**Chapter 22**

**Reap the Whirlwind**

“*My enemies began this war against the Suicide Squad under the childish delusion they were going to defeat us with acceptable losses. They sowed the wind, and now they are truly going to reap the whirlwind*.” Attributed to Perseus Jackson, words supposedly spoken before the Battle of the Giant’s Fall, 14 December 2006.

**14 December 2006, the ruins of Pear Island, Sea of Monsters**

To be certain, Neo Isis was not going to pretend the island had been beautiful before.

It had been chosen to be the new powerbase of Alcyoneus, and the Giant’s presence had been a nauseating thing when she visited it the last time. The parody of Parthenon and the corruption of Death-based sorcery...it had tainted the rocks and the rare fields of this island.

But compared to the spectacle which was offering itself to her eyes...it had been a relatively tolerable view.

What the claimant to the Throne of Love faced today could be summed up in two words: absolute devastation.

And it wasn’t an exaggeration.

Everything, truly everything, had been destroyed.

The beach was not a beach anymore. It had been partially turned into glass, and as if it wasn’t enough, there were incinerated weapons and destroyed ammunition everywhere, to the point a couple of hours had been necessary for a demining operation. Neo Isis wouldn’t have set a foot otherwise on it.

To be honest, the former mortal woman in her almost regretted it now.

High in the sky, the sight had been bad enough. It was now worse when seen from the ground.

The coast was littered with the debris of countless ships, and the bay was worse: it was now a graveyard for the fleet which had been once obediently following her commands.

But as the tormented sea hid most of that particular disaster, Neo Isis’ eyes turned again eastwards. Towards what had been the heights of the island.

Towards what was now the heart of the devastation.

It was the location where Alcyoneus had, in his arrogance, ordered his undead slaves to build his ‘Dark Parthenon’.

It was there where he had perished, and his current ambitions had died with him.

Mercifully, the volcano had stopped pouring lava, and by all signs, it appeared the craters were rapidly stopping to vent their fury. With the Giant no more, the ash rain and the other debris were rapidly ceasing.

But all this meant was that Neo Isis had a prime view of the utter devastation.

It was if she stood before the end of the world. The very foundations of the dominant heights could now be seen, proof of the overwhelming forces which had ravaged and destroyed the island.

And on top of that...there was...a shimmer of divine protection.

This island had been given to a deity as a sanctuary. It would recover...in time.

Every destroyed crate, every anchor, would be dismantled, removed, or simply forgotten in the next years.

It was entirely possible that the island itself would recover fasted for its new purpose than the shock it had inflicted in everyone’s minds.

“Goddess, my life in your hands. I have utterly failed the task you gave me.”

Neo Isis fought back a sigh. While she had never been in awe of her husband’s favourite officer, there was no denying Lucius Vorenus was a competent man.

It would be easy to shoot the messenger, as so many feeble-minded Pharaohs of old did.

And it would be stupid.

All her servants, be they soldiers or not, were left reeling by what this infernal son of Poseidon had done. If Neo Isis went to execute the commanders whose fault was not to anticipate the impossible, there would be mutinies before the next moon. Morale would also fall to new levels of despair.

“Give your report, Praetor.”

Thus the Roman Legionnaire did speak.

If she wasn’t on the island herself, if she wasn’t able to smell and watch the devastation, in addition to all her powers confirming the words...Neo Isis wouldn’t have believed it.

A great while whale destroying an entire fleet. Hordes of undead had fought the monsters and other undead. Uncountable constructs of bones and corpses had cleared the first trenches. By comparison, the tricks the invaders had used for the more conventional fights had been more...reasonable.

“We have captured the surviving Lycanthropes and Teumessian Kits.”

“Good,” she answered, “place them aboard the *Dark Menagerie*. We will bring them back with us, they may still be useful before this entire campaign is over.”

Neo Isis turned back to Praetor Vorenus.

“There will be no punishment for your defeat.” The once-and-future ruler of Egypt told him. “You underestimated the Suicide Squad, but so did I. We all underestimated the son of Poseidon and the resources he was ready to unleash in order to recover the Golden Fleece. As such, it would be perfectly unfair to blame you for something we never saw coming.”

There was a light of relief in Lucius Vorenus’ eyes...but it was a really, really weak candle.

The face, the posture, the reactions...the man had truly been broken by his defeat, and it was going to take time for him to recover and regain his aggressiveness and competence.

Fortunately, time was something she could give him.

“Return to the *Spear of the Gods*, Praetor. I will join you shortly.”

“Yes, Goddess.”

For about several minutes, Neo Isis stayed silent and watched the ruins and the spectacle of total defeat surrounding her.

It was the complete ruin of her strategy...a strategy which was mere days old.

The Suicide Squad, for she had to give the son of Poseidon his due after handing her forces such a defeat, had taken the Golden Fleece and smashed apart a colossal amount of assets which had been placed there to stop him permanently.

Clearly, dividing her forces had been a major mistake.

Everything on this island had been crippled or vaporised, and the moment the Suicide Squad had seen her coming with reinforcements, they had fled, charting a course for a massive storm which had formed this afternoon.

The hunters of the Triumvirate, suddenly, were without prey.

“We are going to return to the ritual site,” she ordered. “Give the orders to all the Triumvirate squadrons.”

“All the squadrons, Goddess?”

“Yes, all the Triumvirate squadrons.” It was, assuredly, completely ceding the initiative to Perseus Jackson and his band of mad Demigods.

But even when the initiative had belonged to the Triumvirate, they hadn’t been able to catch him, and attacking straight on the Forge of All Perils...it was too late. She should have done it immediately after the Drakon’s death, and with her full strength. Now that Telekhines and other forces had fortified the Forge-Volcano, assaulting this industrial citadel would end in disaster...another disaster.

No, they had to pull back, and fortify as much as they could the island they had chosen for her husband’s divine ascension. If they couldn’t stop Perseus Jackson there, with all their preparations, be they traps, siege engines, walls, and other stratagems...they in all likelihood wouldn’t be able to stop him at all anywhere else.

“And summon the pirate captains. I want to give them new orders.”

One by one, the scum of the Sea of Monsters came.

Many of them tried to pretend they were proper gentlemen and honourable souls.

Neo Isis wasn’t fooled.

If anything, the female claimant to the Throne of Love was slightly more appreciative of the pirates who didn’t bother hiding their true nature.

At least those ones were honest. Monstrous, but honest.

“I have no doubt you all know what happened here.” Neo Isis wasn’t going to waste her time with courtesies that wouldn’t be believed anyway. “Yes, Perseus Jackson, son of Poseidon, and his Questers he proclaimed to be a ‘Suicide Squad’, have indeed blasted apart this island, destroyed most of the forces defending it, and recovered the Golden Fleece from the dead hands of an Elder Giant.”

No one in the pirate crowd was surprised, but many had the good sense to look afraid...or take very calculating expressions.

“For this reason, and many others, I want him dead,” the legendary female ruler continued implacably. “This will be your sole and only task.”

One pirate laughed. It was really an ugly sound, filled with malice.

She didn’t need any servants to recall his warlord name.

*Blackbeard*.

“Why shouldn’t we let you activate the explosives in our collars, oh Great Queen? I think at least this would be a less painful way to die...”

There were several appreciative murmurs...and Neo Isis glared at the dangerous scum of the seas.

“Because if the son of Poseidon die, not only the collars will immediately open and release the crews which have been involved in this victory, but the Triumvirate will also richly reward you. Your ships will be repaired. New weapons straight from the Forge of Hephaestus will be given to you. Maps and supplies will be delivered so you can finally leave the Sea of Monsters if it is your desire, or establish your own kingdom somewhere in the Zone Mortalis.”

There were many satisfied grumbles. They didn’t come from Blackbeard and his circle of allies.

“I want all of that and two millions of Drachmas in gold,” the monster wearing human skin grinned.

Neo Isis frowned.

“Provided you manage to kill Perseus Jackson and destroy sufficiently the Suicide Squad so that they represent no threat to my plans before the Spring Equinox, they are yours. I swear it, on the waters of the Styx.”

The Hell Sea’s power thundered.

“Good enough for me,” Blackbeard smiled, and a lot of pirates voiced their support after him. “Let the hunt begin...”

The Second Caesarea watched the columns of pirates, wondering how many of them would still be alive in three moons. She completely intended to honour her oath if they succeeded, an oath on the Styx was not to be broken if you valued your life and your honour.

But after what Perseus Jackson had done to this island, Neo Isis couldn’t help but think their chances were too low, whether they were free to fight the kind of war they loved or not.

This was, in many ways, her own Suicide Squad...led by another monster of the seas.

“Let’s hope they destroy each other,” Neo Isis murmured before leaving this island, swearing to herself she would never return here.

**14 December 2006, Council Room, Olympus**

Apollo wasn’t going to say it aloud, honestly. He had instincts of self-preservation, thank you very much.

That said, only a very foolish God or Goddess would fail to notice that the ‘exceptional emergency Councils’ tended to become...well, less exceptional, these days. They weren’t ‘the norm’, by any means, by there were definitely more and more of them.

The God of Sun, Music, and Poetry knew many Olympians, his father at the top of them, blamed entirely Perseus Jackson for this state of affairs. And while the son of Poseidon was far from innocent...Apollo knew this was more than unfair. The Triumvirate’s existence, alone, could not be blamed upon his head. The treacherous Emperors of the Roman Empire had conspired for centuries before his uncle sired his child.

But he wasn’t going to say it aloud, not when the situation was so tense. Though the mood was improving now, after the Lord of Underworld’s letter had arrived.

“**In conclusion**,” the Master of Olympus said in a far calmer tone than the one he had used mere minutes ago, “**Persephone and her new Champion were able to evade the Giant’s ultimate attack and take refuge in his realm**.”

“**Yes**,” Hermes cleared his throat, “**that is exactly what the letter says. He adds obviously that doing so exhausted them...added more exhaustion to the energy expended in the battle, really. They’re in dire need of resting**.”

“**And the Giant? What does Hades has to say about him**?”

“**His essence has been completely dispersed, to the point it will need centuries, probably millennia, to regain some tiny shred of its former might. It seems the self-proclaimed Bane of Lord Uncle was not so much a bane, when he isn’t fighting with the home ground advantage**.”

“**And good riddance**,” his little sister said peevishly.

Nods of support were made in the next seconds. Many of Olympus’ enemies would never win popularity contests, but even among them, the Elder Giants were known to be particularly cruel and brutal. That one was no longer a factor for the foreseeable future was certainly an excellent reason to celebrate.

“**It matches with what we know happened**,” Zeus declared, “**and yet I have suspicions. Since Persephone disobeyed my commands and entered the battle, we had only an incomplete view of what happened, and once Alcyoneus decided to launch his final attack, we saw absolutely nothing for the last three hours. If they came into contact with *Her*...**”

“**I doubt they did**.” Dionysus materialised a barrel of wine to fill over a hundred glasses in front of him.

“**And what leads you to this conclusion**?” Artemis asked, unconvinced.

“**Too many of the participants are still alive**,” the God of Wine answered immediately without looking in her direction. “**If *dear great-grandmother* was there, it would be the most lenient apparition she made in...what, two millennia? Three? No, it has to be four...**”

“**Many Legionnaires are missing**,” his little sister countered, but her voice was suddenly more thoughtful.

“**Mutineers**,” Athena went to relay their half-brother. “**Given what happened to the last one, I wouldn’t be surprised if one or two of the missing were sent straight to the Underworld by the leader of the Suicide Squad**.”

“**It is absolutely abhorrent behaviour**,” Demeter spoke. “**Not only he somehow corrupted by precious girl, but he is also enforcing a regime of terror among the Demigods**-“

“**He warned them**,” Dionysus had swallowed almost a full litre of wine before taking interest again in the conversation. “**I think Jackson promised that if they failed to heed his orders, he would crucify them. One might say the mutineers got away with a far better death than they deserved, in the end**.”

“**You think he would have crucified them**?” Artemis sounded...not horrified, but rather shocked.

“**Well...**” Dionysus rolled his eyes and turned his head towards Poseidon. “**He is your son**.”

“**So he is**,” the Master of Atlantis and Lord of the Seas agreed. “**And when we are angry, we can invent a lot of long and agonising punishments**.”

There was some light bickering, but it ended quickly after that.

“**We thus agree that the Elder Giant’s final wrath, no matter how...impressive and devastating, failed to achieve anything of note**,” Zeus rumbled.

“**It convinced my daughter to return to the Underworld**!” The Goddess of Agriculture seethed.

Hermes raised his eyebrows comically.

“**Weren’t you the one yesterday complaining that she had somehow managed to steal two credit cards and tried to invent a Ponzi pyramid scheme to satisfy her shopaholic fever?**”

Demeter growled, and hundreds of plants began to appear next to Hermes’ throne.

“**Enough, sister**.” The Master of Olympus commanded, before increasing the volume when he wasn’t obeyed. “**I said enough**!”

The plants stopped before they tried to strangle Hermes.

But only a third disappeared immediately, and there was some massive amount of vegetation above the God of Trade’s throne.

“**While Persephone is no longer my brother’s wife**,” the Lord of Olympus began, “**everyone who is invited by my brother has the right to visit him in the Underworld can do so. It is not a crime. And...based on Hermes reports, yes, it is good we have...alternatives when it comes to certain shopaholic tendencies**.”

Aphrodite giggled, earning herself a thunderous glare. The Goddess of Love tried a more apologetic expression, which was clearly insincere as hell, pun absolutely intended.

“**She will be severely punished when she returns**,” Demeter huffed. “**That I can promise you, brother**!”

“**I will hold you to your word**,” Zeus growled. “**She is a daughter of mine, but she ignored completely my edict! And if any of you think to imitate her...you better rethink your moves! Any punishment Persephone will receive will be nothing compared to the judgement I will deliver onto your heads**!”

Everyone was suddenly very interested to examine his feet...save Dionysus, who was emptying his barrel of wine.

“**Back to the Great Quest. There seem to be good news and bad news. Your son, Poseidon, appears to have decided to obey my commands, and recovered the Golden Fleece**.”

“**Didn’t I tell you he had a plan?**” the currently green-haired sailor answered with a smirk.

The grumbling which followed shook the Council Room...

“**However, while this third goal was accomplished, it is obvious the Questers will not free Ares and Hephaestus before the Winter Solstice**.”

“**Yes**,” Athena acknowledged, “**but if the Questers are not ready to begin a rescue operation against Forge MP-42 and the island where Ares is prisoner, it also appears that the traitor duo of the Triumvirate is not ready either for their big usurpation attempt. All my agents report the former Egyptian ruler and her lover have their eyes set on the Spring Equinox**.”

“**And we don’t have anyone else**,” Hermes remarked pointedly, “**the Romans are useless at sea, and the First Cohort’s decimation was a blessing, now that we have the correct hindsight**.”

“**They have a bit more than three months left, brother**,” Poseidon added his support to his niece and nephew. “**Given how little time my son’s party was given to assemble and sail to the Sea of Monsters, I believe it is not too much to ask**.”

“**Very well**,” Zeus finally relented with bad humour, “**but if neither Ares nor Hephaestus are freed by the Spring Equinox, Perseus Jackson will be the first to earn a memorable punishment**!”

**15 December 2006, somewhere in the Sea of Monsters**

When a storm unleashed this wrath in the Sea of Monsters, it was never a gentle affair.

Even by these standards, the one raging outside the bay where the *Inevitable Doom* and the *Second Chance* had taken refuge was truly something terrifying. The waves were twice the high of the super-yacht, and the winds were hammering rocks and everything that stood in the way with elemental ferocity.

It was a good reminder why you should fear the Zones Mortalis. Yes, they had big monsters, crazy traitors, and warmonger villains and heroes. But the weather could kill you far more easily than all of the aforementioned dangers.

Needless to say, Hera would have preferred staying in her cabin, and not set a foot outside. The *Inevitable Doom* was a very luxurious super-yacht, and it was incredibly tempting to just enjoy it rather than to endure the rain and the other unpleasant things waiting outside.

Alas, if she wanted to have a conversation in private with Perseus Jackson, there weren’t thirty-six ways to obtain it.

The son of Poseidon, for reasons no one in the Suicide Squad could guess, had taken the watch outside, and was staring at the vengeful storm and the sea in fury.

And he did it bare-chested with his orange tricorn upon his head.

“Ah, Antigone,” he called her, making her grit her teeth, “I see the Golden Fleece healed your injuries...and removed all you acne and skin problems permanently.”

How could he tell that? He hadn’t turned his head...and under the poor light conditions, it was a miracle to see clearly beyond your nose!

“I believe I told you to not call me by that ridiculous first name!”

“Duly noted...and duly ignored!” the crazy Demigod replied cheerfully.

Hera growled...but had no choice but to let it pass. It wasn’t like she could smack him and force this infuriating boy to apologise.

“Did everyone receive the Fleece’s healing?”

“Yes...” the former Goddess answered. “But while it healed perfectly wounded Legionnaires, it didn’t break the curses of the penguins...or the...the changes of the two Huntresses.”

And it hadn’t returned her immortality, obviously.

“You sound like you have something on your heart, Antigone.”

“I’m Hera,” she spat before leashing once again her anger. “Why was the Golden Fleece unable to give me back my immortality or break these ridiculous curses?”

“You don’t know?”

“Evidently not, otherwise I wouldn’t ask the question...”

Perseus Jackson chuckled loudly enough so that she could hear him clearly despite a new miniature tornado raging around them.

“Fair enough...the Golden Fleece was given some quite miraculous properties. But all of them are focused on a tiny, very specialised field: healing.”

Hera frowned.

“You mean....”

“Our trio of foolish penguins is in good health, aren’t they?”

“Well, they are *penguins*...”

And she couldn’t believe she had a conversation like that in the middle of a storm...

“The Golden Fleece doesn’t really care. It is a magical artefact, and it heals. Human-to-animal transformations...or God-to-human transformations in your case...it doesn’t consider them a problem, as long as they don’t represent a major hindrance for the one afflicted.”

“Kimiko the Huntress has a blue tongue, Jackson.”

“And some dirty mind could say it is an advantage in certain professions,” the son of Poseidon replied equally as cheerfully, “fortunately, I am above that...”

Once again, Hera felt the urge to try to strangle Jackson. Would it become easier to tolerate this madness in the days to come? The former Goddess didn’t know whether she had to be frightened by a positive answer...

Ultimately, she decided to change the subject.

“Jade and Drew are gone.”

“Only temporarily,” the leader of the Suicide Squad replied calmly. “They will be back.”

“You can’t be certain of that.”

A look of pity was all she received in return.

“Dear Antigone, please give me a little credit. I didn’t negotiate several weeks with multiple Goddesses just to hand them the eternal power boost and a personal Champion without benefits for my ambitions. Both the Goddess of Frost and the Queen of Spring agreed beforehand that the moment their transition would be completed, they would place their Champions at my disposal until the formal end of this Great Quest.”

“Ah.”

Hera gaped for several seconds...it was quite easy to rant that Jackson was utterly mad.

He was, to be fair.

But when he showed such foresight in his strategies, it was...it was really scary...even if the former Goddess of Marriage wouldn’t admit it out loud.

“You really accounted for Drew’s absence at such a critical moment? I mean, without the daughter of Aphrodite, you had to let Moby Dick go, and without this whale-automaton, we couldn’t fight the Triumvirate fleet...”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Antigone. With or without Moby Dick, fighting the Triumvirate the enemy fleet here and there would have been a terrible idea. Let me remind you that aside from me and a few others, you were all terribly exhausted. Furthermore, unless you have missed it, the *Spear of the Gods* is a Solar Ark. It flies...and Moby Dick has no anti-air weapons. So while our dear great while-automaton would be able to inflict great damage to the escort fleet, all it means it would present a superb target for the powerful weapons of the Triumvirate’s flagship.”

“So...all according to the plan, then?”

Hera advanced until she was by the right of the son of Poseidon, watching with him the fury of the Sea of Monsters’ storm.

“Perseus?”

“No, not everything went according to the plan. I really hoped a part of the Triumvirate fleet would try to pursue us, so I could defeat them within this storm, sinking them while they were vulnerable and away from the Solar Ark.”

“Is it that bad?”

“I fear they are not going to allow us to defeat all their naval forces in detail.” Perseus admitted grimly. “I handed them the equivalent of a modern Actium at Pear Island...but unlike at Actium, they still have powerful military forces in their order of battle, both on land and sea...and we lack the order of battle to exploit the weakness.”

There were no jokes, grins, or bad puns to accompany the tirade...and it definitely could be acknowledged as genuine bad news.

“If they are smart,” Perseus continued, “and I think they are, they will concentrate all their forces on the island where they keep the God of War prisoner, and they will fortify it as much as they can.”

“In that case, it might have been a mistake to make such a...devastating impression on them.”

This time, the demonic grin returned.

“I don’t make mistakes of that magnitude, Antigone. Recovering the Golden Fleece here had to be done...because otherwise, your ex-husband would have sent his assassins after us, under the excuse I didn’t try to accomplish his goals for this Great Quest.”

This time, the hatred burned hellishly hot in her chest, and Hera let it grow further...the more she lived as a mortal, the more her hatred for this unfaithful oath-breaker was rising.

“I suppose plans have to be changed.” She said after clearing her throat.

“That’s why I make so many of them,” the son of Poseidon chuckled again, and just like that, madness returned.

“Oh, is it Plan D? Or E?”

“Antigone, please do not say nonsense! Do you really think I would limit myself to a meagre twenty-six contingency plans?”

Now that the truth had come out, Hera indeed admitted it was kind of foolish to have had that sort of thoughts for a few minutes...

**17 December 2006, the Docks, Forge of all Perils, Sea of Monsters**

Now that they had survived this hurricane – the apocalyptic weather had been so bad it felt disrespectful to call it a mere ‘storm’ – Elvis Knight supposed tradition forced him to pretend everything was fine, victory had been obtained at a reasonable cost, and one of the key objectives of the Great Quest, the legendary Golden Fleece, had been recovered. This, in return, had allowed everyone wounded in the battle to be healed.

Thus morale was excellent, everything was perfect, and every Demigod and Demigoddess was awaiting eagerly the next operation, which assuredly would make them wealthier and more powerful.

All of this was a lie, by the way.

The moment they had dispersed over the Docks – trying their best to not disrupt the repair work of the Telekhines working there – the Roman Centurion had felt trouble was about to start.

Though to be honest, Elvis Knight wondered why he still pretended to be a Centurion.

In the last three days, his authority over the surviving Legionnaires had decreased to a point one could clearly wonder if it existed anymore.

And what was an officer without men to command? Very little, in the grand scheme of things...

And as much as he wanted to say it was a recent thing, the root of the problems he faced had begun with the purge of a generation officers. Bryce Lawrence and this sycophant of Octavian had built the First Cohort in their image: corrupt, treacherous, and incompetent. And when the officers pursued such ‘values’, well, what did you expect from the Legionnaires? A Legion had the men its officers deserved, nothing more, nothing less.

The real miracle, in fact, was perhaps not that Eustace had led nineteen other Legionnaires to his death.

It was that *only* twenty out thirty-two men had died, though of course, the wounded had hardly been in position to walk, never mind fight...and Elvis wouldn’t be surprised if Eustace had intended to keep some numbers low in order to divide the ‘rewards’ among his mutineers.

All of this...well, it was really bad, of course.

Most of the ‘officers’ of the Suicide Squad had been looking with expressions of suspicion at the Romans. By the Pits, for once, the Huntresses’ hatred had changed of target, Perseus Jackson being no longer the problem in their eyes.

This, obviously, told you how much the Twelfth Legion had screwed up...when the Huntresses preferred watching you with hawk eyes instead of the son of Poseidon, there was a really, really big problem.

And now the trouble was about to explode.

Elvis saw Chuck lead the Legionnaires who had all showed signs of ‘troublemaking’ at some point or another, reinforced by the ten wounded soldiers who had waited for their return here.

There were eighteen of them now, in two columns...and they all marched with a common purpose towards their target...who saw them coming and crossed his arms. Oh, and the ‘target’ had a roguish look on his face. That was not going to be good...

“JACKSON!”

“Yes, this is my name, last time I checked,” the son of Poseidon replied with his usual grin. “Oh, but it is Charlie!”

“IT’S CHUCK!”

“Whatever you say, Charlotte!” the crazy leader of the Suicide Squad. “Was it something important that let you to this glorious corner of the Docks on this splendid morning?”

“You know why we’re here! We want you to relinquish your leadership now you have proven yourself unfit to command!”

“I see,” Perseus Jackson didn’t even seem fazed when Chuck drew his Gladius. Ironically, the Telekhines present on the Docks showed more reaction; they stopped working to watch what was happening. “And the reason why I should consider this stupid motion is?”

“Unless you’re even crazier than we thought,” Chuck hissed angrily, “you might notice that we are eighteen to have enough of your suicidal tactics-“

“And there isn’t a single officer of the Suicide Squad among you. Thus what you want is irrelevant, because...because I think a goat’s vote is more important than yours. Anything else?”

Plenty of Demigods and Telekhines laughed raucously at the announcement...of course it just fuelled the anger of Legionnaires.

“You don’t have any more Goddesses to protect you! If you don’t relinquish your position, we will make sure you do it by force!”

Chuck struck...but no matter how fast he was, Jackson was even faster. The standard Gladius met nothing but air...and suddenly Chuck stopped moving, because the son of Poseidon had immobilised his sword arm.

With one hand.

And by the looks of it, Chuck was frenetically trying to take his limb out of the other Demigod’s grip...in vain. The hold Perseus Jackson had could have been made of titanium given how little effort he showed.

And then as Chuck realised he wasn’t able to move or get out of this grip, Jackson delicately disarmed him, in a gesture that was very much an insult.

“So, Chimera, I can call you Chimera, right?”

“IT’S CHUCK!” The Legionnaire of the Twelfth roared, though his voice had a lot of fear in it.

“Chimera, it is!” The grin lasted a few seconds...and then was replaced by a malicious expression. “Seriously, you really thought that because the two Goddesses I negotiated with are in the Underworld right now, you had a chance against me in a duel? You were really not the brightest strategist of New Constantinople when recruitment day came, right?”

“I am not alone, in case, you forget! LEGIONNAIRES! ATTACK!”

But no one else drew swords or took a fighting position.

It wasn’t difficult why. On each side, the two sorceresses had taken position. The daughter of Hecate had conjured some red-burning glyphs which were inflicting considerable pain every time they tried to move. As for the daughter of Hades, she had cast a spell which swallowed the feet of several Legionnaires in some sort of shadowy pool, and from which very threatening pincers appeared from time to time.

As a result, none of the seventeen Legionnaires could more a single finger...nor did they dare to.

“This is really, really one of the least subtle mutiny attempts I’ve ever seen in my two lives,” Elvis couldn’t be mistaken, but...was the son of Poseidon really complaining? “There was no planning with your friends I let stay inside the Forge, you literally engaged me on a field of my choosing. Honestly, this is just...pitiful.”

“STOP MOCKING ME!”

“You’re right.” Perseus nodded. “This whole thing has been a massive disappointment. I’ve been waiting for this for three days...and really, there is nothing salvageable.”

There was a flash of metal, and suddenly, Perseus plunged the Gladius in Chuck’s heart.

And then for good measure, the leader of the Suicide Squad let go of his arm, and broke the Legionnaire’s neck.

With his bare hands.

Palatine Hill preserve him, these imbeciles had tried to mutiny against *that*?

Chuck fell like a bag of potatoes on the ground, but Elvis knew he was already dead before the final collide.

“Now that the mutineer-in-chief has received his proper punishment...let’s deal with the rest.”

“Let me crucify them,” Bianca di Angelo intervened. “This was your promise, remember?”

“I didn’t swear it on a certain Hell River,” Perseus Jackson countered with the same grin filled with insanity. “And besides...crucifixion is so...permanent. It would also decrease the ranks of our Suicide Squad at an unfortunate time. I am going to pursue an alternate contingency. If it fails, I will let you have fun with them, your Dreadful Majesty.”

The malicious green eyes observed the entire assembly, Telekhines, Officers, and Mutineers alike...before teeth were bared into an expression no one sane could have described as ‘pleasant’.

“**Prostrate yourselves**.”

Seventeen Legionnaires instantly obeyed.

Most only realised what they did when they were on the ground.

“Congratulations! I have decided to create a special section among the Suicide Squad, and you band of mutineers and oath-breakers have just volunteered for it! In the honour of one of my eternal friends, I have decided to call it...the Gallowborne!”

 The dreadful feelings had never left, but with this last announcement, despair truly intensified.

“Now you might wonder what kind of role you will have to fulfil so you continue to breathe for a day longer and not join Charlie there in the halls of the Underworld. Wonder no more. From now on, *I own you*, Legionnaires. You have no rights, save the one to be sent on hellish battlefields fighting insurmountable odds. The moment you disobey one of my commands again, any officer will have not just the right, but my benediction to strike you down.”

This was....it was hard to say it wasn’t undeserved...and Elvis Knight couldn’t do anything.

He was their Centurion...emphasis on the ‘was’.

“Twice you screwed up so bad no one on Olympus would bother throwing you a bucket of water if you were on fire,” Perseus Jackson continued mercilessly. “Understand me well, there won’t be a third time. But let’s not say I am a merciless Tyrant. I owe you, this will never change. But if your service lasts three Great Quests without giving me a reason to complain, it is not impossible I will agree to release you from my service.”

Some hope returned on the mutineers’ faces. It was...really desperate, but it was difficult to blame them, given what awaited-

“Of course,” and the Tyrant was back, prompt to crush even these tiny lights he had himself turned on. “There is a last matter to deal with. Yes...I believe the proud volunteers of the Gallowborne must be aware of their true place in the Suicide Squad!”

“But we didn’t volunteer!”

That, evidently, was a colossal mistake.

“Thank you, **Scapegoat**, for explaining my new order: the death of your old selves.”

What? No, no, surely he didn’t-

“You! From now on, you will be ‘**Cannon-Fodder**’!”

“Hey!”

“Here is ‘**Future Zombie**’!”

One by one, the Legionnaires received an absurd and insulting description to replace their names, and absolute interdiction to use their old identities under pain of death.

“And last not least, let’s acclaim...**’Dead Legionnaire Walking**’!”

The applause was sonorous...from the Telekhines.

“All right, the show is over. Everyone goes back to work. Members of the Suicide Squad, I want everyone in the Grand Strategium tomorrow morning at nine. Don’t be late, Gallowborne, or the meeting will begin with your public execution, certainly by crucifixion, unless I mercifully allow you to be boiled alive...”

**18 December 2006, Grand Strategium, Forge of All Perils, Sea of Monsters**

Annabeth would lie if she said she had missed the so-called ‘Grand Strategium’. The place hadn’t changed at all: you had to be in swimsuit if you wanted to avoid a lot of discomfort.

As the newly-created ‘Gallowborne Division’ could attest, because they had not been allowed to don any swimsuit today.

Instead they wore bright orange suits which looked like prisoner clothes...and the daughter of Athena supposed it was kind of the point Jackson was trying to make.

Oh, and on every T-Shirt the mutineers had been ordered to don, there was the message in neon colours ‘I tried to mutiny, I failed, and all I got was this stupid T-Shirt’.

Jackson’s humour was really, really something unpleasant when you were on the receiving end of it, assuredly.

“And we have been able to install ten more anti-air pieces after correcting the problems with the five anti-ship batteries,” the shark-looking Telekhine called Frankie finished his reports. “Ammunition production is rising nicely, Boss. We will be able to provide you a lot of missiles and nice toys according to the urgent schedule you fixed, Boss.”

“Music to my ears, Frankie,” Perseus replied with one of his grins. “Thank you for your dedication...give your teams my compliments for the superb work.”

“I will, Boss!”

The Telekhines saluted martially before leaving one by one the Grand Strategium...soon the only beings in the ‘Strategium’ dominated by hellish hot pools were the members of the Suicide Squad.

“All right,” the son of Poseidon watched them all with a carnivorous expression that made Annabeth’s heart beat far faster than usual, “once more the Suicide Squad triumphed, my plan was genial, and the Golden Fleece was recovered for minimal losses. You can stand in awe of my superior intelligence.”

“You’d better not make a new monologue,” Ethan Nakamura grunted.

“Everyone is a critic these days,” the son of Poseidon complained loudly, though the grin never left his face. “Anyway. As all of you were informed before the beginning of the Great Quest, recovering the Golden Fleece was one of three chief goals. Since this one was successful, we must turn our attention towards the two others: free the God of the Forges and the God of War from their respective prisons.”

Given how it was expressed, no one, not even the Huntresses, could do anything but approve this course of action.

“Who do we begin with?” Leo Valdez asked, the son of Hephaestus managing to be...as hirsute and unkempt as ever, despite wearing only a swimsuit.

The grin on Perseus’ face disappeared...replaced by something which approached the description of a genuine grimace.

“That’s where there is a problem, I’m afraid.”

“Problem?” Jenna the Huntress scoffed. “I don’t see where there is a problem. We know there are very few islands which are adequate for the kind of abominable heresies the Triumvirate traitors have in mind. In the Sea of Monsters, their choice is even more limited. They are certainly waiting for us on the island of Guadalcanal.”

“Yes,” the green-eyed Demigod replied simply, surprisingly not choosing to taunt the servant of Artemis. “And do you know how to find said island? Because I assure you, I don’t. I have been unable to spy upon it, or even to remember the coordinates. None of my drones, not even the best magically-guided ones, were able to fly anywhere near it and deliver some priceless information.”

“That’s concerning, all right,” Richard Grant intervened, crossing his heavily muscled arms in an impressive pose. “The Triumvirate traitors hid the island, and certainly intend to fortify it so it is impregnable against conventional...and unconventional assaults.”

“Exactly,” the leader of the Suicide Squad agreed.

“No spell or enchantment is perfect,” the Lightning Thief calmly announced. “There has to be a weakness.”

“Of course. In this case, the weakness is the ‘anchor’ of the sorcerous means to hide the island. When you have to hide a God’s presence alongside an entire island, you have to provide a lot of magical power...or divine power. And what better way to hide a deity than to use another for your schemes?”

“That’s...extremely clever,” Annabeth admitted.

As long as they hadn’t freed Hephaestus, they couldn’t go after the Triumvirate, not if Mark Anthony and Cleopatra were willing to stay on the defensive. And as far as the evidence of the last forty-hours suggested...they did intend to do exactly that.

“Then what are we waiting for?” Nick Coleman, no longer looked sick or feeble thanks to the Golden Fleece’s magic, spoke with an impressive amount of arrogance for someone who hadn’t done anything of note...so far. “We know where the God of Fire and the Forges is imprisoned. If we have to begin by storming his prison, so be it!”

Jackson uttered ‘Kappa’, and instantly, a divine projection materialised inside the Grand Strategium.

It represented...a citadel.

A really, really huge citadel.

Annabeth thought it was an island-fortress, but the defences covered so much that there was no way to say if there was an island supporting the fortifications and everything she could see...there had to be right?

“Let me present you,” Perseus Jackson did not grin or show any amusement, “what was some months ago Forge MP-42, and is now the prison of its former owner.”

Every member of the Suicide Squad had suddenly become grim, and for very obvious reasons.

“As you can clearly see,” the son of Poseidon continued, “the outer wall was rebuilt after the battle which saw the Gods’ capture. After that, they built more walls and redoubts. They even built more parts of the citadel in the surrounding sea itself, so to deny the very possibility of a beachhead to any invading force.”

“But you have Hydrokinesis, right?” Luke asked what she had already on her lips. “This shouldn’t be a massive challenge for you.”

The leader of the Suicide Squad made another grimace.

“Look better, Luke Castellan. Do you notice something particular between the different kill-zones and walls?”

“The water...it looks like it is...boiling?”

“It might be a geothermal spring...I see a lot of steam...”

“The Titaness of the Seas,” the son of Poseidon took once more control of the discussion, “has, by her mere presence and her capture of the God of Fire, created an extreme environment that no Demigod, no matter how powerful his or her lineage will be able to tame. If any invader manages to break through the first wall, he or she will have no choice but to fight his way from kill-zone to kill-zone, evading or disarming the countless traps awaiting an enemy to be triggered. I must also mention the quite modern army of dolphin-automatons and other creations that will hold the ramparts and each layer of defences. And once again, I will insist, the moment you’re past the first line of defences, all the fighting will have to be done by the infantry. I’ve no doubt some among you relish the challenge...I don’t share this confidence.”

“The Grand Strategium...” Annabeth murmured, and suddenly why the Forge of All Perils was as it was suddenly became clear. “This isn’t just an attempt to make us stronger or to force us to sweat? It is an attempt to replicate the conditions we will certainly have to fight when we will assault Forge MP-42.”

“Very good, your Owlishness.”

Annabeth immediately scowled.

“And before anyone tells me they can handle this warmth just fine, let me remind you that you will have to fight in this kind of environment with water up to your knees, if not higher. Oh, and clearly, it’s better not to count on heavy armours...or armours at all there.”

“Is that all?” Ethan asked, his tone clearly a masterful strike of dark sarcasm.

“Of course not,” Perseus Jackson didn’t bat an eyebrow. “Once you have fought your way through all the defences, you still have to confront a well-rested Titaness, remember?”

The expressions had been grim before. They showed something very much akin to despair now. The divinely-materialised representation of the citadel didn’t help. The Suicide Squad had fought against strong opposition, the battle to recover the Golden Fleece had been won against near-impossible odds.

“Meaning that once will have exhausted ourselves fighting automatons, monsters, and lieutenants of the Titaness,” Miranda Gardiner summed-up darkly, “we will be out of breath and absolutely dead meat to confront an opponent which can pretty much drown us in mere seconds after we issue a challenge. Or am I failing to see something critical, Jackson?”

“You don’t,” Perseus shrugged off surprisingly honestly. “At this time of our Great Quest, the best option we have is to beg the Titaness to relinquish her illustrious prisoner.”

“Then what was the point of coming here?” barked a Legionnaire part of the Gallowborne.

“**Future Zombie**,” the evil grin was back, “let me remind you that the Expeditionary Force of the Roman Legions volunteered for this noble and suicidal adventure, and at the time you sailed away from the harbour, the opposition was very much the same.”

The Legionnaire glared, but shut his mouth, clearly out of arguments.

“But let me reassure you...I have a plan, Suicide Squad!”

Fierce groans were heard...and several Drachmas changed hands.

**18 December 2006, Bayou Island, Sea of Monsters**

Octavian wished he had understood far sooner this whole expedition was a death trap.

This was the fault of the Gods!

He had always prayed to them, sacrificed so much for their glory, and what was his reward?

To be chained and collared by a warband of murderous pirates, who looked like they had all escaped a hell pit.

Octavian bit back the urge to scream. They were always beating me when he opened his mouth.

If at least it was the pirates beating him...unfortunately, the bloodthirsty beasts found it all the more amusing to let his fellow Legionnaires do it.

And these bastards did with relish. They had turned against him, Octavian McArthur.

For that, he would kill them. Octavian swore it on the Styx and every river of the Underworld. No matter what happened, he, glorious Legacy of Apollo, would have his revenge. No matter how many humiliations they did, no matter how pain he felt, the Centurion of the First Cohort would make sure every insult and blow was paid a hundred fold.

They had dressed him as a woman, just because they felt he was ‘too pretty to be a boy’. They had...they had marked his flesh and inflicted upon him humiliations and things he would be haunted by for years.

But Octavian would have his revenge, no matter how long it took him.

Against his Legionnaires who had betrayed him.

Against the scum of the seas, those *Blackbeard Pirates*.

Against the Gods, who had done nothing while he was enslaved.

“Captain we are making very little progress, maybe we should turn back!”

“Our Fate is good today, Lafitte, I feel it!”

“Captain, so far in this swamp, I don’t see a lot of good omens...there are only those mosquitoes, this swamp, and the rain...our muddy trail was bad enough, but we don’t even know if we are-“

“We are moving closer to our goal. I know it.” The monstrous leader of the pirates made a sound that couldn’t be laughter, it was too...discordant. “And no, I won’t turn back. The Giant’s Fall and the White Whale’s Annihilation Tide proved the son of Poseidon was clever. I can’t offer him a fair fight, he would remove my head and throw it to his Telekhines, and we want to avoid that, eh, Lafitte?”

“Yes, we do, Captain! But you haven’t told us why we need to crawl in this swamp...”

“Patience, boys! The answer is going to be worth the wait, I promise!”

The two pirates went away, and Octavian and all the other members of the drowned column had no choice but try to continue their ‘walk’...which was incredibly difficult.

But after a good hour or two, they began to accelerate, courtesy of the swamp receding, and what looked like an old Roman highway appearing from nowhere.

To be sure, the highway was in a bad state, with plenty of pavement missing, and on each side looking like the jungle was about to devour them...

“Octavian is slowing us down again...”

“That must be the heels we forced *her* to wear...use the whip, he will stop slowing us down for a few minutes!”

It immediately hurt, both mentally and physically...but more the former, for it was Legionnaires who had struck the blow, and without any order from the pirates.

 Yet heels or no, the walk was far faster and easier than in the swamp. The mosquitoes were gone too.

But what was revealing itself to their eyes was strangling in the cradle any positive feeling Octavian might have ever felt.

It was an enormous edifice...it looked like one of those dark temples you only found in ridiculous fiction books. The one which always began with a sleeping evil that shouldn’t be disturbed...

Hours later, Octavian acknowledged his mistake, as they finally entered it.

It wasn’t a temple or any place where Gods were worshipped.

Or maybe it had been some time ago.

But not anymore.

Now, it was a prison.

A prison where odious pirates and monsters had been imprisoned.

There were many monsters Romans and Greeks had to deal with on a permanent basis. Evil Cyclopes, Empousai, lesser Gorgons, and many more things of claws, talons, and fangs.

They were all monsters, and they watched them with predatory eyes.

No jail was opened. However, there were automaton guards, which were easily defeated as Blackbeard turned all their weapons against them. The human-looking monster disappeared into the darkness only to reappear where they didn’t await him.

“I need reinforcements for my crew.”

For the first time, the roars, hisses, and insults totally stopped.

Octavian wanted to say because it was of the surprising announcement...but no, it was all the pirate who had enslaved him...

“I do not care if you have too many hands or how many souls you devoured for the sake of your ambitions. I do not care if you’ve offended one or dozens of Gods. If you have the will to survive so long in this prison, then you have the strength to be of use in the Sea of Monsters.”

The enchanted metal bars of the prison were shaken, and monsters roared their approval.

“But I only have a few ships now. Places among my crew are limited. If you want to get out of your prisons, you will have to reduce your numbers the hard way.”

“How do we know you will hold to your word?” an Empousa licked her claws with an expression that presaged nothing good.

Blackbeard drew his long sword...and then without warning, he cut down the arm of Mark, the very Legionnaire who had struck him with his whip hours ago.

Naturally, the bastard screamed and begged for a battle-medic...and Blackbeard utterly ignored him.

Instead, the vile pirate grabbed the severed limb, and threw it into the Empousa’s prison through the bars.

“Prove you strength, and as Fate is my witness, you will get your freedom.”

It didn’t take more than a couple of seconds for the bloodbath to begin.

**18 December 2006, Grand Strategium, Forge of All Perils, Sea of Monsters**

Ah, the groans were something Perseus wouldn’t miss for all the gold in the world.

“Feel free to groan all you want, but my plan is necessary,” the former Tyrant said cheerfully. “And you know it. First, if you want to blame someone, blame the mutineers.”

“Not me?” Hera asked with considerable surprise.

“Nah, you’re to blame when it is a divine problem from now on,” the son of Poseidon ‘reassured’ her. “For the affairs of the Suicide Squad and the Sea of Monsters, the Gallowborne and the dead mutineers can take the blame. That’s why one of them was named ‘Scapegoat’, in case you had any doubts.”

More groans followed, proof that his genius was evidently acknowledged by the Suicide Squad.

“Now that this point had been made clear, we must admit the evidence: the Suicide Squad has severe manpower shortages. Drew and Jade will join us back eventually, but not in time for the next battle. On the Legionnaire front, their perfidious and totally expected mutiny gave us a lot of cannon-fodder, but decreased the number of conventional soldiers at my disposal. And so far, despite erratic contacts, we haven’t been able to join with the other survivors of the Expeditionary Force.”

“Yes, yes,” Clarisse interrupted. “Now you told what this plan wasn’t about, the bad news...I mean, the plan, Jackson.”

“You haven’t say the magical word...”

“Please, Jackson tell us the plan...before we organise a real mutiny, not the half-baked thing the Romans did.”

“And here I had prepared a superb monologue,” surely the Gods would forgive him if he faked a non-existent tear at that moment, right? “Very well. The plan is to invade an island which is a Goddess’ main residence.”

“How fortified is it?” Michael Yew asked.

“Oh, it has no fortifications whatsoever. It’s just a spa.”

Centurion Elvis Knight, clearly, was the one who understood first what he was speaking a first.

“A spa...no, you couldn’t possibly mean...the...it’s Cir-“

“Call her C.C, please. Names have power, better to avoid some big mishaps.”

“C.C?” Emperor Penguin Skipper...squeaked vigorously. “But she’s the one who destroyed the Legion’s aircraft carrier with a single shot of her super-weapon!”

“May I say I also loved the way she taught to the idiots in charge the concept of ‘decisive battle’?” After all it was better to lighten the atmosphere...

“DO YOU WANT US TO DIE?”

Perseus sighed.

“Dead Man Walking, if you want your status to reflect your name, please keep panicking.”

Suddenly, the Gallowborne Legionnaire decided to shut his mouth...too bad.

“So now that the obvious has been said, yes, I will confirm that while the spa is not fortified, it is defended by a super-weapon called the *Eye of Helios* which is a combination of divine sun-aligned power and laser technology. Yes, the island is the headquarters of C.C, one of the three Immortal Sorceresses. Yes, she has most likely prepared new traps and magical enchantments to make sure the defeat of the Romans can be replicated to any force which dares invading her island. Any questions?”

“I have indeed one.” Bianca di Angelo bared her perfect white teeth.

“Yes, oh your Dreadful Majesty?”

“Aside from benefitting from the effect of surprise and your urge to pretty much declare eternal friendship to the entire Sea of Monsters before waging war upon half a hundred different enemies, is there a particular reason for the invasion?”

Perseus gasped theatrically while placing both hands above his heart.

“I am shocked you think so little of me! Why, I am devastated!”

The former Dread Empress gave him an expression which was filled with impatience and scepticism.

“Now that I have defended my honour,” the green-eyed Demigod said after a few seconds, “I have to admit that yes, there is a good reason why I have decided invading C.C’s Spa and resort is the best preparation of an immense range of plans to prepare the attack on Forge MP-42. You see, C.C has loosely allied herself to the Triumvirate, and has profited from it to refurbish old and new weapons with the technical support of their illustrious prisoner. As such, the *Eye of Helios* is only one of many super-weapons that are waiting for us there.”

His words, predictably, were answered by fierce grimaces.

“Jackson...” the son of Dionysus was the first to react, “many of these super-weapons will be activated by C.C *to destroy us*!”

“Don’t be ridiculous, my drunken lieutenant!” Perseus answered cheerfully...and truthfully. A mental command, and he summoned one of the best photos the Telekhines had been able to give him. “Just to give you an example, there is this.”

“It looks like...a secret submarine base,” the daughter of Athena said with narrowed eyes.

“It is exactly that, yes. During the Antiquity, C.C lured men who found her island and transformed them into pigs. At the time, all the unlucky souls arrived by ship. Now that we are in the modern era, there were many more ships which fell in her hands...and then there were the submarines which disappeared in the Sea of Monsters.”

“Jackson,” Nick Coleman argued back, “no submarine in the world will be able to break the defences of Forge MP-42. This is just ridiculous!”

Perseus gave another mental command, and another photo taken by the Telekhine spies who had participated in the modernisation of the submarine base was released for the Suicide Squad’s eyes.

“Your doubts have been duly noted. Now let me present you the techno-magic-improved Typhoon-class submarine, formerly of the Soviet Union. I believe that when it was commissioned by the defunct superpower, its name was *Red October*.”

Perseus grinned.

“Of course, when we ‘liberate’ it, my first action will be to paint a new name upon its hull.”

“Jackson...” Leo Valdez said weakly, “that’s...that’s a nuclear submarine...”

“To be accurate, that’s a nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine, or SLBM. With one of them, the Soviet Union could unleash the nuclear apocalypse. Now it is modernised by C.C, I can guarantee you that its firepower will in all likelihood have significant increased. The Telekhine spies have been unable to tell me how much, but it’s at least by a factor of three.”

“And you intend to steal it.” Lou Ellen accused, the daughter of Hecate rolling her eyes.

“I intend to liberate it from vile capitalist-divine oppression,” Perseus replied before chuckling. “Gods, I love saying that. It makes me sound so virtuous...”

“Yes, yes,” Ellen the Huntress interrupted him, ruining the fun, as befit of her patron. “You made your point clear, C.C won’t fire at us with something like that. It is a...it is a super-weapon she built to threaten Olympus when her betrayal would be revealed to all. She won’t use it against us.”

Perseus was tempted to point out that technically, Circe had never sworn anything to Zeus or Olympus, and thus couldn’t be qualified to be of a traitor, but why let logic get in the way of a good conversation?

“She might not use *this* particular super-weapon,” Nick Coleman acidly spoke, “but I’m pretty sure there are others which will be ready to annihilate a small Quester force. You want us to attack *that*?”

“You want us to attack Forge MP-42 and the Titaness without these weapons in support?” Perseus cheekily returned the favour. “I await eagerly the brilliant plan which will allow us to compensate for this slight firepower disadvantage.”

“Coleman spoke a bit too hastily,” Richard Grant intervened, “but he still has a point. The spa, at first sight, looks like it is far less fortified and dangerous...but that’s just an illusion to lure in an invading force. By the Pit, C.C is a Goddess of Magic, and if the myths and rumours are true, she transforms men into pigs.”

“Oh, no she has stopped doing that a while ago.”

“Really?”

“Absolutely! Now she transforms men into *guinea pigs*. It’s far cuter, more economical in terms of space and budget, and the smell is far more tolerable, or so I suppose the reasoning went...”

Miranda groaned loudly.

“I might also add,” Perseus continued innocently, “that according to some rumours, her Charmspeak and her powers are also so persuasive that all women who end up in her thrall soon obey her like she is their mother...and they end up joining her evil lesbian cult...no offense intended for the Huntresses.”

It said quite something that this time, the four servants of Artemis didn’t seize their bows.

“For once we will let it pass,” Jenna growled, “we have...our own reasons to be less than fond of C.C and her cult.”

“Good to hear.”

“There is still a lot we don’t know,” Ethan pointed out. “And I have to mention that no matter how armoured the *Inevitable Doom* truly is, I really doubt the conventional and unconventional armour will stand up against the *Eye of Helios*...and even if that super-weapon malfunctions or misses, I guess this leaves all the other super-weapons we don’t know about.”

“It’s a good point, my treacherous lieutenant. That’s why to convince you, I think a little visit of the secret docks is in order. And yes, Gallowborne, when I said ‘I think’, you might consider it an order!”

**18 December 2006, the Docks, Forge of All Perils, Sea of Monsters**

The longer they spent in their presence, the easier it was to understand why Perseus Jackson had been eager to strike an alliance with the Honourable Family of the Telekhines.

The shark-looking mafia was a bunch of monsters, literally and metaphorically, but you couldn’t deny their skills when it came to everything involving weapon-making and shipbuilding.

They had only arrived yesterday, but the *Inevitable Doom* was already in dry dock, and the minor repairs necessary after the storms they had endured on their return journey were already expedited.

Of course, the repair phase was only the beginning. Now that it was dealt with, the Telekhines were working with some enchanted ‘bubbles’ under Lou Ellen and Bianca’s direction, all the while the white hull of the super-yacht was progressively disappearing under some strange ‘bricks’ of black colour.

The purpose of it could have been mysterious, but the Telekhines had prepared many, many schematics of what they were working upon, and while Miranda was a daughter of Demeter, she had enough knowledge to know the final goal.

“Having the largest super-yacht wasn’t enough, so you of course had to give it a ‘submarine mode’.”

“I sense great disappointment in you,” the son of Poseidon retorted with eyebrows raised.

“This is your way to make sure we aren’t hit by the superweapons of C.C? A submarine?” the daughter of Demeter wasn’t going to bet her life on that working...and if it did, then surely said superweapons would be useless, because the Titaness of the Seas would be completely immune to them...

“A super mega-yacht with significant submarine capabilities,” the mad Demigod rectified with evident pleasure. “And of course, we will have with it two scout underwater drones built specifically to serve as our vanguard and rear-guard. Once we will be near the approaches of C.C’s spa, they will reveal all their abilities in dismantling whatever traps wait for us.”

The daughter of Demeter had seen them, these drones. They had nothing to do with the aerial drones the son of Poseidon had used before. No, these drones were almost mini-submarines in their own right.

“Initially, I wanted to buy some obsolete Kilo-class submarines,” the leader of the Suicide Squad continued, “but the corrupt officers demanded a way too expensive price for these pieces of junk. Fortunately, the Telekhines are far more competent in this area and completed the drones in record time.”

This at least shook Miranda sufficiently to analyse the attack plan from the hints she had been given...

“You think you can bypass entirely the super-laser of C.C and most of the long-range bombardment using submarines? This is...err...”

“This is genius, yes, don’t be afraid to say it.”

“It is stupid!” Miranda called out loud. “You were just telling us an hour ago C.C had an entire submarine base with a Typhoon and the Gods only know what else to begin a World War!”

“Yes, but these submarines aren’t usually on patrol.”

Perseus replied tranquilly.

Miranda...stayed speechless.

“What?”

“I’m not going to debate all the superstitions and morale problems which made sure this situation developed, but submarine crews, until recently by the standards of submersible warfare, has been an affair of men. Women were not allowed to be aboard.” Perseus Jackson explained. “And C.C and her followers hate men. Not to the same degree the Huntresses do, but enough to be on par with the Amazons. We might as well call it a matriarchy where women are ruling and the male population is close to slave status...or transformed into guinea pigs. As such, the only women who know how to operate a submarine have learned by their prisoner-slaves. There aren’t that many in the first place, and they will necessarily have to transform back some men to their natural bodies to operate a few of them. C.C’s submarines are a great weapon if they see the enemy coming many hours away. Everything is dependent on their mistress’ magic giving them the warning in time to do any good. Now you can bow in awe before my genius.”

Miranda Gardiner didn’t bow, of course. In fact, she scowled.

“C.C is not an amateur. She will know there is something amiss.”

“She is one target of many,” Perseus replied serenely, “and no, I don’t intend to send her a letter proclaiming my eternal friendship before announcing she is the next to face the Suicide Squad. Furthermore, the scout drones are extremely stealthy. I estimate there is about eighty to ninety percent of chance we will manage to cut all the nets, deactivate the undersea alarms, kill of most the monster-sentinels and reach Point I.”

“Point I?”

“Point Invasion, the coordinates where Operation Nautilus formally ends and the explosive fun can really begin.”

Why had she asked? There were some things you were better off not knowing...

“Even if we neutralise the undersea obstacles and traps-“

“*When* we will have neutralised them, *when*, oh doubtful lieutenant!”

“If,” Miranda repeated wit more strength, “the question of how we will reach the island is something you haven’t answered so far. Water isn’t my element...nor it is the one of most of the Suicide Squad.”

“But water is no problem for penguins!”

Fear and doubt suddenly fought in her heart.

“Please don’t tell me the entire plan relies on this moronic penguin trio!”

“No,” Jackson admitted after several seconds, and with what it seemed was extreme reluctance. “They alone stand no chance against C.C’s lieutenants, never mind the Immortal Sorceress herself.”

Miranda breathed out, both relieved and a bit anxious now.

“Okay...now say the bad news, Jackson.”

“The bad news?”

“You love your monologues and over-complicated explanations, but you don’t begin with them unless there’s something that is going to create a lot of problems. So yes...the bad news...please.”

The Earthshaker’s son grinned.

“They are really beginning to predict my moves...maybe I should step up my game?”

The daughter of Demeter repressed a shudder of terror.

“As you wish, my hesitant lieutenant. We will need to deploy near the entire order of battle of the Suicide Squad once we reach Point Invasion. Since I am the only one with the penguins who can breathe in an aquatic environment, I’m afraid that means diving suits for all of you.”

Diving suits...what did he...oh, no, no and no...

“Fortunately, my sister was all too happy to provide these diving suits for a reasonable exchange of favours!” Perseus told her, the bastard relishing her fear. “They will allow of you to breathe while we’re walking on the seabed, and they also will dispel the hundreds of enchantments C.C has no doubt soaked the approaches of her island with...”

This wasn’t the problem, and the two Demigods knew it. The X-Suits used for the adventure in this very forge had proven extremely valuable and capable of defeating the curses which would have transformed them into monsters if they had no protection to shield themselves.

No, this wasn’t the issue...and it didn’t take an Oracle to see the storm coming on the horizon.

“Do these...diving suits have a name?”

“I called them S-Suits. Why?”

“Is it too much to hope that the S-Suits are slightly less indecent compared to the X-Suits?”

Perseus Jackson grinned again before bursting in laughter...and Miranda groaned again.

**18 December 2006, somewhere in the Forge of All Perils**

There was some minor consolation this time.

Since they weren’t about to jump into battle today – though with Jackson leading them, you couldn’t guarantee it wasn’t about to happen – they had been given the permission to try the ‘S-Suit’ in private.

As a result, the realisation the diving suit was exactly as indecent as the X-Suit was done away from prying eyes.

Although the son of Hercules had seriously to question how much modesty was left, when everyone had to wear swimsuit from dawn to dusk. Be it inside the Forge of All Perils, or during the battles, it was no exaggeration to say the Sea of Monsters was assaulting them with extreme tropical temperatures.

They were Demigods, Demigoddesses, or Legacies, and as such adapted way faster than a non-Demigod, but it was still very exhausting. Save when the storm had struck and brought some fresh air, the air was humid and hellishly hot. It wasn’t heroic, but most of the training and the activities had to stop regularly so they could drink and acclimate themselves to the climate of the Zone Mortalis.

“How was it?” Dakota MacDonald asked five seconds after Richard left the changing room.

“Like I had body paint on me instead of proper clothes,” he replied drily.

“So I wasn’t imagining things,” the son of Bacchus shook his head. “I have a bad feeling about this...”

“You have had bad feelings since this Quest began,” Richard replied in an amused tone.

“Was I wrong to do so?”

With the benefit of hindsight...no, he wasn’t.

“It isn’t like we have a lot of choices.” Richard had had some time to think since they left the Grand Strategium, and unfortunately, he had arrived to the same conclusion Jackson had.

“For the S-Suits or the goals of this Great Quest?”

“Both, I suppose...but I was thinking about the former in priority. We put on the S-Suits for the next battle, or we better be ready for a new life of beautiful guinea pigs in the hands of a man-hating sorceress.”

“So you believe it.”

This time, it wasn’t the son of Bacchus who spoke, but Nick Coleman.

Richard was going to be honest...he didn’t like the son of Quirinus. Now that his disease had been purged by the Golden Fleece, his fellow Roman Demigod was suddenly loud-mouthed and arrogant, despite having achieved exactly nothing of importance. For everyone sake, Richard really hoped this wasn’t the prelude to another treachery...

“Yes, I believe the S-Suits are vital to storm the defences of the next island, Coleman. We’re going to face C.C this time, and Jackson was right the last time with the X-Suits.”

It really annoyed him when the son of Quirinus chuckled before repeating his words while parodying his voice.

“Jackson was right the last time...I never thought I would see the great Richard Grant become the obedient dog of a Greek.”

“Why don’t you return the S-Suit, if you’re not convinced?” Dakota intervened. “I mean, surely a Demigod as gifted as you are will have no problem countering the curses of the sorceress. Hand me the S-Suit, I swear I will return it to Jackson and never give your name.”

They waited about thirty seconds...and evidently, Nick Coleman didn’t make a step forwards to give back the S-Suit.

And they all knew why.

It was the same reason why the Huntresses had not protested this time before going to the changing rooms. When Kimiko had a long blue tongue and a blue tail, and Alexia had small horns and red talons, it was impossible to forget that without something like bathing in the Styx, a God-level enemy or a Goddess could transform you into an animal...and there was nothing you could do to stop your transformation.

“He is plotting something treasonous...the S-Suits are part of his plan!”

Dakota McDonald yawned.

“If that was the case, Jackson would have painted them orange. He loves that colour...for a reason I can’t fathom.”

“Maybe he was only given orange toys when he was a baby?” Richard suggested before dismissing the thought. “At least this time, the S-Suits are pure black, they have that in common with ‘normal’ diving suits at least.”

“Yes, they are only...tighter, and far more revealing.”

“You’re making fun of my arguments.” Nick Coleman didn’t hiss, but he wasn’t far from it.

“No,” Richard denied. “We’re just telling you that out of everything you’ve shouted or barked in the last hour, there’s not a single thing that convinces me you have a serious plan.”

“Because you are afraid?”

Why, oh why, had he thought that surviving a fight with a gigantic Drakon would give him deity-level respect?

“Because I might be only a mountain of muscles, according to some,” Dakota’s skin immediately turned an interesting shade of red, “but I can admit when there’s something beyond my strength. The Drakon almost killed us. The Elder Giant should have killed us, if we had fought him. The Titaness will kill us if we fight her with the Questers we have. You and your new ‘Gallowborne friends’ can say whatever you want, but the problem remains the same. We have to free the Smith God. To free him, we must fight a Titaness. Jackson’s plan is dangerous and indirect, but if we can indeed force C.C to give us her super-weapons, we may have a chance to successfully complete this Quest.”

“Or the son of Poseidon is going to kill us all,” Nick replied bitterly, “after angering something that he couldn’t handle.”

The son of Bacchus snorted.

“There are very big words, coming from someone who still speaks with the Legionnaires...what are their names again? Scapegoat and Future Zombie, are they? Did they tell you their tales of triumph and how they were about to complete this Great Quest? I mean, they were prisoner at the gates of a Titan’s jail, waiting for someone to rescue them...”

“Jackson will pay for that. The Legions will judge him once this entire folly will be over.”

Richard did his best not to facepalm, but he wasn’t sure how successfully he hid his expression of lassitude.

“Coleman, we are Questers, not Legionnaires. No matter how many crimes we do, it is a Court assembled from all the Barracks which will judge Jackson...and I don’t think it will ever come to that.”

“Why? Because you are now believing the lies he sprout?”

“Because he would literally buy his way out of trouble, find a suitable...scapegoat for the entire trial, and likely spread discord across the audience so his enemies would end up in prison before the day was out.”

There was a moment of silence, and then Dakota nodded.

“Yeah...yeah, that’s exactly something Perseus Jackson would do. But Richard...please don’t say that to his face. He might take it as a challenge...”

“I’m not that stupid,” the son of Hercules retorted. “Now let’s get out of here, it’s time to return to the Strategium. You know how much our mad leader believes in punctuality...”

**18 December 2006, an office near the Grand Strategium, Forge of All Perils, Sea of Monsters**

To his surprise, Luke was the first to return. Neither Lou Ellen Blackstone nor Bianca di Angelo were in sight.

It wasn’t a huge surprise like it would have been before they departed to steal the Golden Fleece from Alcyoneus. Unlike this time, it was clear the son of Poseidon had completely recovered his strength...or at least was faking it convincingly so well no one could notice the difference.

What was more out-of-the-norms for the leader of the Suicide Squad...Perseus Jackson was busy studying a pile of photos, all representing different views of C.C’s spa from different angles.

It didn’t stop the younger boy from commenting upon his arrival in his irritating and mocking fashion.

“I had a bet on you returning with the S-Suit on you, my heroic lieutenant.”

“No, thanks,” the son of Hermes’ shudder was not faked in the least.

“Ah well...Annabeth is going to be so disappointed.”

“She’s like a little sister to me, Jackson!”

“And I will say that you didn’t take *her* feelings into account...because a blind man would remark her feelings towards you have nothing *sisterly*. Unless we’re speaking about *Olympian sisterly*, which naturally involves much-“

“Stop.” Luke commanded, and in an outlandish turn of events, Perseus Jackson stopped...this time. “Stop, you made your points...very clear. I will speak with Annabeth before we sail out for the next battle of this Quest. Satisfied?”

“Completely satisfied,” the son of Poseidon was literally eager to once again comment in depth on the matter, but Luke stared and kept an unflinching expression. At last, the younger Demigod relented and changed the topic of the conversation. “Now for the S-Suits...no problem with them?”

“None that I did notice,” Luke answered honestly. “We didn’t watch each other’s diving test for evident reason, but when I left, everyone who had gone through it was satisfied by the diving capability.”

“Good. I would have found it extremely frustrating to find an alternative to Operation Nautilus.”

“Err...right,” the son of the God of Thieves cleared his throat, “so...the S-Suits work, and if you have anticipated the weaknesses of the Eye of Helios accurately, it will allow us to approach the island without being incinerated or torn to pieces by C.C’s superweapons. At the same time, I suppose this will give us the opportunity to fire quite a few missiles at this spa...”

The very grim expression Perseus Jackson returned him was absolutely not encouraging.

“We can target the spa with the *Inevitable Doom’s* weapons, right?”

“Well, *technically*, we can,” there was so much stress on the ‘technically’ it could have sank a continent by the weight of its irony, “but C.C’s Spa and Resort is a true spa, not a fake establishment. There are quantities of female VIPs visiting it when they want to enjoy some massages, spend a luxurious holiday, or some other things. Blowing up the spa would be...ah...considered a quite hostile move, I think.”

Luke blinked.

“When you say ‘female VIPs’...”

“Well, C.C didn’t give me her list of clients, obviously, but some of the information I was able to obtain came from Rhode, my sister...”

Oh, that wasn’t good at all.

“Goddesses VIPs,” Luke breathed out.

“And maybe worse,” Perseus had decided not to be reassuring today. “C.C is not sworn to Olympus, which means naturally she is free to invite many parties of the Roman-Greek Pantheon that you would not find anywhere near New York.”

Correction: it was clearly very, very bad.

“Best we avoid a...major diplomatic incident, then.” Luke grimaced, before he thought of something else as he watched the photos dispersed upon Jackson’s desk. “While you have been very dramatic about what we will face in the approaches of the island and outside the spa, you’ve been...unusually mysterious about the rest.”

“This is not me being mysterious.”

Luke didn’t believe the protest, no matter how serious the voice.

“This is me not knowing what we will find inside.”

Luke Castellan suddenly felt far more worried than he had been a few heartbeats before.

“But...but got some information about the submarine secret base...and your sister’s help...”

“The so-called spa is C.C’s domain, Luke.” Perseus reminded him darkly. “You see an island. I see a gateway to the Domain of C.C. Yes, I know certain things from reliable and unreliable sources, plus the Telekhine contractors who worked there some months ago. Guess what they agree with? The infrastructure they each were given the pleasure to see are all way too big to hold in a small island like this one.”

“Okay, and what does it mean for the Great Quest and our goals?”

“That there is certainly a far larger island hiding behind the gateway, and the superweapons we aim to generously borrow are going to be there, defended by very dangerous things.”

That was wonderful...oh, wait, it was anything but.

“Your aerial drones can’t help?”

“They are shot down when they come too close to the inner defensive magical systems of the island.” Perseus admitted. “I bought the good stuff, but C.C is a mistress of magic, and she must have taken advice from people aware of how lethal modern warfare can be. As such, while I have a good idea of what the outer defences are, the same can’t be said about the real C.C’s Spa and Resort.”

“Damn.” A far unpleasant idea suddenly decided to cross the thief’s mind. “Wait a minute. If you don’t have any way of spying inside the spa, how by the Dark Pit do you know the Immortal Sorceress didn’t receive massive reinforcements to defend her island?”

“My heroic lieutenant,” ah, the huge grin was back, “please don’t be as narrow-minded as our Gallowborne mutineers, please.”

What a relief-

“It is obvious C.C received reinforcements to help her defend her Spa-Domain. And I’m not counting the female Legionnaires she recruited and has likely brainwashed via various enchantments, all the while promising them a life of seduction and pleasure in every way which matters.”

“Oh,” yeah, it was not the better retort he’d ever done...and yes, Luke was aware of how funny Jackson found it. “So I suppose the better question is how many reinforcements did C.C recruit just in case we would invade her island?”

“That’s indeed the good question, my heroic lieutenant.” Perseus grinned. “And while I have a few guesses, without any aerial reconnaissance to confirm them, I’m afraid I’m as much in the dark as you are...”

**18 December 2006, C.C’s Spa and Resort, C.C’s Domain, Sea of Monsters**

Long ago, Hylla had watched a small group of Amazons visit New Constantinople for a short-term mercenary contract, and she remembered not having been impressed.

After all, who would be amazed when the girls were all clad in some sort of neo-Spartan armour which protected nothing of importance, and when you had the Legions to compare next to them?

Now that she was older, however, Hylla had to admit the Amazons had sprung nicely their illusion of weakness that day.

The neo-Spartan Armour...or ‘Amazon Armour’, to give it justice, looked like something a hoplite of the ancient eras would be armoured with...at first sight.

In reality, though, the Amazon warriors had all a bronze-coloured bodysuit underneath, which was their first true armoured layer. Assuredly it was extremely tight and revealing, but it protected you from a multitude of lethal blows, and ensured a remarkable amount of protection.

All of this guaranteed the average Amazon was extremely agile and able to exploit her mastery of weapons, of which they carried plenty.

For while the ‘hoplite armament’ seemed to be nothing more than spear, sword, and arrow, in reality the spear could transform itself into a machine gun, and the arrows often had a grenade launcher mode. As for the swords, they were of Celestial Bronze or Imperial Gold, and could shift into other modes too, most of them promising very painful deaths for the enemies who would face them.

Last but not least, the ‘Amazon Armour’, including the helmet, the shield, and the greaves among many other things, were incredibly light-weighted. Thus even once an Amazon female warrior was fully equipped and ready for war, she was in reality as agile and fast as someone who would be in T-Shirt and other civilian clothes.

Hylla Ramirez-Arellano had been very hesitant to trust the Goddess when they were told to leave the great defensive strategy to the Amazons. But she had been wrong, and Lady Circe was right. The Amazons were an extremely potent force.

Maybe the only potent force capable of achieving what the Triumvirate and the monsters of the Zone Mortalis had utterly failed to do so far.

“You seem very silent suddenly, Lady Hylla.”

“My apologies, Tagmatarkhis Kinzie...I’m afraid I was lost in my thoughts...”

“No offense was taken,” the dark-haired Amazon commanding the force on the island, “I understand you didn’t have the privilege to see us train seriously before today.”

“I didn’t, and now I am a bit...envious. You brought quite an arsenal with you...and more Amazons than I’d ever seen in a single place.”

“The Goddess paid for a double battalion,” the athletic young woman shrugged. “We provided a double battalion, nine hundred and fifty Hoplites and officers in total. Usually, it should have been a Syntagmatarkhis in command, but there were none available on such short notice. As such, I received a temporary battle-promotion for this contract.”

“Knowing a bit about the sheer scale of logistics for a Legion to operate in campaign,” Hylla noted with a polite smile, “I think it was a bit more complicated than that. This part of the Pacific is hardly next door when it comes to the West Coast.”

Kinzie chuckled.

“Indeed...Hylla. But in several millennia of existence, we have become quite proficient when it comes to logistics...and war.”

“Logistics, I understand, but the company business of Amazon is hardly a war company.”

“Ah, the naivety of youth...” Kinzie gave her a carnivorous smile. “Everything is a war, Hylla. There are the wars everyone think about, with swords, rifles, blood and corpses, but this is just one aspect of it.”

That...that made far too much sense, now that the explanation had been given.

“You are waging an economic war on every continent.”

“Trade is the lifeblood of republics and empires alike.” Kinzie was the very definition of smugness. “And we Amazons have made sure to dominate this new field before everyone else save perhaps the God of Thieves knew there was a battle raging on.”

There was something which resonated deeply in her heart with these words.

And because it did, Hylla Ramirez-Arellano carefully replayed all the conversations she’d ever had with the Tagmatarkhis.

“You’re not here just because the Goddess paid you a large sum of money, nor because the spa is a sanctuary and a recruitment centre for female Demigods and Legacies. You’re here because a certain child of the Seas somehow discovered all your plans and could ruin everything if he spills every secret of the Amazons he knows.”

“Yes,” Kinzie grimaced. “That’s why the Queen, using her Polemarch authority, authorised this urgent deployment to the Sea of Monsters. The dangers are too great when it comes to this son of the Earthshaker. Given how much he is escalating...the Amazons have to deal with him...I have my orders.”

And Hylla had a suspicion some of them may not be totally compatible with the ones every servant of Circe had received lately...but one challenge after the other.

“We saw the rampages of his latest...escalations.” Hylla searched for her words several times until finding what she felt was as accurate as possible. “This is not going to be easy.”

“It won’t.” The Amazon veteran conceded. “That’s why I hope why all the drones and other spying methods used by the enemy were neutralised while we unloaded our arsenal. It is a certainty Perseus Jackson is going to have a lot of evil surprises for us. Well, I have many for him too.”

The side which had the biggest number of surprises and which improvised the quickest was likely going to end victorious in this battle...

“You don’t have any doubt the Suicide Squad will come, then?”

“None,” Kinzie replied, “the only question is when, not if.”

Then the Amazon lowered considerably her voice.

“And I must say your sister and yourself impressed me a lot today, Hylla. Please think about my offer...I would be delighted to call you sisters, Reyna and you.”

“I...” Hylla swallowed nervously. “I will...think about it.”

**18 December, the Orrery, Forge of All Perils, Sea of Monsters**

The room was not an Orrery, though Perseus understood why the Telekhines had given it that name. The old star maps, the globes supposed to represent someone’s idealised representation of Earth, as well as the presence of a large hole allowing someone to watch the stars with astronomical instruments, certainly pointed to a certain direction.

But it was not an Orrery. It was a temple...however, it was not one dedicated to a God in particular. You could call it an ‘invitation room’.

To be honest, the former Tyrant had cursed profusely when he had visited it the first time. With a big more funds assigned to exploration purposes, there would have been no need to invite Persephone anywhere near his Grand Strategium.

Ah, well. What was done was done, and it wasn’t like he could go back in time to correct it. And there had been no bad consequences from this decision made in ignorance. And ultimately, there was a proverb that said you learned more from failure than you did from victory...

“I am not humble, nor really a servant,” the son of Poseidon murmured. “But I beseech you, Lord of the Underworld, for there have been unforeseen developments we need to speak about.”

A crystal of onyx was sent straight into the pyre, and for a few seconds, the Demigod could do nothing but cough...the smoke created by the ‘sacrifice’ was just too painful for his throat and lungs.

It quickly dissipated...leaving a dark figure on a throne of darkness...and Perseus was certain the throne had not been there before.

He curtsied and waited.

“**The Earth Mother...an interesting choice when it comes to conspiracies and godhood changes**.”

“She wasn’t my choice, Lord.”

“**I know**,” Hades replied. “**If it was deliberate, I would not have questioned your sanity nor allowed any apologies to reach my ears, *nephew*. I would have promptly killed you, and urged Olympus to act. The Earth is mostly asleep these days, and the majority of the immortals want this status quo to continue for millennia**.”

“The majority of the immortals, alas, did not include your...your self-proclaimed Bane.”

“**Clearly not**,” the avatar Hades used tonight changed sufficiently to betray a grin. “**He is quite lucky to have been extinguished to the point his soul-essence is beyond my wrath. I had in mind quite a few excruciating tortures by the time the battle ended. But this is not what we must speak about**.”

“The Earth or the two Goddesses?”

“**Since there isn’t anything at all we can do currently for the former save pray she will not have her sleep troubled anymore, this is the latter we must speak about**.”

“I would argue there isn’t a lot we can do either on that front, Lord Uncle...unless I have misread omens too badly, their transitions will likely end on the Winter Solstice, two days and a few hours from now.”

“**Yes. The Hell Eggs will break, and I will certainly have to fight the battle of a lifetime**.”

The Lord of the Underworld was completely right about that. If Gaea had not intervened, Khione and Persephone would most likely have acknowledged his supremacy on the spot. Not only the two female immortals would have lacked the raw power to mount a credible challenge, despite the power boost he had engineered, but the motivation would have been an obstacle too.

But now that Gaea had been able to change Persephone and Khione...well, every certainty and assurance Hades had ever had.

The concern on his face must have been a bit too evident, because the Lord of Hell made a sound akin to a chuckle.

“**I can win, nephew. In many ways, this will be a...welcome relief, from all my bureaucratic duties. But I am not going to pretend it will be easy. I have a lot of battle-experience, and my skills are quite proficient when it comes to deal with recalcitrant Titans, Giants, and Gods. Alas, once the Eggs hatch, I have no doubt my meddlesome *grandmother* will have made each of them my equals when it comes to power...and of course those who are reborn by her will gain superior regeneration in their Domains**.”

“I...see. I suppose this is an indirect warning to not expect any form of help during and after the Winter Solstice.”

“**Not until their two Champions join your Quest again, no**,” the Lord of the Underworld confirmed. “**The daughter of Aphrodite and the former Huntress returning to the realm of the living will be your clue that the battle is over...one way or another. You will have to face the Immortal Sorceress on your own**.”

The green-eyed Demigod knew better than to think Hades had guessed in an attempt to surprise him. Evidently, there were still some spies around...that or Bianca had informed him.

“Yes.” For once, he wasn’t going to waste his saliva on a denial. “Is it going to be a problem?”

“**Not for me**,” Hades remarked with a hint of humour, “**but it might be for you. Giving your yacht submarine capabilities and approaching C.C’s spa underwater is indeed going to neutralise the fire of Helios’ old weapon before it fires a single shot. But the Winter Solstice is beloved of sorceresses and all magical practitioners for a reason, nephew. You are going to fight a Goddess of Magic in her lair, and at a moment where her powers will be at her apex**.”

“One might say it is an audacious approach, Lord Uncle.”

“**One might say that**,” the oldest brother of the seven founding Olympians agreed with a smile. “**Of course audacity tends to be considered foolishness when it blows up in its architect’s face**.”

“But when it works, the visionary mind is often praised as a genius.” Perseus smirked. “And I note that so far, all the letters I sent before sailing for the Golden Fleece were ignored.”

“**C.C answers on average a letter of mine every century. Don’t waste the years you have waiting for an answer**.”

“What a pity.”

“**She is a full-fledged Goddess, nephew, and while she tends to behave arrogantly in public, I can assure you her sorcery skills are indeed a match for her ego. And at the risk of repeating my warnings, C.C is waiting for you inside her Domain, and the massive resources she had accumulated for centuries in the Sea of Monsters. She saw what you did to the Drakon and the Giant. You can’t count on her underestimating you**.”

On this point, Hades was in all likelihood totally accurate. The opposition, be it C.C or the Triumvirate, were going to assume he had the firepower to be an equal to a member of the Olympian Council when it came to turning around the outcome of a battle.

In many ways, the fact he had played an insignificant part in the battle near the Dark Parthenon may have generated more problems than it was intended to solve.

“I will leave tomorrow nonetheless,” the son of Poseidon declared. “We need some training to test the *Inevitable Doom* and the scout drones, but once all the lights will be to the green and the Telekhine shipbuilders are satisfied, we leave to challenge the Immortal Sorceress.”

Perseus grinned again.

“We’re both going to be very, very busy in the coming days, Lord Uncle.”

“**Yes**,” Hades watched him with amusement. “**Planning how to win victory against insurmountable odds is indeed going to take all of our time**.”

Perseus narrowed his eyes and hesitated.

On the one hand, no matter the outcome of the battle for the Underworld, the Suicide Squad would see Drew and Jade return to reinforce their ranks.

On the other hand, there was no denying that it would be far, far better for his long-term plans to have Hades ruling the Underworld. Not to mention there was a risk neither Khione nor Persephone would be mentally stable if they managed to defeat him and take the throne for themselves...

“**Yes, nephew? Something you want to add**?”

Well, it was just advise, in the end...it was up to his ‘immortal uncle’ to follow it or not.

“Long ago, in a land of treachery, demons and nightmares, there was a ruler who survived three abdications and massive defeats. No matter whose identity he was born with, no one remembered, for by the time the first coronation happened, historians and chroniclers would call him Irritant. And atop the Tower which he climbed so often, he uttered words that would haunt heroes and villains for eternity.”

It was a philosophy that, to be fair, he had progressively abandoned in the last months. But at the enemies gathered and surrounded the Suicide Squad, it may prove once again the solution to all his problems.

“And so Dread Emperor Irritant boasted to them words which would live in infamy. ‘But being defeated was always part of my plan! Yet another glorious victory for the Empire!’”

There were things which changed when you began another life. But there were other things which didn’t. It was still hilarious as hell when an enemy realised you had played them every step of the way...

**19 December 2006, Forge of All Perils, Sea of Monsters**

The moment she woke up, Lou Ellen felt something was wrong.

It was not accompanied by screams and monumental explosions.

It was not a spell striking out of nowhere.

It was...it just was.

How did you explain something that you knew intimately?

It was both in the air and the earth, and everything the Telekhines did in the Forge of All Perils had nothing to do with the wrongness.

It was slow, it was ponderous, but the daughter of Hecate knew that it was coming.

After a light breakfast, the sorceress went to find Perseus.

She found him at the top of the mountain, sitting on a large rock his Hydrokinesis had sculpted in a parody of throne, and his spyglass was on his lap.

“You felt it too.”

It was not a question.

“Yes. What it is?”

“You know the expression ‘hell hath no fury like a woman scorned’?” Lou Ellen nodded. “Well, it’s exactly what is about to happen.”

“Ah. But you mentioned the Winter Solstice...we’re still two days away, no?”

“We are.”

And yet they could feel the first quakes of this explosive cataclysm coming.

“By my mother’s magic, this is going to be...” the blonde Demigoddess was unable to find the words to describe what was going to happen.

“It is going to have interesting complications, to be sure.” The voice was calm, serene, but there was no smile on Perseus’ face.

“Olympus is not going to be amused.” And that was a generous understatement...no, it was a colossal understatement.

Seriously, Demeter already wanted to kill most of the Suicide Squad, and Artemis wasn’t far behind her.

“Bianca will be here soon. Out all of the officers, there is no question she will feel it too.”

“Perseus, don’t change the subject of the conversation, please.”

The son of Poseidon at last chuckled...but there was almost no positive emotion behind it.

“Sorry. Olympus is going to be furious, of course. By the Solstice, they will know the Lord of Hell and I lied to their faces. The fact we didn’t get away with it for very long will not exactly be a mitigating factor, I think.”

“Thus the need to sail for battle as soon as possible.”

“Thus the need to reach C.C’s Spa and Resort as fast as discretion and the laws of this Zone Mortalis allow us to, yes. Fortunately, the *Inevitable Doom* is out of the dry dock and ready, and we have tested the *Suicidal Insanity* and the *Special Spa Operation* scout drones.”

Lou Ellen was a mature Demigoddess...as such she just slapped the son of Poseidon as a punishment for the ridiculous names.

“You realise that at the infernal pace you’re escalating, they will never let us leave the Zone Mortalis alive.”

And the daughter of Hecate didn’t bother specifying who the ‘they’ were, thank you very much.

“I’m aware of this, yes.”

Yes, of course you did. For all his flaws, Perseus wasn’t someone who failed to anticipate the ironic, cataclysmic, and destructive consequences of his own actions.

It was just that most of the cases, these consequences were exactly why he committed his outrageous deeds in the first place.

“What is the plan this time?”

“The plan is to survive and steal one specific super-weapon.” She asked.

“The Typhoon-class submarine?”

“No. Oh, it would be useful, and I will definitely let Luke steal it if we have the opportunity. No, I am after something far more dangerous, and that C.C will be far more reluctant to hand me out.”

“And you intend to do this...exactly how, pray tell? In case you have forgotten, C.C is a Goddess.”

“I didn’t forget...and as for the how, it’s very simple, Lou Ellen. I intend to give her the victory she desires with all her heart...and no, it doesn’t involve having you serving as Apprentice...that would be a nice bonus for the Immortal Sorceress, of course.”

“You have me, very, very confused, Perseus.” And the daughter of Hecate glared, making it clear the explanations had better be good.

“Don’t worry, it isn’t going to last. The succession of operations I have prepared is simply *glorious*.”

**Author’s note**: Our good friend the ‘heroic’ Perseus Jackson is not really good at the de-escalation thing, it must be said. Though to be fair, the world around him isn’t exactly trying to decrease the tensions...the madness is really contagious.

The Battle of the Winter Solstice approaches...and there are going to be more massive upheavals and epic clashes to decide the fate of the Sea of Monsters.

**Suicide Squad - List of Fallen**:

*Judith – Huntress of Artemis*

*Kalinda – Huntress of Artemis*

*Eudoxia – Huntress of Artemis*

*Douglas Smith – son of Volturnus*

*Phoebe – Huntress of Artemis, daughter of Eris*

*Eustace Bragg, Jeremy Clark, Helmut Veers, Scott, Irvin, Craig, Jared, Harper, Chuck, plus twelve other Legionnaire mutineers*

**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

**Gallowborne ‘Division’**:

17 ex-Legionnaires, condemned to be thrown in the most dangerous situations for their attempted mutiny; their names are now forsaken, and they are now known as ‘Future Zombie’, ‘Cannon-Fodder’, ‘Scapegoat’, ‘Dead Legionnaire Walking’, etc...