me with your madness,” the other Demigod said in a tired voice. “We are with you, no need to turn us into talking donkeys or whatever weird beast strikes your fancy today.”

“I wasn’t planning to do that!”

Antigone stared at the insane Demigod. All other half-blood children stared at the bastard son of Poseidon. No one said it out loud, but ‘lie’ had to be thought so hard everyone heard it.

“Fine, fine...I have a tough audience today...”

“Can you not watch the war games and make estimates on who is going to be part of the Expeditionary Force?” Hera spoke in exasperation.

If nothing else, the fallen Goddess was really interested in the Cohorts which were going to be sacrificed for Zeus’ precious tree-bastard.

“My dear Antigone,” the grin of Perseus Jackson grew larger, assuming it was physically possible, “there’s no need to watch the war games to know who will be chosen. The treacherous little snake calling himself Octavian has conspired in the shadows and cheated so outrageously that victory is guaranteed to belong to his cohort and the one from the Third Legion he has allied with.”

By his side, the son of Nemesis shook his head and immediately voiced his protest.

“Jackson, I know you have a hellishly good spy network, but there’s no way Octavian and his accomplices have the influence and the gold to bribe...everyone who needs to be bribed. Okay, his First Cohort is not the worst strike-force of New Constantinople, but the reality they got two idiots transformed into penguins is a good clue they have not the brain to support the muscle.”

“And the Twelfth Legion is not as wealthy as the Suicide Squad is,” Hera agreed with Nemesis’ spawn, “its officers were garrisoned here during the months the Master Bolt was taken to the Underworld. They were paid for garrison duties. Smuggling and disloyal arrangements can only compensate for so much...”

“Your lack of confidence in my sources is regrettable,” the grinning bastard pouted. “I’m saying that when Heracles and the good old Dionysus will announce the victors at the end of the day, it will be to say the First Cohort of the Twelfth Legio Fulminata and the Third Cohort of the Third Legio Gallica will be triumphant.”

“I don’t believe you,” Hera said defensively. “You aren’t that good.”

“My dear, are you ready to gamble your future archery clothes on this small and unimportant bet?”

“NO!”

The shout was out of her mouth before she could control it...

**18 June 2006, Barracks’ Arena, New Byzantium, United States of America (de jure)**

Jackson wasn’t taking this duel seriously.

Clarisse knew she wasn’t Annabeth ‘Well of Wisdom’ Chase, but she wasn’t completely stupid. The son of Poseidon was using a wooden sword. She was using a brand-new *Carnifex*. There was no water nearby.

Half of her blows were still missing largely, and the other half Jackson parried with his blade. The shocks when those occurred really hurt her arms, such was the power the son of one of the Big Three could put behind them.

Finally, Carnifex flew over her head, and Clarisse was weaponless and with a wooden blade pressed against her throat.

“You could try to not look so smug, Jackson!”

“Me? I am the very image of humility and-“

“Yeah, he’s smug,” Luke Castellan interrupted the black-haired boy. “In a few seconds, he will start a monologue or gloat about...this should be his ninth consecutive victory.”

“You, my heroic lieutenant,” Perseus Jackson began to complain, “are a terrible duelling referee.”

“And proud of it,” the son of Hermes retorted.

“Damn you, my heroic lieutenant!”

Clarisse didn’t speak for a couple of minutes. She had been well-rested and well-fed before they began to ‘duel’, but after enduring this beating, it was like everything she had done before entering the Arena of New Byzantium was an eternity ago. And of course the weather was getting more unbearable day after day.

It was early morning, but she was already sweating and it felt like half her water’s body was missing.

So Clarisse drank the cold water that was available at the nearby fountain, and tried to ignore the pain in her muscles and everywhere Jackson had beat her blue.

It took her far longer than she had imagined before feeling good again. Seriously, how powerful was the Earthshaker’s son?

“Do you want me to take my father’s throne once he is no longer a prisoner, Jackson?”

And yeah, Dionysus and his servants had announced yesterday evening them what everybody in the Suicide Squad already knew: Hephaestus and her dad had been taken prisoner by a Titaness. And it was early, so they were only Jackson and Castellan around, and the magic stuff was activated.

“That’s a good question,” the green-eyed Demigod replied, his usual ‘good smile’ already greeting her. “And it is one you, and only you, can answer, Clarisse La Rue.”

“I don’t understand,” Clarisse said honestly.

“During the Great Quest, you walked the path of the berserker,” the Demigod explained while playing with his wooden sword. “You experienced multiple times the full power and addiction bloodlust and unbridled rage the God of War wants of his followers day after day. So yes, it is a question only you can answer. Do you want this? Do you want to walk upon the path of carnage, eternal war, until it doesn’t matter who you fight for, just that there is a war and that your spear is bathed in blood?”

For an instant the daughter of Ares hesitated.

During several battles, throwing herself at the enemy and hammering them had been...it had been glorious.

But it never lasted, except against the skeletons. The servants of Hades were already dead, no damage done, and all that stuff.

But...skeletons or no skeletons, many times it had been like she wasn’t in control. It was...her rage, her anger, and everything violent in her which attacked. And the more she did it, the easier it was.

“No, I don’t want that. I don’t want to become...a copy of *him*.”

The sneering face of the bloody sergeant that was her father flashed in her mind, and Clarisse shivered.

“Who would?” muttered Castellan. Clarisse groaned loudly. “Yeah, I know he’s your father, and he wasn’t the worst godly parent in the Hell Palace...but he only cares about your kills and not embarrassing his bloody reputation.”

“Yeah,” Hermes’ son spoke the truth. “He’s...a bastard.”

“Oh, I’m sure the King and the Queen of the Gods were married when they conceived him!”

Clarisse had been busy drinking more water, and she emptied half of it on Castellan before she could master her reaction.

“Damn you, Jackson!”

“Go to Hell, Jackson!”

“I was just giving you a mythological truth!”

“Here’s another, then: you are a bastard, Jackson!”

Clarisse tried to rush towards the fountain, but the watery contents of it began to swirl and bubble in a way which was...not good. Jackson was preparing another surprise with his hydrokinesis, and while Clarisse wouldn’t say no to a shower right now, she didn’t want to be drowned by a powerful wave.

“Fine, the path of the berserker is out.”

A gargoyle passed before them, holding a cardboard ‘Say no to the Berserkers in your garden’.

Luke Castellan placed his head in his hands, and Clarisse really wanted to imitate him.

“Fortunately, I have many other delightful contingencies for you, Clara!”

“I think you have taken too many drugs, Jackson!”

“Why do people think I need to take drugs to create my most brilliant plans?” the expression was one of surprise...and it was all a lie, they all knew it. “I freely admit to you; the line between brilliance and madness is one I reach effortlessly with pure water and joy in my heart!”

“And the world can shake at this terrifying prospect,” Luke Castellan commented.

“In fact, I’ve grown wiser and smarter,” the daughter of Ares took her spear and the rest of her possessions, and tried to get fast out of the arena’s neighbourhood.

She was too late. Jackson moved to make sure she didn’t have anywhere to escape to.

“I know this going to be horrible!” the spear-wielder called out.

“Absolute nonsense!” Perseus Jackson cheerfully denied. “Tell me, my dear Clarisse...have your history lessons mentioned the Varangian Guard?”

**26 June 2006, Hades’ Barrack, New Byzantium, United States of America (de jure)**

Annabeth was never happy to visit Hades’ Barrack.

The manor-thing Hades had ordered for his children a century ago was...creepy. Yeah, creepy was the right word.

Even the air was oppressing, and the walls themselves appeared to say ‘you’re not wanted here’.

Unfortunately, it was one of the rare locations in New Byzantium where you were sure to not be overheard by someone who wasn’t a child of Hades.

Thus the grey-eyed daughter of Athena had to regularly visit Poseidon’s Barrack and this dark lair.

And then she had to deal with Perseus Jackson.

“The logistics are simply unsustainable!”

To her surprise, the mad boy laughed...and yawned.

“You forgot to say, your Owlishness, that in this scenario, the commander-in-chief prioritise none of the primary goals, attack everywhere in insufficient strength, and increase the pace of the battles until the troops die of exhaustion.”

The infernal grin reassessed itself.

“But this isn’t what you were trying to say.”

How could one be so intelligent, clever, and perceptive...and yet such an irritating jerk?”

“Assuming your enemy strength’s estimates is correct...and a margin of twenty percent is acceptable in this case...the Suicide Squad’s chances to achieve one or two successes in the Sea of Monsters are nonexistent. Forget the Titaness, attrition will make sure a dozen battles are all we will able to fight before dying.”

“It lacks poetry, but the statement is essentially correct.” Perseus Jackson approved with a smirk. “The Cohorts of New Constantinople selected for the slaughter should worry about the Legionnaires of Marcus Antonius, the uncountable slaves of Circe, and of course the mighty sea monsters waiting for them...but alas, most of their commanders are ignoring that utterly. If I was a gambler, I wouldn’t bet on the Roman Expeditionary Force’s survival...”

Annabeth gritted her teeth. The son of Poseidon was a gambler...and a cheater when it came to card playing, the sons and daughters of Hermes and Apollo had rapidly learned that to their moneybox’s sorrow.

“We aren’t given the authorisation to leave New Byzantium.”

“It will quickly change.” The green-eyed Demigod assured her. “And when this old senile centaur and his affiliates finally realise we have told them the ugly truth all along, ***my*** plans will be ready!”

“Excuse me? *Your* plans?”

“You’ve just admitted you had no idea how to storm the Sea of Monsters. By this logical deduction-“

“I am perfectly able to prepare a battle-plan which will see the Suicide Squad victorious!” Annabeth Chase snapped.

“And there you fall into the trap again,” Jackson chided her. With this tone, it was truly no wonder that ‘Antigone Barbaros’ was trying – and failing – to strangle him at least twice a day...

“How so?” the daughter of Athena grumbled.

“We will train hard in the next months, of course. I will torture...ahem...I will inflict great ordeals...err...no, I will train you harshly. But since we aren’t Gods and I don’t expect the number of ‘Suicide Squad volunteers’ to be larger than thirty, it stands to reason, as you said, that for each battle we will suffer losses, be they dead, wounded, or missing as some repugnant creature drags our unfortunate cannon-fodder under the waves.”

Perseus stopped grinning, and if the blonde daughter of Athena was correct, it frightened her considerably.

“That’s when we meet again at this table, I want your next series of plans to include quantities of schemes which have nothing to do with battle.”

“You will have to be more specific.”

“Well, to begin with, I intend to loan an impressive quantity of flags of different divine and non-divine factions so that we avoid sailing under the colours of New Byzantium.”

“Flying under colours which aren’t Olympus is considered piracy, Jackson!” The grey-eyed Greek Demigoddess exclaimed.

“It is piracy if you get caught. And we won’t get caught. Where is the problem?”

Where was the problem? Where was the problem? The problem was that if any Olympian or a major God, or anyone else took umbrage, they would be lucky to find a part of their body for their funeral pyres!

“We can’t limit ourselves to that, of course.” The son of Poseidon continued as her astonishment paralysed her. “Sabotage is a classic. Bribery is a powerful tool in our arsenal. We will of course try ambush tactics in order to steal the ships of the enemy so we can break through without a fight. Temporary alliances with...suitable powers must be considered too.”

“You...” The survivor of the Master Bolt coughed, wondering if dying in the hall of Hades wouldn’t have done wonders for her mental issues. “How many divine and non-divine laws do you intend to break?”

“Plans before pleasure, plans before pleasure!” Jackson proclaimed. “We will have all time to list larcenies and our other exploits when we will emerge victorious and half of the Council will have heart attacks at the idea of giving us another year of ‘diplomatic immunity’. Now I want a first draft of your plans in ten days, Amanda! We will meet again here with her Dreadful Majesty, and I will explain to you in detail your mistakes.”

“Annabeth,” the young daughter of Athena muttered angrily before realising something. “Wait a minute...if we’re to brainstorm on the attack plans of the Sea of Monsters, and you already have your own ready, what are you going to do during the next week?”

“I am so glad you asked the question,” for a second or two, Annabeth Chase wondered if Perseus wasn’t some long-lost descendant of dozens of terrible villains which were all tortured in the Fields of Punishment. “We will need a warship once the Cohorts will have sunk theirs on the seabed of the Sea of Monsters. I appoint myself the noble task of requisitioning a suitable transport for our military operations.”

By the Pit of Tartarus and the liquid flames of the Styx Sea, what had she done to be plunged into this madness?

**4 July 2006,** **the New Golden Horn Shipyards, New Constantinople, United States of America (de jure)**

The bay was crowded today, and for once, it wasn’t because of Independence Day.

No, it was because everyone, Greek and Roman, Nymph and Satyr, adult and children, Legionnaires and Questers, had agreed a few hours of their lives was a good investment when it came to see the Expeditionary Force sailing away from the city.

And it was beautiful day. Everywhere his eyes could see, an atmosphere of party reigned. There were tents selling drinks everywhere it was physically possible, and in some cases where it wasn’t. Numerous deities had opened their warehouses, and the result was countless mini-explosions of colours, improbable illusion-spectacles, and massive sport contests, including but not limited to: wrestling, running, climbing up the mast of a wooden ship, and riding pegasi.

Ethan couldn’t find anything in him to share the exuberant joy of thousands of Demigods and Legacies.

The terrible war that had been averted with the recovery of the Master Bolt and the Trident was practically not averted at all. The Triumvirate was extremely dangerous, and had found a Titaness to ally with.

And the Expeditionary Force gathered today was commanded by moronic idiots.

“Still, it would be better if I had a list of ships to look for...” the son of Nemesis whispered to himself...

“One has only to ask, and I deliver!” A familiar voice was heard, and he received a friendly tap on the back.

It was very hard to not draw his sword and try to impale the source of the problem.

“Jackson...” then he realised what the paper which had found itself in his hands told. “An order of battle? Really?”

“Hey, you asked for it!”

Ethan passed a hand in his hair, and wondered what the hell he had been thinking accepting for the first time to be part of the Suicide Squad.

Deciding this question could wait for another day – the answer would be likely very demoralising, the grim leader of the Nemesis Barrack began to read.

**Naval Roman Order of Battle – Codename: Operation Vanguard**

Launch Date: 4th July of the Year of Grace 2006

1st Squadron (First Cohort, Twelfth Legio):

*Ave Caesar*, modified Ticonderoga-class Cruiser, Squadron Flagship

*Rhenus*, modified Oliver Hazard Perry-class Frigate

*Danubius*, modified Oliver Hazard Perry-class Frigate

*Dominus Caelum*, modified Casablanca-class Escort Carrier repurposed into an Eagle Carrier

*Assyria*, modified Agile-class Minesweeper

*Corinthus*, modified Neosho-class oiler

*Emporiae*, modified Neosho-class oiler

*Vesuvius*, modified Kilauea-class ammunition ship

2nd Squadron (Third Cohort, Third Legio):

*Jupiter Invictus*, modified Ticonderoga-class Cruiser, Squadron Flagship

*Rhodanus*, modified Oliver Hazard Perry-class Frigate

*Hispania*, Modified Agile-class Minesweeper

*Brundisium*, modified Neosho-class oiler

*Etna*, modified Kilauea-class ammunition ship

“That’s...interesting,” Ethan conceded. “I note you didn’t add your predictions of the fatalities and the casualties they’re going to take in this...this ‘Operation Vanguard’.”

“No, I didn’t.” Perseus Jackson grinned. “I’m sure you understand, my treacherous lieutenant, that something so insignificant slipped off my mind.”

“I’m sure it did...why are there the two transformed penguins waiting for your orders?”

“By a curious coincidence,” the son of Poseidon beamed with the sort of intensity which put even Dionysus ill-at-ease, “those two poor souls have found themselves dismissed from the Twelfth Legio by their intolerant superiors! But the law is the law, and they had to continue military service, or the vows they swore to the Olympians would cause them untold trouble. Realising the trouble they were in, they realised that their early dismissal of my generous proposal may have been a hasty.”

“But penguins?”

Ethan had never been much of a priest, but in the next seconds he really, really prayed the Gods and whatever immortals were in charge of this mad world that the two Cohorts would succeed.

Otherwise he would have to go to the Sea of Monsters, and with Jackson leading them, it promised to be sheer madness from the first hour to the last.

“We had a donkey, a Minotaur, and a crocodile regularly involved during our previous adventures. Why not penguins?”

“Why not indeed...” Ethan sighed before replying dramatically the three fatal words.

“That’s the spirit! Now, let’s wave hands and fins a lot towards the warships, I have a feeling those poor Legionnaires haven’t the slightest idea of what they’re embarking for...and a double ration of mackerels for you Rico, if you swim and go singing in front of the *Ave Caesar* as it leads the squadron out of the bay!”

“RICO! DON’T DO IT! YOU ARE NOT A PENGUIN! HE’S TRYING TO-“

A splash interrupted the tirade, and countless Demigods cheered like madmen.

**Author’s note**: Let’s go to the Sea of Monsters, they said...

The madness is back. The Suicide Squad has yet to leave New Byzantium, but the wheels of craziness are already turning, ready to unleash new catastrophes in their wake.

And no, next chapter isn’t going to be an Interlude. Perseus Jackson and the Suicide Squad need a ship, and the son of Poseidon is a Tyrant who doesn’t stop at the first hurdle...

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