**Chapter 27**

**Dawn of Blackmail**

*As Perseus Jackson warned us beforehand, we hadn’t seen his ‘surprise’ coming.*

*Again.*

*In fact, I think it is no exaggeration to say no one had been prepared for the final outcome of the Clash of the Titans.*

*The most optimistic souls among Force S had conceded that maybe, just maybe, the arsenal delivered by the Telekhines and placed under an insane son of Poseidon might be able to free Hephaestus, at the price of catastrophic casualties.*

*But no matter how arrogant or supportive, few had been willing to gamble a single Drachma for the battle which had to be fought after that.*

*The odds of Force S successfully storming Forge MP-42 were low enough as it is; to repeat the exploit against the island-fortress of the Triumvirate and before we had the time to bring reinforcements sounded like folly at its finest.*

*That’s why well before Kymopoleia appeared before the Super-Mega Yacht, there were plenty of whispers suggesting to negotiate some gracious exit with Olympus. The Suicide Squad and all its allies had the firepower to fight one major battle per couple of months; we certainly hadn’t the resources to survive two.*

*And it wasn’t a bad calculus, ultimately.*

*The Clash of the Titans left all of us, battered, exhausted, and half-mad. We were certainly in no shape to participate in a skirmish against the Triumvirate at that point. The missile stocks were gone, plenty of ships had gone to the bottom of the Sea of Monsters, and after continuing for so long an existential battle, more or less everyone needed to be healed by the Golden Fleece.*

*All of that had been expected.*

*Perseus engineering the Apotheosis of Isis and sort of kidnapping her by becoming his Adjudicator, on the other hand, had definitely not been part of the plan mentioned beforehand.*

*It was, admittedly, a strategic strike worthy of legend. In a single day, all the plans of the Triumvirate collapsed.*

*And already one thing was clear: the final battle wouldn’t happen at the gates of Guadalcanal, with the Suicide Squad desperately trying to storm the magical defences before Marcus Antonius could usurp an Olympian during the days of the Lupercalia.*

*That wasn’t to say, of course, that this Great Quest was over and victory was ours. Far from it.*

Chapter 21 of *Seas of Madness: Chronicles of the Suicide Squad Volume 2*, by Annabeth Chase, daughter of Athena

**1 January 2007, Caedus Fortress of the Triumvirate, Guadalcanal**

It began with a musical opening.

Someone on the other end had apparently decided to play *Ride of the Valkyries* as a prelude.

How in the name of the Gods the Demigods had known that his Emperor hated everything that came from Richard Wagner would be something to ponder later.

A few more seconds passed, and then a short video played out. It was clearly the Empress standing prisoner in what had to be a ship’s cabin. Lucius Vorenus and many others breathed out in relief, as according to the data on the screen, this had been filmed mere minutes ago.

Obviously, Isis was different. While the means of communication was by its very nature imperfect, anyone with the eyes to see could tell clearly she had shed what was left of her mortality. She was a true Goddess now.

And as Lucius and everyone acknowledged this point, the video ended, and the screen was quickly replaced by a being the overwhelming majority of the Triumvirate troops had learned to dread.

The young Demigod was sprawled on the couch in a posture that had to be voluntarily insulting. He wore an orange T-Shirt and black trousers.

And if there was a sign he had been fighting for his death against a Titaness hours before, one couldn’t see it now.

“Gentlemen,” the monster grinned. “I wish you a Happy New Year.”

Lucius had thought the gloating, when it finally came, would be a slap on his face.

But that was worse than gloating.

It was-

“I am going to strangle you very, very slowly,” his Emperor promised. “I assure you that when I will have finished with you, you will shout you should have died in the battle against the Titaness of the Seas!”

Perseus Jackson yawned in an exaggerated fashion, something which naturally raised the levels of anger inside the Strategium.

“Say what you have to say.” His Lord ordered once it became clear the son of Poseidon was content to imitate a smug feline teasing a pack of dogs.

“Ah, straightforward and eager to speak of business. I like that.” The black-haired enemy grabbed a crystal glass, and someone on the left brought forwards a bottle of alcohol, pouring the contents of it into the Demigod’s glass.

It went without saying that for thirty seconds, the son of Poseidon didn’t speak at all.

And all the while he didn’t stop smiling, something which felt...incredibly wrong. It was like contemplating a smug snake, assuming the snakes had the ability to be smug like that.

At no point the enemy leader brought the glass to his lips.

“I have, by some curious twist of Fate, become your wife’s Adjudicator. As you could clearly see beforehand, she is an honoured guest aboard my flagship-“

“Your prisoner, you mean,” Second Augustus Marcus Antonius interrupted, his rage beginning to lash out.

“Honoured guest,” repeated the son of Poseidon, closing one eye, making sure only his crimson iris stared at them while grinning. The effect was honestly incredibly sinister. “I assure you that the Goddess has been treated with all the respect her new status deserves. Of course, the *Inevitable Doom* is a bit limited when it comes to floating palaces, but I assure you that we’re taking plenty of measures to remedy to it.”

You had to give it to him: Perseus Jackson didn’t lack in audacity or assurance. There were many people who would have lost their composure speaking to a room filled with Legionnaires and warriors who wanted him dead yesterday.

The grin ended, and the other eye opened again.

“As for our business. I am going to blackmail you.”

“Go to Hell!” a Legionnaire barked.

“Already did it thrice, and I don’t advise it for a touristic destination,” the son of Poseidon replied immediately. “What do you say, Lord Emperor of the Triumvirate?”

“You have kidnapped my wife,” Marcus Antonius growled, “but you are not beyond my reach. I don’t know what your plan is, Perseus Jackson, but-“

“Oh, that’s easy,” the mad being who had freed the God of Forges from a Titaness smiled, and it was like madness had a new Prince. “I am going to do *nothing*.”

“Excuse me?”

“You are forgiven,” the infuriating boy cackled. “You see, what you seemed to have a bit forgotten is that with the Titaness gone, your little hidden island there is not so hidden anymore. Olympus knows where it is, and though it will take a few days, I’m willing to bet that the moment certain protections will fade, your fortresses and magical obelisks will be earmarked for several strikes of the Master Bolt.”

“I am aware of this reality, bastard.”

The Demigod didn’t seem fazed in the slightest by the insult.

“Then you are also aware you will lose the ritual grounds you’ve prepared for the last months. And with C.C. monitored by several Olympians and your wife as my guest of honour, it is extremely improbable you will have the opportunity to find another one before this Lupercalia. Moreover, the absence of Lady Isis by your side is another massive setback for you. You do not have any significant magical abilities. I’m also curious how long the chains of Ares will hold now that you have no one to reinforce them.”

“They will hold long enough! And you can’t stay Adjudicator for all eternity either!”

“No,” Perseus Jackson admitted. “But I can assume these duties for an entire year. It’s far more than I need to destroy your plan utterly. You made too many rituals focusing on the Lupercalia; you can’t ascend at any other date, *claimant* Marcus Antonius. And once the sacred Roman holy days are behind us, it is incredibly likely the chains will break. The Fates are not fond of people who think taking divine captives comes without consequences.”

The expression the scion of the Earthshaker gave them was not particularly gentle. Indeed, it was extremely malicious.

“Thus we return to my Master Plan. I am sailing back to the Forge of All Perils with my guest of honour, and you are way too late to intercept me. I will bunker down there, as by now my Telekhine allies have turned it into an impregnable stronghold that all your remaining fleet will be unable to storm. And you have two choices. If you are willing to be reasonable, you release Ares, and within twenty-four hours I swear on the Styx,” the earth shook, “that I will relinquish my position of Adjudicator.”

“And if I refuse?”

The lone eye of crimson shone malevolently.

“If you refuse, I will wait a few days after the Lupercalia and the ruin of your ambitions to abandon the duties and privileges of being the Adjudicator of Love.” The Demigod shrugged. “By that point, I expect Ares will have freed himself and gone on a rampage to slaughter you and everyone serving under your aquila standards, Marcus Antonius. You got lucky once, but this time, there is no Titaness in this Zone Mortalis to give you succour. And unfortunately for you, with no magic to make sure Ares’ strength is severely restricted, you stand no chance in a duel against him. So yes, right now, I don’t need to do *anything* to win.”

“That assumes there are only two choices,” Lucius Vorenus stated. He felt plenty of heads turning towards him, but he ignored them for now, focusing on the eyes of the enemy. “You summoned Lady Isis three times to become her Adjudicator. You took enormous risks for it. It allowed you to completely upturn the strategic situation again, yes, but something so powerful must have drawbacks. No matter the name, every semi-ritualistic deed supported by the Ancient Laws has some weaknesses inbuilt in it to prevent Gods and Demigods to abuse it.”

Perseus Jackson nodded.

“That’s certainly true. Of course, time is against you now, Praetor. Should these hypothetical weaknesses exist, you have to find them before the beginning of this year’s Lupercalia. And no, I am not going to reveal them. You will have to search it the hard way, same as I did.” They heard a new cackling laughter. “I don’t wish you good luck, for I am not that hypocritical. You heard my conditions, oh Second Augustus of the Triumvirate. You know how to contact me now, and I, as a peaceful and magnanimous Tyrant, would happily end this storm of violence on a calm and happy note. And once again, Happy New Year!”

The explosion of anger and loathing struck the moment the screen turned black again.

It took many, many minutes for it to decrease.

“Lucius,” his commanding officer snarled, his fury far from a thing of the past, “rush to the Cursor Tower. Tell my esteemed peers of the Triumvirate I request an emergency council *as soon as possible*.”

**1 January 2007, the Coral Palace, somewhere in the depths of the Pacific Ocean**

Calypso had expected many things to await her at the gates of the Coral Palace once they arrived before it.

But the food packages, honestly, were really something which had no precedent.

“**What is this...pop-corn, mother**?”

“**A poor joke from Oceanus**,” Tethys sighed. “**My *dear husband* sent me a mountain of it. I don’t appreciate his sense of humour**.”

“**I don’t understand it at all**.”

“**This**,” her pirate-costumed mother explained while removing the pile of food packages which blocked the way, “**is one hundred percent algae-pure pop-corn. It’s one of those munching delicacies Gods and mortals love to devour when watching a movie. I’m pretty sure that all the film rooms in my palace are playing some part of the battle you and the Suicide Squad fought against my forces**.”

“**Oh**,” yes, Calypso was beginning to understand why her mother didn’t like the joke. No Titan or Titaness liked to have his nose rubbed in the ashes of his or her defeat. “**Your marriage didn’t improve when I was away**.”

“**We tolerate each other’s presence when we are invited together to the balls and other prestigious events of the year**.”

Yes, that was what she thought.

A current came on her back, and their swimming speed accelerated until they were ejected in a specific room of the Palace the former Titaness of Drakons had done her best to avoid millennia ago.

Who would blame her?

This was a hall that mortals would need several hours to cross if they wanted to exit it.

And from the ceiling – which was sixteen metres above her head – to the floor, this space was devoted to wedding dresses.

Yes, for several kilometres, there were dresses of all the colours imaginable floating perfectly preserved for a bride to pick them.

“**I had already a dress in mind**!” The former Queen of Ogygia didn’t have the time to make two steps before being forced by an impenetrable wall of water.

“**I will be the judge of that, young Lady**.”

Calypso surveyed her surroundings, hoping against all hope there was an avenue of escape. Alas, her mother had clearly anticipated her reaction. All the doors had disappeared, and there were no allies in sight.

“**This is part of my punishment, I suppose**?”

“**Now, now, Calypso**,” the Mistress of the Coral Palace teased her, “**you are marrying the King of the Underworld. I am not going to let you go to the altar in battle-armour**.”

Strangely, the new Princess of Tenebrae didn’t hear a ‘no’...

“**Like you won’t present yourself in this horrible pirate attire**?”

“**Polite daughters shouldn’t criticise their mother’s choices**.”

Calypso breathed out loudly before acknowledging the inevitable.

“**Right, let’s go with it**.” The long-imprisoned Titaness huffed. “**I will find strength in the fact father will not be here to bring me to the altar**.”

Needless to say, Atlas, Lord of Endurance, hated the God she was about to marry. It was hardly surprising, for Hades was his ‘successor’. Their battles during the Titanomachy had been brutal, and one which had created plenty of feuds to last tens of thousands of years.

“**Yes, bringing him would be a major faux-pas**,” her mother chuckled. “**And before I forget...do you have a Champion now?**”

“**I have one, yes**.” She knew Perseus Jackson had noticed how the sands of Miranda Gardiner had turned black before she left, but she didn’t know if other people had noticed. Since her own mother didn’t, the probable answer was negative.

“**Good! Would you mind summoning her here? Champions must be by their patron’s side, and your fellow wives have already announced they intended to bring their lieutenants**.”

Calypso bared her teeth. There was a saying: misery loved company. She had to suffer with these wedding dresses for a couple of days, yes. But nobody had said she had to endure this torment *alone*!

**1 January 2007, the Little Forum, Mount Olympus**

The Little Forum was certainly a very popular place of the immortals on Olympus.

As such, it was a minor shock to see it deserted, especially on the first day of this New Year. Yes, it was late evening, but there should be more people...and there would have been, if not for the extraordinary circumstances.

His brother was waiting for him, seated at a table for two.

The glasses were already filled.

“**Strawberry hydromel?**” Neptune asked lightly.

“**The Norse gave me an ungodly amount of headaches for centuries, but they knew their drinks**,” Jupiter replied.

“**That they do**.” And the two Olympians proceeded to empty the first bottle in complete silence.

Silence for them, at least.

Several streets away, a singer certainly hired by Dionysus was singing something first composed for the French musical comedy Romeo and Juliet. Specifically young men proclaiming themselves Kings of the World, if he remembered the lyrics correctly.

“**What a year**,” his brother mused.

“**It’s not been twenty-four hours, you know**.”

“**What a year**,” Jupiter repeated, before snorting. “**You know how many orgies are happening right now here? Twenty-five, brother, and the biggest one is Dionysus’**.”

“**Why I am not surprised**?” The Ruler of the Seas snorted. “**All over the world, the mortals have been influenced as much as we have. Las Vegas has seen its record of marriages per day hilariously demolished, and all over the world, lovers are fornicating without shame. What has the world come to?**”

“**Please**,” the Lord of Thunder retorted. “**The very reason your Roman persona is here right now is all your Greek aspects are busy in the bedroom with your wife**.”

“**We are not limiting ourselves to the bedroom, you know**.”

“**Neither are plenty of ambitious politicians and their mistresses in Paris, Rome, and several other major European cities**,” the Master of Olympus commented ironically. “**I knew she had expanded her cults’ numbers on the other side of the Atlantic, but it seems the estimates were tens of thousands too low, judging by how many people are acting as nexuses of Lust and Love right now**.”

“**And yet you’re not unhappy**.”

“**The Twelfth Clause was supposed to do exactly that when I wrote it, brother**,” the Lord of the Master Bolt said drily. “**I can’t exactly complain it did exactly what it was supposed to without sounding absolutely stupid and ridiculous. No, at last my son understands how lucky he is to have a hot wife to have sex with. A pity it took such extremities to stoke his fires**.”

Neptune groaned. That was a horrible pun.

“**It is still going to have major consequences**.” Aphrodite was now fully a vessel of Fire and Lust. Article Twelve was going to last only a limited number of time, but that reality would remain.

“**Yes. But there’s the hope that for the first time, my son and his wife will truly be husband and wife for real**.”

If the number of eruptions in the Pacific was an indication of the consolidation of their union, yes, the likelihood of that was high.

“**Speaking of Goddesses, some have begun to spread rumours**.”

“**I have heard of them**,” Jupiter sipped the first new glass of his second hydromel bottle. “**And I assure you, I have not the intention to try to kill her husband and marry her while the corpse is still cooling down**.”

“**I wasn’t thinking you would, but I had to be sure**.” Neptune hesitated before finishing his point. “**Newborn Goddesses are extremely vulnerable, and this one even more so**.”

“**If she was in my custody, I would certainly try to turn her against the Triumvirate, and convince her to swear allegiance to me**,” the Lord of Thunder admitted honestly. “**But she isn’t, and I have learned enough from Juno to avoid repeating the trouble for several centuries**.”

“**I see**.”

“**No, I will wait until the end of the Quest to decide Isis’ fate. If she is still in your son’s power...there will be a hard decision to make. Until then, it’s not worth wasting our time with ideas that might turn out to be impossible**.”

“**The same will likely apply to Aphrodite’s punishment, I take it?**” The Goddess of Love had managed to get out of several oaths she had made, courtesy of not swearing them on the Styx, but her behaviour had really been outrageous, and that was saying it politely.

“**Of course**,” his brother scowled. “**And she isn’t the only one who will need to be punished. I extensively checked my sons’ affairs while they were prisoners, and while I had nothing to complain about Hephaestus save his near-celibate lifestyle, the same can’t be said about my other son**.”

Neptune didn’t bother showing the shadow of a surprised expression. Many Olympians, including himself, had warned the Master of Olympus. By the Pit, it was one of the few things Minerva and himself agreed upon these days.

“**Your son is a butcher**.”

The other God didn’t bother arguing back.

“**He has many sins. But some of the most problematic flaws do not stem from his cruelty, but his lack of leadership qualities. The Amazons are completely out of control and are engaged into forbidden trades under the cover of their megacorporation. And there are now several armies of mercenaries in the Middle East and elsewhere that no one oversaw properly, ever**.”

Unfortunately, once again, the God of the Seas couldn’t pretend being surprised. Mars was capable on the battlefield and in military affairs, but both his Roman and Greek personal were extremely bloodthirsty, and saw no point restraining the carnage to a few days of the year.

“**I had to send Hercules, Minerva, and Bellona to clean the mess.” His brother rumbled. “And the more I dig, the more appalling things I find. This is enough**.”

“**Enough?**”

“**I want Mars outside of the Council**.” Jupiter spoke bluntly.

“**I am willing to tentatively agree**,” Neptune said prudently, “**provided of course I have a vote in who will replace him**.”

“**I...yes, I suppose I can do that**.”

In other words, the Master of Olympus had decided first to expel Mars. The evidence must have truly been disgusting and earth-shaking to generate that sort of reaction.

“**The Sea Titaness has returned to the Coral Palace. She shouldn’t cause trouble for the current Great Quest and the months to come**.”

“**You no doubt understand how relieved I am to hear that!**” Thundercloud eyes stared at him. “**Naturally, a second relief would be that your son did his best to avoid taunting the Primordials, *please***.”

“**I will do what I can**.” Neptune coughed. “**But in all fairness to him, we didn’t even inform our children of the ‘Cursed Crown’, so it wasn’t like he could know of the problem before staring at the abyss**.”

“**I know. This is why I didn’t disintegrate him on the spot**.” Jupiter frowned. “**This boy is exactly like us when were children**.”

“**Adventurous?**”

“**I would use some other words, but I fear our mother would wake up and force me to eat a treasure worth of soap**.” There was a thunderous rumble. “**No. Your son is who he is**.”

The words beginning by ‘arrogant brat’ were not uttered, but they had to be thought very loudly.

“**I would love to say I will fine him, but I’ve already noticed he’s sending his tithes to Athena and I can’t voice my disapproval. And in the end, he did free my son, so I suppose I can forgive him. And I can’t trust you to punish him either, since he gave you your Heiress in mortal form. Yes, I know about that, they weren’t as discreet as they believed**.”

“**And**?”

“**Kymopoleia, however, will be punished. She willingly challenged my right to rule**.”

“**How much**?”

“**Seventy-five million Denarii**,” this was almost...reasonable. It was merely one million gold Drachmas, really. His brother must be in a very good mood from all the sexual perversions he was no doubt involved into in the last hours.

“**She will pay the fine**,” the ruler of Atlantis assured him. “**I trust the same will happen to your daughter**?”

In her Greek form, Minerva had intervened directly to convince Perseus to deprive the Gorgon sisters of their monstrous powers. If Kymopoleia was guilty, then too was the Goddess of Wisdom.

“**Oh yes, she will be punished most severely. I sent her to be a messenger, and she used the time to pursue her agenda against my will**.”

Hopefully, all the personas of his brother would take it as a hint that one couldn’t rule tyrannically without ignoring the political ambitions of the very children he had elevated to the Council.

“**Mars is still prisoner of the Triumvirate**.” Jupiter abruptly changed the subject at once.

“**I would have thought that my son doing what he did more or less guaranteed victory, and an exchange of prisoners**.” The military forces of the Triumvirate couldn’t really go on the offensive against Perseus, really. The Telekhines had fortified the island once used as a lair by Fimbulvetr. If they attacked, they would regret it before dying in the explosions.

“**Being an Adjudicator, since your son chose that particular translation, is not without its flaws. I should know, since I invented it for this foolish Trojan Prince**.”

Neptune grimaced. Even so long after the fact, he really didn’t like being reminded of the Trojan War and everything that led to it.

“**I suppose my son thought it as a challenge, rather than as obstacle**.” And against someone as powerful as Tethys, it was certainly the only way to accomplish some of your goals without dying horribly in the process.

The Master of Olympus conjured an image of several European cities on their right. Predictably, it was all parties and carnal manifestations of lust and love.

“**I am willing to let him return to New Constantinople**,” Jupiter declared. “**But he will be assigned to residence. I don’t care if you build him a palace, brother, but he will stay there for a few months. And he will stop giving reasons for Diana to come screaming in my ears every hour**.”

Ah yes, *that*. If there was one Goddess who had taken the ‘birth’ of Isis and the changes of Aphrodite as a personal affront, then Diana was undoubtedly that Olympian.

The Goddess of the Hunt was on the warpath now, and it wasn’t an exaggeration.

“**And you tell Pluto the same applies to his infernal daughter**.”

Neptune chuckled. Yes, he supposed Jupiter wasn’t going to rush to the Underworld to present his congratulations to their eldest brother, not when he had slept with one of his wives recently.

“**I suppose I can do that**.”

The God of the Seas emptied the last of the hydromel – excellent, as always – and prepared to leave.

“**One last matter**.”

“**Yes**?”

“**My son sent me a concerning message between two copulation sessions. A Key has been stolen**.”

“**Brother, do you realise how little**-“

His voice faltered as the Lord of Thunder showed him an old-fashioned golden key he carried around his neck.

“**Yes, one of *those* Keys**.” A storm was brewing into the divine eyes. “**And your son informed Vulcan it was the Sire of the Drakons which had struck again, with his new agent stealing the Key**.”

That was bad...incredibly bad.

“**So the Sire is one of the Three**.” When you knew the First was Typhon, it said something how problematic the issue was.

“**The other Keys**?”

“**Bacchus checked his: they are still there, heavily protected. And obviously, so are mine**.”

This was reassuring, though it also meant they didn’t know which one of the Three was trying to stir trouble.

“**This doesn’t make any sense. One of the Three should have known we would notice the robbery. There should have been attempts to seize the other Keys**.”

“**Yes**,” his younger brother grimly replied. “**And it means we’re missing something. Unfortunately, I have no idea what it might be**.”

**2 January 2007, War Room of the Aquila, Caedus Fortress of the Triumvirate, Guadalcanal**

“And as the little bastard taunted me, the *Inevitable Doom* is on its way to the Forge which was once a Drakonic lair.” He certainly wasn’t going to use the ridiculous name the son of Poseidon used on a constant basis. “The *Spear of the Gods* has no chance to intercept him before he reaches it.”

That concluded his report, and for a few heartbeats there was no answer whatsoever.

The former Magister Equitum took it as minor feeling of consolation that none of his two ‘allies’ had seen *that* coming.

It was a pity their wives weren’t here. Their expressions of astonishment would also have been a source of amusement.

For a few seconds, at least.

“Perseus Jackson,” Caligula shook slowly his head. “Of course it had to be Perseus Jackson.”

And once you had said it, what could be added to that?

“Everything went wrong with this battle,” he admitted reluctantly. “But I am sure that with your help-“

Neo Helios, as the arrogant Julii loved to call himself, burst into laughter.

Thank God the bastard was only present via a technological-made hologram, otherwise Marcus would have been tempted to strangle him. Slowly.

“How in the name of the Underworld will we do that? None of our military forces are anywhere near the Sea of Monsters. It would take a massive redeployment to arrive before the Lupercalia. Olympus would be sure to notice. The Earthshaker would be ordered to unleash a tsunami and sink our fleets.”

“Not only that,” the Third Augustus spoke, “but with the imminent evacuation of Guadalcanal, you will have lost your main logistical base inside the Zone Mortalis. Any force we send by your side will be condemned to starve slowly if the enemy doesn’t offer battle in the next few days. Something Perseus Jackson told you bluntly was not going to happen.”

“Perseus Jackson,” and oh, how this name felt like poison on his lips, “is not invincible.”

“He is not,” Caligula agreed. “But I advise prudence nonetheless. It is quite obvious that you have lost the upper hand in this campaign of the Sea of Monsters. You’re playing a card game with a mad Demigod, and if his latest cheating is any indication, he has already replaced all the cards and prepared for your counterattack before you ever thought you would need a counter-strike.”

The former Consul grimaced. This unfortunately rang true. But the bastard had captured his wife!

“This ‘Adjudicator’ role must have huge flaws!”

“Neo Romulus,” the other Emperor sighed, before wincing when he glared at him. “I suppose it has, yes, but the most obvious ones aren’t going to work. Perseus Jackson is not going to rape your wife, swear to abandon his Great Quest as he is on the eve of triumph, or try to break as many Ancient Laws as he can in the next month. The son of the Earthshaker loves for everyone to believe he is insane, but he is incredibly clever. Until the Lupercalia, it is quite likely he will fulfil assiduously the duties of an Adjudicator, whatever they may be.”

“Yes,” Neo Mithras intervened to support Caligula, “for him to pull that stunt for the whole world, he had to have found ancient documents from millennia ago, and be quite sure it would give him a modest victory over the Titaness and ourselves. The good news in the middle of this disaster is whatever his goals, he had to make Isis a true Goddess in the process.”

“There are already rumours it happened because the Olympian whore did not respect her part of the bargain.” He was an Emperor, a true Augustus of the most powerful triumvirate to have ever existed now. He wouldn’t scowl. “And while he gave my wife her Apotheosis, he did it by raising her in opposition to the Throne of Love, not by usurping the Dove completely. The Throne of Love still has its current holder.”

“I will concede it is half a victory, but after several millennia, it confirms the foundations of our plan are sound.”

Of course his ‘allies’ were focusing on that instead of helping him free his wife!

“I advise you to agree to the exchange of prisoners Jackson proposed. With Isis a true immortal now, this defeat will be easily compensated for in the months to come.”

“If your wives were the ones to be ‘honoured guests’ of Perseus Jackson, would you follow your own advices and negotiate with the little bastard?”

The disgruntled faced made it clear that no, they wouldn’t.

“That’s all very interesting,” Neo Mithras cleared his throat. “But without Isis to help you, you can’t begin the usurpation ritual, never mind complete it. It will blow up in your face, one hundred times out of one hundred.”

Yes, he had thought about it in the last twenty-four hours.

“I’m sorry Neo Romulus, but the risks are-“

“I need Medea.” Marcus Antonius said imperiously.

Silence greeted his words. Technically, the third Immortal Sorceress wasn’t part of the Triumvirate, no matter what Olympus and other foolish deities believed. But there was no denying that her hatred for Olympus made her a very powerful ally for their ambitions.

“You said an army or a fleet can’t reinforce me in time,” the Second Augustus of the Triumvirate insisted. “Very well, I accept that. But Medea can.”

“Medea is not your wife.” Neo Mithras commented with a smile. “And her services are quite expensive. We can’t also forget that we don’t have enough information about the duties of an Adjudicator. Yes, there are likely weaknesses. But as it is, we don’t know them, and assaulting the Forge-Fortress of our enemy will result in senseless slaughter and the *Spear of the Gods* no doubt joining all the other sunk warships which tried to kill Perseus Jackson.”

“Then we will find them,” he said grimly. “What if the little bastard decides that after his first victory, he can do the same to your wives?”

The argument, as much as the two other Emperors tried to hide hit, really struck true.

“We are going to mobilise our informants on Olympus and elsewhere to get the answers you want,” Neo Helios replied for two. “But you will owe us.”

**3 January 2007, the Third Palace-Fortress, somewhere near Rhodes under the Mediterranean Sea**

She woke up.

And for the first time, she felt at peace.

It was really blissful.

The nightmares were gone.

Everything had been a nightmare.

She raised her hand and tried to summon the water into creating her a new dress.

And suddenly the pain exploded in her arm.

She had been already leaving her bed.

Her strength vanished and it took her warrior’s reflexes to fall on it and not on the carpet nearby.

“What in the name by the Pit-“

“**Careful, sister**,” the sensation of pain vanished, and light blue water caressed her skin, “**you aren’t as powerful as you once were**.”

Fortunately, she recognised this voice.

“Rhode,” she shook her head as her sister materialised and helped her used the bed as an improvised seat. “Why do I feel so weak?”

“**What do you remember?**” She didn’t like the expression. It was one of pity. It wasn’t supposed to be like that. She was the one who protected her sisters. She was-

Something flashed at the surface of her thoughts.

An artefact shaped like a crown of blue-green tentacles. The laughter of a spurned lover. Pain. More pain. The whispers of-

She tried to banish it from her mind, and it was incredibly difficult.

“I take it they weren’t nightmares, then.”

“**They weren’t**.”

“How long?”

Rhode hesitated.

“**We can have that conversation once**-“

“Rhode. I am not one of the guinea fowls sired by the Master of Olympus. How long?”

“**Three thousand and five hundred years**,” the Light of the Sea answered grimly. “**Give it or take it a few decades**.”

Millennia. She had known it was going to be bad, but still-

Millennia. And the worst part was that as the nightmares were still trying to echo in the recesses of her head, she almost understood it. Would you send someone to free her, knowing there was a chance the heroine would be condemned to suffer the same torment as she?

Millennia. And as she tightened her fists, she could watch over her entire body, helped in that by the mirror at the other end of the bedroom. Black hair. Green eyes.

While she had forgotten a lot, she had not lost all her memories.

“I lost my immortality. How?”

“**Our mortal brother had to cut deeply to free you**.”

She snorted.

“Not *one of our brothers*?”

“**There was a Great Prophecy made some decades ago. Father had to make a good effort to not sleep with mortals, sister**.”

“I really missed a lot, it seems.” And by all the abysses, it had been such a long time she felt so weak. She would really have to train once again.

“**You did**.” Rhode hesitated. “**Your name, I’m afraid it is**-“

“Lost? Yes.” The former Heiress to the Throne of Atlantis grimaced. “It is part of the nightmares. It is too bad, I liked it. Does someone remember my mortal name?”

“**Our parents do, of course, but not anyone else...*Aspasia***.”

“And does anyone call her children that in this day and age?”

“**Probably not**,” her favourite sister smirked. “**I think these days the new variant is Aspen**.”

“Aspen,” she mused, “I like it.”

She tried to leave the seat-bed, and her legs failed once again.

Predictably, Rhode laughed.

“You should try the same one day, sister. You wake up and kick Antaeus where he deserves to be hit, and the next moment, you’ve slept for three millennia and lost all your divine powers. I suppose it is too much to hope my symbol of power survived?”

She had hoped for an answer, but there wasn’t any-

“Mother?”

Rhode was suddenly not alone in the bedroom. There was little Kymopoleia, of course, but no one sane could give her all the attention, not when there was-

Aspen felt herself be embraced in a hug she didn’t realise to have missed so much.

“**Welcome home, daughter**.”

**3 January 2007, the Docks, Forge of All Perils, Sea of Monsters**

It had been a few hours since they had seen the entrails of the Forge of All Perils, and Erica Keller was still struggling with the sheer gigantism of it.

It seemed completely impossible, when you marvelled at the massive lake where dozens of warships were anchored, that a tiny group of Demigods could storm it and achieve what no one had done before.

It didn’t get better when you saw the bones of the Drakon. The daughter of Sol wasn’t a coward, but if you didn’t shiver when contemplating the fangs of the ancient monster, you were either stupid or utterly mad.

And now she was here, on a large balcony overhanging over the docks of the Forge of All Perils. Despite the early hour, the activity was already frenetic; a small army of Telekhines and denizens of the seas were everywhere, repairing damaged warships, transporting vast quantities of explosives and food, and more tasks she hadn’t a clue about.

The leader of the Suicide Squad was turning his back on her when she arrived.

“According to my network,” the son of Poseidon began as she was beginning to study the defences of this lake-submerged volcano, “your squadron left the Golden Horn with five warships. Your entire Cohort was five hundred Legionnaires-strong, and to these numbers could be added some three thousand Legionnaires and one thousand maintenance automatons. Correct?”

Erica gaped. How did he-

No. It was better to not be surprised anymore that Perseus Jackson knew information that shouldn’t be available to him.

“Correct,” the female Tribune cleared her throat with some difficulty. “But we have suffered massive losses. Of the original squadron, evidently, we only have the *Jupiter Invictus*. And it is because you generously loaned us the Golden Fleece that I have ninety-six Legionnaires left under my command.”

Yes, she had lost four out of five soldiers of her Cohort. And the worst part was that it could have been far worse than it had been.

“And some eight hundred-plus Auxiliaries are still alive,” the commander of the Suicide Squad enounced as if it was no big deal. “The automatons went overboard or got crippled one by one during this disastrous expedition.”

“I know,” and she didn’t like listening to someone repeating the cold, ugly facts, for all that technically they had fulfilled the goals they had been sent to accomplish in the first place. “I think that by leaving the remaining ships of the Twelfth Legio here, the remains of my Cohort can crew adequately the *Jupiter Invictus* and provide you some fire support for the next battle.”

“Ah, yes, speaking of that,” Perseus Jackson stared at the water below with what had to be a grimace, “there isn’t going to be a next battle.”

“Err...I don’t understand.”

The black-haired Demigod made a sound that was too cold to be a chuckle.

“I wouldn’t be unhappy if the Triumvirate decided to attack the Forge of All Perils, but I don’t think we can rely upon them to do the stupid thing. They know that before they can mount a major offensive, we will have replenished our missile stocks, and all the Demigods and Legacies we have here will be back at full strength. As long as they haven’t forgotten Actium and the naval beating I gave them during this Quest, I don’t think they will try a frontal assault here.”

Erica wasn’t going to say he was wrong.

The gates which had opened to let the *Inevitable Doom* and all the other ships enter this volcanic lake were massive and completely refurbished. Breaking through them would require days of effort. The only alternative was to climb up the slopes of the volcano. When you knew Jackson’s monstrous auxiliaries had built armoured redoubts and big batteries everywhere to prevent exactly that and sink entire fleets at the same time, you knew this solution wasn’t one.

“But you don’t think the Triumvirate leader is going to agree to a prisoner exchange.”

“I would love him to.” Perseus Jackson mused. “While the Golden Fleece healed the physical injuries, it can’t heal the minds and souls. And the reality is that my forces, as well as your Cohort, have seen too much. They desperately need months to rest, preferably within the boundaries of New Byzantium and in the middle of their friends.”

“But you don’t think it is going to happen.” The tone employed made it clear.

“One can always hope,” the younger Demigod rolled his shoulders. “But it is an unfortunate fact that on Olympus, you can only keep a secret if no one knows that this critical piece of information exists. And with the waves I created in the last days, I’m reasonably confident that every major God and Goddess devoted some part of his or her power to remember the rules applying to an Adjudicator. And to make it worse, the Triumvirate has been around for a long, long time, and they have lot of money and resources all across the world. The question isn’t if they will find the information they need; it is if they will find it before this year’s Lupercalia.”

The three days of celebration were from the thirteenth to the fifteenth of February, so fortunately, it wasn’t too far away.

“You must have already a counter-move prepared.” One red eye and one green eye turned to stare. “You are Perseus Jackson. I refuse to think the Demigod who found a way to win one round against a Titaness couldn’t think of a way to use his new duties as bait for something else.”

“You’re not wrong,” the son of Poseidon conceded. “That said, it is a bit more complicated than that. To begin with, I didn’t have many fall-back plans to free the God of the Forges and survive the power of a Titaness. Most of my contingencies involved becoming an Adjudicator at some point. I wish I could challenge a Titaness otherwise, but I can’t. I wasn’t strong enough for that, and to be painfully fair, no one among our group is as we speak.”

This was almost reassuring, in a way. After slaying a Drakon, demolishing Triumvirate fleets right and left, challenging Circe and getting away with it, freeing Calypso to fight her mother, and going to Hell, one could really wonder where the limits of the Suicide Squad were to be found.

“I was a bit more worried about not freeing the God of the Forges in time to do any good. And I also preferred that the majority of the Suicide Squad survived the ordeal.”

“Surely by now the Triumvirate can’t exactly muster anything comparable to the Titaness of the Seas.”

“No. But this doesn’t mean the danger is over, Tribune. In fact, now that we’re approaching the endgame, a single misstep could prove fatal in my attempts to complete this Great Quest. Why do you think I tried to swear eternal friendship to so many people?”

The worst part, Erica Keller mused internally, was that she didn’t even know if he was serious or not...

**4 January 2007, the New Onyx Palace, the Underworld**

Persephone had to admit, she had had concerns Calypso would come in obsidian armour or something equally outrageous for their marriage.

Thankfully, this dreadful possibility had been averted.

While the lower part of the Titaness’ wedding dress had been woven to imitate the black scales of a reptile, the upper part confirmed it was true black spider silk, as dark as the hair and the eyes of the immortal wearing the splendid gown.

“**Nice diadem**,” the younger immortal commented with a smile.

“**Mother kept some old jewels I offered her while I ruled over the Hesperides Garden. It would have been a shame not to use them**.”

Persephone giggled.

“**True, and they happen to be black...your favourite colour, if I’m not mistaken**.”

Calypso merely raised an eyebrow.

“**Someone has to take the colour black to celebrate our union, and you two didn’t volunteer**.”

“**She has a point**,” Khione murmured, and as she took two step forwards, the atmosphere felt far colder than it had any rights to be, yet it managed to stay refreshing and pleasant. As could be expected, the Queen of Snow and Ice was beautiful: her white hair was perfectly synchronised with the white-blue wedding dress she had chosen for today.

“**She has, yes**,” Persephone had chosen a red dress for the wedding, to go with her silver skin and crimson elaborate hairstyle. “**Our Champions are ready**?”

“**They are**.”

“**Then let not our future husband wait any further**.”

Classic music of violins and other chord instruments began to play out the moment they passed the gates, and after twenty metres, their Champions followed on their heels. As could be expected, their robes had been chosen to compliment their own, albeit with some differences: her half-sister, for example, had the black scales-theme from the neck to the shoes, giving off the impression she could transform into a Hydra at any moment.

Overall, though, Persephone was very satisfied by the effect.

Three Goddesses and three Champions. Two Sirens of Gemstones, two female Ice Drakons, and two Night Hydras.

They were powerful, beautiful, and the Underworld had taken their hearts.

They were regal.

And they walked into a throne room almost emptied of any spectators.

This was a deliberate choice on their part, and their husband had agreed.

The news had already begun to spread out, and to say the reactions had not been positive in certain places was an understatement of the highest order.

Thus aside from their Champions, which as representatives of their power and the Suicide Squad deserved to be here, each had sent a single invitation.

To her displeasure, Persephone had been the only one which had had her letter returned unopened.

Thankfully, it had been several days ago, and the thought didn’t manage to break her serenity nowadays.

If her mother didn’t want to participate in her wedding, so be it. The former Goddess of Spring had invited Hecate instead, who had come dressed like a witch: long black hat, elegant sleeveless black dress showing plenty of skin tattooed with sorcery glyphs.

Khione, unsurprisingly, had invited her father. The God of the Northern Wind had answered the call, appearing like a regal king of northern Scandinavia, his hair as white as his daughter, and his majestic blue uniform half-disappearing under the fur of what had to be a monstrous polar bear.

When it came to the former prisoner of Ogygia, there had never been any question Tethys would be invited. Though given recent events, there had been some uncertainty the Titaness would accept. These worries were now put at rest; Oceanus’ wife had come, and not as a pirate: instead she had left the outlaw clothes for some sort of marchioness attire – very similar to the ones the French nobles wore before the Revolution removed plenty of overinflated heads. Of course, no mortal noble could have tried to make an entire costume of flowing water like she did and with these shining beige-blue colours.

There had been more uncertainty to who exactly Hades would invite today. It was out of the question to send a letter to the King of Olympus, obviously, and most of her siblings didn’t approve her choice, so they were also out. In the end, it appeared that Poseidon in person had been the recipient of the last invitation.

Equally unsurprisingly, the God of the Seas had chosen to play his part by dressing in a dark blue Admiral’s uniform. Nothing was missing; not the parade sword, and certainly not the beard of an old man of the sea.

Persephone merely blinked, but deep inside, she was pleasantly surprised.

As far as messages went, it was a powerful one in favour of their union. More importantly, it was a hint Atlantis intended to do far more than speak platitudes should hostilities open against someone who wasn’t going to be named here.

And Hades-

Hades was now in front of them, and they gave him their hands. Three Queens, but a single union. Three Domains, forever bound to the Lord of Hell. Three Hearts, for as long as there were souls to judge and rule under the world of mortals.

Hades was indomitable, and looking more beautiful than ever.

And she loved him.

It had taken a lot of time for her to acknowledge this truth, but she loved him.

His hand’s touch was enough to lit the inferno inside her chest.

“**Shall we, my Queens**?”

“**We shall**,” Khione, Calypso and she all answered together.

And the four of them advanced together towards the altar, leaving their old lives behind them.

**4 January 2007, Grand Strategium, Forge of All Perils**

If someone had told her before this Great Quest she would enjoy spending her free time in near-boiling water, Annabeth would have thought they were raving mad.

Yet here she was, wearing a black swimsuit, and doing exactly that. The fact the water and the steam didn’t cook her like it had weeks ago also meant she had become stronger. The training and the battles worked, assuming you survived it. And after some time, you found it pleasant.

“So you think the Eidolons were created by the Earth Mother?” the daughter of Athena asked the girl she was sharing the huge pool with.

“It is only a guess,” Lou Ellen replied, and Annabeth almost blushed because her bikini hid very little of the curves of the daughter of Hecate. “But it would explain why the three possessing the Gorgons were able to pursue their own whims. As the only being who can give them orders is soundly asleep-“

“There is no one that can tell them some things are forbidden, yes.” The grey-eyed Demigoddess grimaced. “That doesn’t explain why the Gorgons thought getting Possessed was a good idea.”

“Power,” the sorceress replied as it was obvious...and then maybe it was, for her.

“Power?”

“They wanted enough power to break the curse your mother wove into their souls.”

Annabeth snorted.

“Good luck with that. The only way to break a divine curse upon yourself is to be so imbued with the divine that...oh.”

It would require them to become true Goddesses, much like a certain Egyptian ruler had.

“Yes, oh.” Lou Ellen Blackstone smirked.

Annabeth analysed all the details she may have missed in a few seconds. And she quickly arrived to an unpleasant conclusion – unpleasant for the Gorgon sisters, that was.

“It didn’t work. Once they got the power boost of the second Curse, they were unable to advance past that.”

“That’s my opinion too,” the other blonde Demigoddess nodded, basking in the near-boiling water. “The beginning of the plan was honestly not stupid, but the next steps failed. And once their power stagnated, the result was that instead of suffering a single Curse, they suffered the drawbacks of two, and they couldn’t remove the Possession themselves. This must have pleased the Eidolons. The Gorgon sisters, on the other hand, certainly didn’t enjoy the situation.”

“They suddenly had more power than they ever had at their fingertips, but never enough to accomplish their ambitions.”

“It is a good tale to warn everyone against the quest of absolute power.”

“Like with the Primordials,” Annabeth’s shudder wasn’t feigned at all. “I seriously hope we won’t get end up facing more cursed artefacts of them for the rest of this Great Quest.”

“According to a certain source of mine,” in all likelihood she spoke of the leader of the Suicide Squad, “there is a strong possibility the Primordials follow the Rule of Three when it comes to their interventions. They are too powerful; they can’t intervene too often in mortal affairs without causing tremendous collateral damage. So we should be fine for this Great Quest.”

“For this Great Quest,” Annabeth replied with a sigh. Demigods and Demigoddesses generally thought themselves very lucky to complete one without losing their lives in a mortal lifetime. The Suicide Squad was already participating in its second, and given the earth-shaking events, one could hardly imagine it was going to stop there.

“Small victories, don’t forget,” the blonde sorceress smiled.

“Does it apply to the Sire and the bat traitor?”

“Probably not,” Lou Ellen’s smile disappeared immediately. “There was a message from the God of the Forges around twelve hours ago. We were more or less commanded to keep the Key theft a secret. And the way it was written, I think whatever it is that Key is supposed to open, it isn’t good news for anyone.”

“I can’t believe a Demigoddess thought it was a good idea.”

“What were we saying about power?”

Annabeth laughed, but her heart wasn’t in it.

“Yes, but the Gorgons,” it was difficult at the best of times to call them ‘my half-sisters’, “were already cursed by my mother. I don’t like it, but the argument can be made that since they were hideous after the first Curse, the second and the Possession were just increasing the degree of ugliness. And apparently, since the Possession was voluntary, they retained a fairly high degree of control. The bat traitor, however, was not cursed before we entered the Sea of Monsters.”

“True. There are researches going on at New Byzantium, but our shadow-shrouded traitor didn’t leave us papers or anything to conveniently explain exactly how she was prepared for her transformation, the identity of the ‘Sire’, or more about her motives than what we know.”

“And the ex-Titaness of the Drakons hadn’t any ideas on that front.”

“I’m pretty sure she was lying.” Lou Ellen smirked. “Yes, she was our ally for this battle, but ally doesn’t mean we won her allegiance or anything like that. The Third Queen of Hell had to know that whatever she told us would be relayed to Olympus in record time. And since she holds a massive grudge against the Olympians, she stayed quiet.”

“Power and bad decisions all around,” she commented peevishly.

She turned her head, and Lou Ellen was giving her an evil smirk.

“What?”

“You’re one to talk, your Owlishness.” The daughter of Athena groaned instinctively. She hated that nickname! All thoughts about stopped with the next words, though. “Don’t think I have missed the doe eyes you’re giving my boyfriend.”

“I do not!”

Lou Ellen Blackstone’s black eyes suddenly seemed to suck all the light of the Grand Strategium.

“Okay,” the grey-eyed Demigoddess confessed, well aware her cheeks were burning, and not because of the hot water. “It’s just a crush! With Luke telling me he loves me like a sister, not as a potential girlfriend, I have been looking elsewhere!”

“You really have a thing for bad boys, don’t you?” The sorceress chuckled.

Annabeth was sure that by now, from forehead to chin, she had to be redder than a tomato.

“It isn’t like that!” She weakly protested, before her brain conjured images that ruined all her efforts to concentrate on something else.

“You’re a horrible liar, dear.” The black-eyed Demigoddess swam and halved the distance separating them. “And I think it’s time we have a serious conversation on this spicy subject, you and I.”

**4 January 2007, Panathenaic Stadium, Athens, Greece**

Athens had changed.

Evidently, saying the opposite would have been a far bigger surprise.

The last time she had seen the city had been a long, long time ago.

Which Olympian had said once that no mortal kingdom, no matter how powerful, was nothing against the ravages of time?

Oh, yes. *Her*.

“We could turn away, sister.”

“Yes, we could.” She chuckled at the stunned expression of her little sister. If there was one thing she had really missed, it was their genuine emotions which were not fuelled by wrath or hatred. “What? No matter what the Fates pretend, we all have a choice in the end.”

“So-“

“It’s just not a good one.”

“The food is far better now that it was in the old times. I loved the olive oil we could add to every dish.”

“I’m sure you did, Euryale. But haven’t you missed the problem? These meals are better, but they are also expensive. And we have no money save what we awoke with.”

“I’m sure we could earn more.” Her expression of disbelief must have been evident, because Stheno quickly finished her sentence. “They are trying to rebuild the Pantheon. Since we have the gifts of architecture, I’m sure we could find a way to become the architects-in-chief of the project.”

“And how do you intend to explain to the present workers that you were there when the first temples of the Acropolis were built?”

“Err...”

“Moreover, without her permission, staying too close to the Acropolis would be just a death sentence.”

“We could ask your lover. Now that we are back to...to Demigoddesses like we were before the incident, maybe-“

“I will not call him!” She realised she had shouted, and she leashed her anger as fast as she could. “I am not going to call him. His son...it was his son who broke our curses, sister. I can’t face him. Not today.”

“If so,” Euryale snorted, “then we really have to enter the stadium before it closes for the evening.”

“There’s still two hours. We have plenty of time-“

“Let’s deal with this before I lose my courage.”

The last strange money papers were just enough to pay for the entrance, and the trio of sisters was able to step into what the guides had called the Panathenaic Stadium.

It was a massive monument dedicated to sport, one which would have generated plenty of approval at Olympia in the old days.

It was made entirely of marble, as far as they could see.

“It was rebuilt from an abandoned stadium for the 1896 Olympics.”

“The Master of Olympus must have loved that,” Euryale snarked. “Though I don’t understand why they don’t paint the marble instead of leaving it in this plain white. Do they really think everything was white in our time?”

“Who knows,” she shrugged. “Athens has one thousand times more people now than it did, but the Acropolis and the old city are in ruins.”

And that was when there was something left. There were just a few columns of the colossal Temple of Zeus, and plenty of other impressive monuments had disappeared without leaving a trace.

“I see her. She’s at the top, facing the track’s turn.”

The climb of the marble steps was an exercise of humility. Without the Curses powering them, it became cruelly evident how little they had exercised their bodies for as far as they remembered. They were still Demigoddesses, yes. But the first Hellhound would easily defeat them without shedding too much fur in the process.

*She* was waiting for them.

The Mist had to hide her from those who hadn’t the eyes to see, because somehow, three metres-tall hoplite women in bronze armour were not exactly common for this ‘New Athens’.

“**Euryale. Stheno. Medusa**.”

“Lady Athena,” she replied for her sisters.

Instantly, the grey glare pierced her like a divine arrow.

“Mother,” she grumbled.

“**Daughter**.”

“That’s as uncomfortable as we thought,” Euryale sighed. “Can we please move on?”

“She transformed us into monsters, sister!”

“**I did. And then you transformed yourselves into more terrible monsters, ensuring the transformation was irreversible. Am I wrong?**”

“No,” the former legendary Gorgon monster grumbled. Why couldn’t she stare at her eyes? They had *her* grey irises, but they were never able to master the piercing glare.

“What do we do now?” Stheno asked. “We aren’t monsters anymore, though I think the infamy of our name will ensure there will be more Gorgons spawned by the Pits. We are just Demigoddesses.”

“**You can work on redeeming yourselves**,” Athena told them in her commanding tone. “**Or you can choose another path. As Stheno suggested, you can call the Earthshaker and hope he is in a good mood**.”

So she had been listening to her from the very beginning. Curse her. Yes, it was a figure of speech.

“I will pass.” As good as the sex had been, it had not been good enough to face everything which came after. “You never begin a meeting without having a plan, *mother*. Please give us the bad news.”

“**The bad news, as you define it, is that you killed a son or a daughter of nearly every member of our Pantheon when you butchered the sailors who landed on your island. That’s a mountain of bad blood that has not been forgotten. Should I remove my protection, you will be dead before the next dawn**.”

Medusa groaned.

Even if you weren’t a daughter of Wisdom, you could tell where it was going. There weren’t many places where the denizens of Olympus did not have the right to transform a few Demigoddesses who had displeased them into a defenceless animal..

“Please tell us we are not going to eat at these wine-smelling tables again and give archery sessions with Chiron the centaur.”

“**I won’t say it, then**.” Had Athena uttered a joke? Quick, the world had to be ending...or maybe not.

“I hated this freaking camp.” Stheno grouched. “The sons of Apollo always mocked my architectural ideas.”

“And I got punished when I tried to burn the house of Artemis’ Huntresses.” Euryale added.

“I kept saying that injuring the children of the War God during mock battles was just a nice prayer to Vengeance.” Medusa affirmed piously, wincing when her mother gave her a disapproving expression. “What?”

“**I negotiated with a majority of the Council, and they agreed to assign you to a newly built house where you will stay the next year**.”

“Oh, good,” Stheno nodded enthusiastically. “I’m sure-“

“**During daylight hours, you will gain a measure of humility and modesty by doing the chores of the other Quester Demigods you were so loud in disparaging for millennia. This you will do for one year or until I will be satisfied, whichever ends last**.”

“Oh? And then we will be able to don our hoplite armours, surely?”

“**Not exactly**,” for those who doubted it, Medusa was willing to confirm it: her mother, Lady Athena, was a *vengeful bitch*. But saying it out loud may be a bit counter-indicated. “**Once I will know for sure the punishment has its intended result, you will place yourselves under the service of Perseus Jackson, and for the next couple of years, you will have to train with him**.”

Oh, no. Oh, no.

Was there something worse in her lexicon than vengeful bitch, for the sake of curiosity?

“He may still die in the Sea of Monsters, mother.” Euryale tried.

“**In that case, daughter, you have nothing to fear, no**?”

“Nothing but fear itself,” Medusa gritted between her teeth, truly aware that this punishment was awaiting them, no matter how hard they were going to try to escape it.

**5 January 2007, Healing Wing, Forge of All Perils, Sea of Monsters**

Leo knew instantly when he woke up.

Because it hurt like he was burning in the flames of Hell!

“RAAAARRRRRRRGGGHHHHHH!”

And then something awfully cold and liquid hit him everywhere.

“I give your ‘Raargh’ a nine out of ten, Amigo. But I advise not to lose control too much. I only have so much ‘special extinguishers’.”

“What?” His vision was blurry for many, many seconds, until he realised it was some sort of icy-foam in his face causing it. “Jackson? Where-“

He would have loved to continue his question, but his throat felt parched. Leo coughed.

And the flames came out of his mouth.

It was a good thing that a miniature snow storm erupted from his left, and stopped the fire before it burned everything.

“Okay, that was cool,” the young Demigod groaned miserably as he saw the mad grin. “You can thank Jade, you know. It’s thanks to her ice cocoons that you fever finally decreased and you didn’t burn from the inside.”

“Thank you, Jade,” the reptilian-looking ex-Huntress sniffed and left the room without a word.

Leo tried to escape the strange mattress where he had been sleeping, but his strength seemed to abandon him after a few gesticulations.

“Careful, now,” the son of Poseidon admonished him. “Don’t overexcite yourself. You need to recover before you even think of leaving this room.”

“And where is this room exactly?” he managed to ask weakly.

“The Forge of All Perils,” the leader of the Suicide Squad placed a bottle of water in his hands, and when the drops began to fall into his mouth, they felt both divine and painful.

His moan of pain was apparently seen as an incitation by Jackson to continue.

“Your father said the surgical operation was a success; the Heart of the Forge has now replaced your normal heart. So congratulations: you are the first member of the Suicide Squad to have your heart replaced by a mechanical marvel of science! And you got a cool scar in the process, by the way.”

This was...not so bad? At least Leo didn’t feel so, compared to the agony he had felt before. When he had begun to melt the Orichalcum anvil, it had been like someone was pouring molten metal on every part of his skin before burning his stomach.

“But...but we won.” His heart beat faster and-

SWOOSH!

He received more icy foam and other white stuff in his face.

“I said to not overexcite yourself!” Leo was sure at that moment Jackson had ‘volunteered’ to monitor him so that he could get his fun.

“Was it-“ he spat plenty of foam from his mouth. “Was it necessary?”

“Your hands were beginning to burn, and your ears were expelling smoke.” The lone red eye towered over him while the mouth was malicious. “So yes, it was really necessary. I have many talents, but I am not *that* fire-proof.”

Leo stared.

Perseus stared back, and Leo flinched.

“Anyway, since you desire the answers so much: yes, we won the battle. I didn’t get to inflict a true defeat upon the Titaness, but my plan was sufficient to convince her to throw the towel and return to the oceanic depths. Your father was freed, and nobody important was killed during the final confrontation. You were in fact the one who was the most heavily injured, since the nature of the operation made it impossible to use the Golden Fleece as long as you hadn’t assimilated your new heart properly.”

“What?” The foam jet on his hands was really unpleasant.

“No excitement!” Leo hoped it wasn’t going to be a permanent affair, because he already hated this extinguisher. “And yes, I’m afraid this was the truth. The Golden Fleece *heals*, Amigo. If we had used it immediately, it would have removed the Heart of the Forge from your chest and regenerated your old one. It surely would have saved your life, but it also would have returned your little flamer problem to the starting line.”

Leo grimaced. He wasn’t smart like plenty of heroes, but he knew what Jackson meant.

“I could have died.”

“Yes,” at least Jackson didn’t try to pretend the contrary. “But in my partial opinion, the pyrokinesist gift would have killed you anyway if nothing was done; it would just have taken longer. It may have taken a decade or two, but the outcome was inevitable. There’s a reason why your father tries to not giving his children this gift nowadays. It’s not just incredibly potent and can be used for evil in cruel hands; it burns you from the inside too.”

“Err...” suddenly, excitement vanished, leaving only exhaustion. His head hit the large pillow again. “Okay, we won.”

Leo knew he should feel happier, but he felt *so tired*.

“The flames...I will need to control them again?”

“You will need to control your emotions along with them. The solution your father gave you has its advantages and its drawbacks.”

“Did I get taller?”

He heard Jackson erupt in laughter.

“You have gained more muscles, Amigo. But I’m afraid that the location where your body grew is one I am not going to check myself.”

Leo wanted to curse him, but he fainted again before the insults could come out of his mouth.

**5 January 2007, Palace of Love, Paris, France**

For the mortals, it appeared as a five-star hostel which happened to have a front view on the Eiffel Tower and several of the greatest monuments build next to the Seine River.

For those who had the eyes to see through the Mist, it was of course more than that.

There was enough splendour and extravagance in the architecture and the decorations to give the Palace four or five more stars.

Naturally, if you could see it, you also knew it wasn’t a place where you should come with young children.

The pink-and-red statues of the entrance alone were welcoming you with very suggestive poses, and once you passed through the entrance hall, one could say it would take a particular blind man to not guess who owned this miniature paradise.

Aphrodite was waiting for him at a table on the first floor, the remains of what had to be a copious breakfast in front of her.

She had changed.

By itself, the words meant nothing. Even Gods and Goddesses changed millennium after millennium, centuries after centuries. The Olympians were not the same as they had been after the end of the Titanomachy. It was one of the rare things that everyone – including his two brothers – would firmly agree upon.

But Aphrodite had changed a lot in the last days.

Her blonde mane was unkempt, and her body managed to combine something very close to satisfaction...and exhaustion. The almost-transparent silk nightgown hid almost nothing, which was why his eyes could clearly see her appearance was incredibly muscled.

And then there were eyes. They clearly burned with some potent fire.

“**Poseidon**.”

“**Aphrodite**.”

“**I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised you came to plead the cause of your son**.” The Goddess of Love devoured a croissant in a vengeful manner.

“**Three and Thirteen, Aphrodite**,” the ruler of the Seas was sure his tone made his disappointment clear. “**It is one of your worst Lust Curses, and I’ve seen men driven utterly mad by the minor ones**.”

“**You exaggerate everything**.”

“**No, I’m not. When some men prefer throwing themselves at Artemis in the vain hope it would help them end the Curse, despite knowing very well she will skewer them with arrows, the Curse is nothing but a disguised death sentence. Or should we speak of the time when you forced an entire city to mate with pigs, all the while each mating transformed them further and further into beasts?**”

Aphrodite scowled, but didn’t retort. Instead she sipped the Ambrosia in the glass in front of her.

“**Fine. I may have gone...a bit overboard**.” The Goddess of Love admitted. “**But your bastard deserved my wrath**.”

“**He solved your little marriage problem**.”

“**I wanted a divorce, not this solution**!”

“**I think the Lady protests too much**,” the husband of Amphitrite managed to answer without gloating. “**It’s been a while since anyone had seen you that *satisfied***.”

Aphrodite had the good grace to blush.

“**Fine. Hephaestus at last has shown...he can have the vigour and the enthusiasm of his sire. Happy**?”

“**Oh, yes**,” and he was recording that conversation. All Atlantis would cheer him for that juicy piece of blackmail.

“**Anyway. Your son didn’t respect his part of the bargain. I was supposed to be able to absorb Isis inside myself, not end up with a Goddess of Water and the Nile**.”

“**You were the first to not respect your part of the bargain**,” Poseidon reminded her. “**Your great misfortune is that for once, the Demigod you bargained with had the power to do something about it**.”

Aphrodite scowled, but didn’t lash out in anger. She preferred emptying all the plates in front of her. Judging by the evidence available, the carnal sessions with her husband required *a lot* of energy.

“**I was thinking about incinerating him. But it might go against the Laws to do it during a Quest. Then I thought about dungeons, torture instruments, and slave collars. I settled for this Curse**.”

“**Am I supposed to praise your restraint?**” it really felt bad when he was the sane immortal in the room.

“**I am Lust and Passion, Poseidon. Your son wants to play the Great Game? I am ready to oblige him**.”

If the Age of Olympus ended, there was no doubt it would be because the cycle of vengeance and retaliation would grow out of control.

“**Aphrodite. I don’t know the exact terms of what you and my son settled for when you made a bargain, but one thing was sure: it created a link between you two, as tenuous as it is**.”

“**Yes?**” Clearly, she didn’t see what he wanted to show her.

“**Perseus is the Adjudicator of Love now, and this can last for close to an entire year**.”

“**I know that, but continue**.”

“**You might have not paid attention for the last days, but your Curse is clearly inactive, and will be for as long as he is the Adjudicator**.”

“**True, but I don’t see**-“

“**Have you considered the possibility**,” Poseidon turned his head to watch the Eiffel Tower in the distance, “**that my son will find a way to cancel or negate your Curse entirely?**”

“**Impossible!**” The female Olympian replied immediately. “**I am the only one who can cancel the Curse! And the other alternative is for your son to become immortal, which he is far from achieving!**”

“**Some might say**,” the Lord of the Earthquakes and Horses mused, “**that engineering the Apotheosis of an enemy Queen, becoming the Adjudicator with minimal Olympian support, and managing to free a God from the clutches of a Titaness were impossible feats too**.”

Poseidon counted silently up to twelve before shrugging.

“**Do you want to take the risk Perseus achieves the impossible once again?**”

“**You...**” the flames burned in Aphrodite’s eyes before receding. “**You have a point**.”

Any other time, it would have been time to crack a joke and remove the existing tensions between them.

This time, it wasn’t. Hephaestus’ wife had not conceded anything for now.

“**The clear problem is that I did curse your son with all my divine essence gathered in a single place**,” the blonde-haired Goddess let a long pink cocktail dress replace her red nightgown. “**To cancel the Curse, I will have to fulfil the same requirements again, and this can’t be done on a whim**.”

Nothing about the Ancient Laws was muttered or even hinted directly at, but both immortals understood it perfectly.

“**We’re also supposed to stop with all the divine interventions in support of your son. Several daughters, yours included, were fined because your brother was in a very good mood. Next time, the punishment will undoubtedly be worse**.”

Poseidon gave her a slightly ironic look. For this action at least, Aphrodite had to know she would get his support.

“**And the Triumvirate will be there. Don’t give me that look! You know as much as I do that they’re going to take the chance of challenging the current Adjudicator. The second Augustus of the Triumvirate has always been the passionate kind. He is not going to take the safe path**.”

“**May I suppose this means you are going to think about it**?”

Aphrodite watched him seriously for a good minute before nodding.

“**Yes, Poseidon, I will think about it**.”

**6 January 2007, somewhere into the Forge of All Perils, Sea of Monsters**

It had been somewhat a relief when Jackson hadn’t asked her for blackmail when it came to the marriage of Lady Khione and the other Queens of Hell.

Sure, the son of Poseidon had asked for photos, but then so had everyone else who hadn’t been present, which could be translated as ‘everyone in the Suicide Squad’.

Of course, Perseus Jackson was looking tired and hardly his usual grinning self today. He could be best described as ‘distracted’. Yes, that was the right word.

Unfortunately, the remaining Huntresses weren’t distracted at all. One could easily say they were as antagonistic as ever when she was nearby.

“What is she doing here?” Ellen glared murderously when the door slammed closed behind them.

“She is here because I want to speak to everyone who was once sworn to the Hunt Goddess.” The leader of the Suicide Squad rebuffed her question like it was a bug to be squashed. “More questions that will waste my time? No? Excellent!”

Jade passed a hand in her hair, preparing herself for the worse. Whatever the reason for this meeting, it seemed Jackson had decided to open it with iron gloves.

It also had to be noted that the place for the meeting was really a dark one. It looked like an amphitheatre for Telekhines had been given that honour, except all the seats were made of obsidian, awfully uncomfortable, and only a tiny amount of light could at all times illuminate the near-empty room.

“I have reasons to believe the Sire of the Drakons has plans for the Huntresses, and so far, he has been able to accomplish each and every one of his goals.”

Jade hated to be proven right so quickly.

Ellen wasn’t convinced, clearly. And she was no shy telling him so.

“Why shouldn’t we blame you instead of the Sire of the Drakons, Jackson? After all, whatever fake apologies you gave before, you were awfully satisfied to see us fall one by one!”

“Please remember,” the lone red eye fixed Ellen emotionlessly, “that the only Huntress I can say to have arranged the dismissal from the Hunt is Jade.”

“That’s not-“

“He’s right, Ellen,” Kimiko intervened, grimacing and trying at the same time to not show her long blue serpentine tongue. The Huntress has recovered surprising quickly from the madness effects of the Sunken Temple. “Jackson certainly did nothing to save us from our mistakes, but he didn’t plot all the way to ensure we would die before the end of this Quest. If he really wanted us to perish, he could have thrown all of us against the Drakon, and we would have shared the fate of Phoebe, Kalinda and Eudoxia.”

“Still-“

“Your fellow Huntress is right,” Perseus Jackson confirmed. “And to be blunt, I only had use for Jade, since she proved to have a heart and the ability to mourn for a friend, something none of the rest you manifested.”

Save Iphigenia, all the girls present looked like someone had punched them in the face.

“You could try to corrupt us one by one. Or you want to avoid Lady Artemis’ wrath!”

Perseus facepalmed. Hard.

“Dear Huntress, your mistress is already incredibly angry at me. Something about the fact I’m the architect of what was an incredibly potent wave of Lust and Love spreading across the world. And before that, we weren’t exactly eternal friends either. She was furious that four Huntresses out of nine died under my watch and one chose the Queen of Snow instead of her while she lived. I’m sorry, but after five Huntresses removed from the Suicide Squad’s order of battle, the fate of the four last ones was immaterial. The Lady of the Hunt was going to be mad at me no matter what I did to appease her wrath.”

The worst part was that it definitely felt like the truth. And Jade was certain that Perseus had begun this Quest expecting to earn Artemis’ eternal enmity.

“But why now are you thinking that the Sire-“

“Because of me,” Iphigenia said coldly. “Am I right?”

Jade was powerful now. Ice flowed in her veins, and she could hear the song of Frost. While she couldn’t change herself into a true Drakon for now, as she wasn’t ready for it, she could take a hybrid form which would bolster her offensive skills.

And every time she so much glanced at the ex-Huntress in the blue-green scaly suit, her senses screamed DANGER.

“You are.” The Demigod who had survived the attacks of the Titaness Tethys confirmed her statement.

“How so?” Kimiko asked. “You told us Nocturna was on the island, stealing some object...oh.”

“Funny, isn’t it?” Perseus’ smile was only a shadow of his normal grins. “I admit it took me a couple of days to arrive to that conclusion myself. Yes, Nocturna did steal an object precious to the Gods. But why did we think that’s all she could do? It isn’t like we monitored her moves. She could have, you know, created a sort of magical anchor to ensure that once the Cursed Crown was removed from Charybdis’ hands, it would end up in an ancient temple of the Dreaming One.”

“But that would assume she knew my birth name,” Iphigenia frowned. “And I certainly didn’t tell her. Only Phoebe knew, and we didn’t speak of it aboard the *Inevitable Doom*. Unless you told her, Jackson?”

“I didn’t know,” the son of Poseidon admitted, and Ellen and Jenna opened their mouths in surprise. “What? I am resourceful, not omniscient.”

Jade giggled, this was too funny to not take the amusement where it come from. Even the other girls derided themselves.

It didn’t last long, but it felt good.

“All right,” Jade said in the name of every girl assembled in the dark amphitheatre. “I understand your point. Of our original numbers, we have four dead, I left the service of the Goddess, and Iphigenia and Kimiko have been marked, one by the Drowning One and the other by the icy curses of the Ice Drakon, and the latter is synonymous with the Sire.”

As a consequence, it left only Ellen and Jenna as the unmarked and unwavering Huntresses.

“You think the Sire is going to try to ensure we leave the Hunt or we die before the end of the Great Quest,” Jenna spoke for the two of them.

“I do,” Perseus bluntly replied.

“Given the ‘successes’ this monster had, I’m not going to tell it is impossible we will perish,” the Huntress’ eyes narrowed and her fists tightened in controlled fury. “But what would be the point? Don’t get me wrong, Jackson, I am in no hurry to die. But as I’m pretty sure you know, there are thousands of other girls serving Lady Artemis. Whether the nine of us die, break our vows, demand to leave the Hunt formally, or transform into something new, it won’t be the end of the Hunt. The Goddess losing nine worth Huntresses will be a tragedy, but hardly a military disaster. The loss of experience will sting, but the casualties will be compensated in mere months, assuming they haven’t already been.”

“Yes.” Jade didn’t know if it was more frightening that Perseus agreed with one of her former sisters, or that he looked resigned and grim. “This was my reasoning too when I investigated the problem. Numbers aren’t the answer. Or rather, they’re not, from a military perspective. On the other hand, there is the symbolism. The blood of virgin girls flowed. It could be a sacrifice.”

“Could?” Kimiko wondered.

Perseus grimaced.

“There are problems with that theory. To begin with, nine isn’t a sacred number for the Lady of the Hunt, or for most Olympian deities. She had far more than nine Huntresses when the Hunt was assembled for the first time. She was not given nine Domains when she knelt in front of the Master of Olympus.”

Not for the first time, Jade was forced to acknowledge that while Perseus Jackson did crazy stuff most of the time, there was a redoubtable sharp mind behind the vicious grins.

“Could it be a coincidence?” Ellen asked. “The Sire may have need of something incredibly important, and we’re just the collateral damage?”

“It’s possible, I guess,” and his voice made it obvious the son of Poseidon didn’t believe it for a single second. “But I don’t believe in coincidences in the first place, and there have been way too many instances of enemy actions during this Great Quest to not plan for the worst.”

**7 January 2007, Ultra-Giant Yacht *Germanicus*, close to Saint Lucia, eastern Caribbean**

The day had begun on an excellent note, in that case incredibly good sex. Then he had gone swimming, before eating first-class grilled lobster.

And then there were plenty of good news from his sister.

Neo Helios should have known it wasn’t going to last.

“I still think your so-called ‘Ultra-Giant Yacht’ remains a colossal waste of money.”

The true Emperor of the Roman World frowned. These were moments like this where he was frustrated he needed allies like those.

Alas, saying it out loud would be counter-productive.

“You have your idea about what can be proper headquarters; I have mine, Neo Romulus. Contrary to an old-fashioned fortress, in case of setbacks my ship can just sail away when I give the order. And as your greatest headache proved, the concept of a ‘Q-Yacht’ is sound, as long as its armament is appropriate for the encountered threats.”

It was a strange irony that he hadn’t known of the efforts of Perseus Jackson to build himself a super-mega yacht before it sailed. Had they unconsciously copied each other? Possible. Great minds thought alike, after all, and the *Germanicus* – named for his beloved father – was supposed to fulfil many of the same needs the Suicide Squad had indentified for Questers deploying far away from their bases.

“You make it sound so clever. Yet I don’t see you take the field. Instead you are trying to work upon your sun tan and-“

“Marcus Antonius,” the First Augustus of the Triumvirate interrupted in a cold forty degrees lower than the current temperature of the Caribbean Sea around him, “first of all, no matter how fast, the *Germanicus* would need more than a month to reach the Sea of Monsters. Given how little time is left, there is no point wasting fuel and resources, assuming of course I wouldn’t be intercepted by some Atlantean military forces or someone else. Then I will remind you that you and I are *allies*. The oaths we swore are an alliance, not a *suicide pact*. And you were the one who assured us before the Battle of Forge MP-42 that you didn’t need our help.”

The Second Augustus glared, which combined with his unshaven beard of seven days, gave him really the looks of a proper barbarian. Isis being kidnapped by Perseus Jackson had really hit the former Magister Equitum hard.

“I apologise,” the other Roman said at last.

“Apologies accepted,” Neo Helios said magnanimously. “Now I presume you want the information we were able to bribe away from Olympus and other sources?”

“I do, please.” The holographic image of the other Augustus shivered for a second. “But I would like to know more of the reinforcements incoming first.”

“Well,” he cleared his throat, “Medea sent us a message five hours ago to tell that she’s on her way. For the generous price we’ve negotiated, she agreed to bring several of her most powerful assets, but for operational secrecy, she had to stay tight-lipped in her messages. You will have to welcome her at the Labyrinth’s Gate, though, with at least one large transport.”

“That is not going to be a problem.”

“Unfortunately, you won’t be able to count upon Circe.” He stated as he watched the magnificent sea and the paradise island in the distance. “Jupiter decided to levy a significant fine via Athena as a sort of counter-ransom, and the Titaness of Magic has been involved as an intermediary. It seems that there’s now enough proof she helped you, and Olympus didn’t like that at all. Circe being Circe, it’s clear she will likely plead you negotiated her help using false allegations, and she was clearly an innocent party unaware of what was truly going on.”

“Olympus will never believe that.”

“No, but Olympus will fine her and let her amuse herself with her spa.” Neo Helios shrugged. “In the end, the Master of Olympus is likely going to consider that having to tolerate Perseus Jackson’s presence on her island was an adequate punishment they will have a lot of difficulties to beat without rousing her mother’s wrath.”

Circe would likely not be among the top victors of this Great Quest, but she wouldn’t be among the defeated parties either.

“As a result, your reinforcements will be limited to Medea and whatever forces you’re able to move to the Zone Mortalis in extremis. Now for the Adjudicator, there is indeed a flaw.”

“Ha! I knew it, by the-“

“It isn’t a good one from your perspective.” The First Augustus was prompt to kill the enthusiasm of his ally. “An Adjudicator *can* be challenged. But as this position which has been often synonymous with impartial Judge is often handed out by immortals, it is not so simple. You need to find someone suitable to play the role of ‘High Judge’. If you are successful, you will be able to challenge Perseus Jackson to a series of trials. He loses, he is no longer the Adjudicator, and your wife is freed.”

“Good,” Marcus Antonius smiled.

“No.” Neo Helios decided to squash this stupidity before it had the time to root itself in the mind of his ally. “It’s not good at all. The Roman Lord of Thunder amended the damn thing after Julius Caesar tried to use his silver-tongue one time too many, and as such when I said ‘someone suitable’, this means ‘a member of the Olympian Council or a former Adjudicator’.”

The second –and lesser – Augustus immediately scowled.

“This is...inconvenient.”

Neo Helios snorted.

“I think it’s something more than that, Neo Romulus. As much as certain Olympians hate Perseus Jackson, none of them will try to support his defeat when a disaster for him means calamity for the current God of War.” In practical terms, it was a case where Olympus wanted the Triumvirate dead far more than they wanted the severed head of the son of Poseidon. “If we involve someone like the God of Wine, he’s going to set a series of trials in a lake of wine, and your opponent will take great pleasure drowning your Champions and yourself, and he likely will do it in a way where you will end up dead in a thoroughly ridiculous manner.”

“This is blatant favouritism from Olympus!”

“It is. So what? The entire set of rules is made to make sure the Gods have fun, not the mortals. And did I mention that assuming you value your life, you also have to let Jackson name an Olympian as one of the two ‘Referees’ who will oversee the trials of the aforementioned challenge?”

Marcus Antonius looked like a barbarian who had just eaten rotten fruit.

“Fine,” he almost spat. “I suppose I have just to choose a former Adjudicator or someone who fulfilled an equivalent role, instead of an Olympian.”

“That would be for the best,” Neo Helios agreed while checking his nails were perfect, as usual, “except the times changed, and like plenty of things, the Gods progressively abandoned affairs where three Goddesses asked a mortal who was the most beautiful one.”

There were only so many times you could throw golden apples before you ended up with an Olympianomachy who destroyed your Pantheon, in the end.

“There were plenty of times where mortals were selected by Gods or Goddesses, to be sure,” the owner of the Hyper-Giant Yacht *Germanicus* continued, “but in the last couple of centuries, there have been no Adjudicators or equivalents. Logically, most of the people who qualify are long dead.”

And naturally, the Triumvirate status of outlaws plus Perseus Jackson’s connections to his uncle meant the very idea of asking for the soul of a dead Adjudicator was ludicrous.

Marcus Antonius grimaced, at last understanding how much the son of Poseidon had stacked the deck to ensure there wouldn’t be any challenge before the Lupercalia.

“The list is not long, I take it.”

“It is not a list,” the golden-haired Roman Augustus corrected acidly, “since it has only a single name.”

“One name?” the bearded Augustus said aghast.

“What did you expect? Most souls don’t manage to escape the Fields of Punishment or the realm of the Rich One, and plenty of those who do are caught not long after.” Neo Helios pinched his nose. “I advise you to abandon that idea and go for an exchange of prisoners. This entire challenge of an Adjudicator? It reeks, Neo Romulus. Yes, you can win big if you defeat your opponent, but the son of the Earthshaker will destroy you if he emerges victorious. Right now, he’s forced to keep Isis as an ‘honoured guest’. If he wins, he will be able to make her a widow and pretty much hand her out to Olympus where she will become a Goddess bound to follow the whims of the current King.”

Obviously, it would be an extremely unpleasant for the Triumvirate, no matter how much the Apotheosis had proven they were on the correct path.

“Jackson won, Neo Romulus. Give him his victory, and move on.”

He knew before the former Magister Equitum opened his mouth that his arguments had missed the target.

“I am not going to let this little bastard gloat! He won’t blackmail me! I had already to suffer Octavian’s, I won’t tolerate Perseus Jackson humiliating me!”

Ah, so *that* was what was injuring Marcus Antonius’ pride above all.

“Please give me the name of the former Adjudicator. The sooner I contact him, the faster the challenge can be organised.”

“As you wish,” though the Second Augustus didn’t yet know the worst part of the news, “the man you seek is the former Adjudicator of the Sun. His full name is Imperator Caesar Lucius Aelius Aurelius Commodus Augustus Pius Felix Sarmaticus Germanicus Maximus Britannicus. But he is better known as-“

“Commodus,” the other member of the Triumvirate was close to apoplexy. “The only possible candidate for a High Judge is this megalomaniacal cretin who only thinks of gladiator games?”

Neo Helios grinned innocently.

“I warned you beforehand that you weren’t going to like it.”

**8 January 2007, Primaris Conference Room, Forge of All Perils**

The man was good-looking.

Yet the moment he saw him materialise on the enormous screen of the conference room, Richard could honestly say he hated him on first sight.

Was it the fact the oiled, tanned abs were bigger than his? No. Was it the perfect white teeth? No. Was it the eyes? No.

Richard Grant couldn’t explain it, but something pushed him to kill the man, and to do it slowly.

It was of course impossible, and he knew it. The man speaking was too far away to be fired upon, assuming the video was recorded as they speak, and they didn’t even know if it was the case.

“King of the Pirates Perseus Jackson,” the voice was soft, but there was an undertone of arrogance that couldn’t be hidden. “I, the splendid Neo Hercules, have received and acknowledged your message!”

Suddenly, Richard Grant knew why he wanted that usurper dead.

He dared?

This stupid parody which tried to compensate with overinflated muscles dared?

“However, I must decline your request of eternal friendship.”

There was a groan of disappointment. Plenty of Demigods and Demigoddesses feigned to not have heard it.

“I was tempted, for your exploits almost equal mine when I ruled the most glorious Empire the world had ever seen and will ever see!” Octavian had been a megalomaniac; it was honestly impressive that just a few days after his transformation into a golden statue, they had found someone worse. “But alas, a challenge has been issued, and I don’t think I have it in me to decline the opportunity of organising a grand spectacle the Gods themselves will be jealous of!”

The longer this went on, the worse it got...

“Therefore by this video, I, the magnificent and unique Imperator Caesar Lucius Aelius Aurelius Commodus Augustus Pius Felix Sarmaticus Germanicus Maximus Britannicus,” for all his endurance, the megalomaniac had to catch his breath here, “that I have accepted to be your High Judge for the coming challenge issued by Consul Marcus Antonius. Per the Laws governing this noble institution, you have three days to acknowledge this message and reply with the identity of the two Referees you wish to nominate for the Games to come.”

The Games? It was supposed to be a challenge. Why did he have a very bad feeling about the entire thing?

“Should you fail to answer, obviously, I will nominate the noble Referees myself.”

What was the worse option? Jackson choosing or this muscular megalomaniac? Sadly, the leader of the Suicide Squad was probably the safer bet for once!

“As the challenger has willingly made important concessions, I have acquiesced to an early date for the challenge.”

“Millions of sesterces and expensive resources must have changed hands,” Bianca di Angelo declared sarcastically.

“But I am pleased to announce my men are ready for the challenge! This is thus with immense pleasure that I can tell you the Adjudicator Games of Commodus will take place in my Coliseum, in the very heart of the Colony Lucia Annia Commodiana, and will begin at dawn on the twentieth of January!”

Twentieth of January? That was an incredibly short amount of time to prepare! And they didn’t even know where-

The image of the buffoon disappeared for a few seconds, replaced by a map, one which seemed to survey the Sea of Monsters from above. A red dot was switched on at the edge of the Zone Mortalis, west of the Solomon Islands. It was a tiny island, lost in the Solomon Sea, almost half-way to New Guinea. Without surprise, the legend indicated ‘Commodus Island’ along with a set of precise coordinates.

Then the trimmed beard and the face of the man who wanted to usurp his father reappeared.

“The seats to watch this formidable event which might last as long as three days will be on sale by tomorrow!” The parody of muscles said gleefully. “Please inform your allies and friends that while we will do our utmost to protect the public, risks of joyous dismemberment, rape, decapitation, and language unbefitting to royalty may occur regularly after the opening ceremony!”

The Roman struck his chest with his fist in a martial salute.

“We await the Suicide Squad for the twentieth at dawn! Don’t be late, King of Pirates and fellow Adjudicator, or it will count as a forfeit of your team! All the details, rules, and accommodations are going to be transferred by divine mail the moment your ‘Referee message’ will be in my hands.”

Richard really wanted much to kill Commodus. At this point, if there was someone who entered and call himself Commodus, he was going to slaughter him, no matter the consequences!

“Oh, and last but definitely not least.” The teeth were so white he wondered while no one had ever felt the urge to break them and feed them to this usurper. “I have chosen the theme of the challenge! It will be...” drums rolled thunderously, “THE TRIALS OF NEO HERCULES!”

“YOU BASTARD!” Richard screamed as the screen went dark, before realising the entire Suicide Squad plus some ninety Legionnaires plus a few dozen of Telekhines had seen him lose control.

Silence reigned for a couple of seconds, before Jackson cleared his throat.

“Language, Grant.”

“Don’t tell me you don’t want to kill him too.”

“Of course, I do,” the heterochromatic-eyed Demigod scoffed. “I thought I had closed that avenue of challenge for the Triumvirate! Two of the three former Adjudicators had accepted my offer of eternal friendship and disappeared from view. If Commodus accepted my offer, the Triumvirate would have had to choose between the poison of prisoner exchange or letting an Olympian judge the challenge itself.”

“But he didn’t,” Annabeth Chase crossed her arms. “Why would he do something so reckless? He has to know that if the Olympians aren’t happy with the outcome, he will be incinerated by the Master Bolt?”

“Is it reckless if you have someone behind you offering protection against the Olympians?” The son of Poseidon slowly shook his head. “There are no coincidences so late in the game. There is only enemy action. Do you not find it curious that the former Adjudicator who rejected my offer also happened to be a candidate the Triumvirate rejected when they established their little usurping organisation?”

Yes, with the size of these coincidences, you could create a new Zone Mortalis out of thin air...

**8 January 2007, ‘Honoured Guest Quarter’, Forge of All Perils**

As far as her conditions of detention were concerned, the Demigods had held true to their word.

The conditions of her imprisonment were indeed pleasant, and while it was slightly maddening to be confined to a single location, she was really given the VIP treatment, with several Telekhines serving as her butlers.

It also meant there was nothing to do but be patient, and Isis was honest enough to admit she was really not good at that. And her new immortality had not improved that trait.

Therefore it was really a relief when the Son of Poseidon used his shark auxiliaries to deliver a letter humbly requesting a ‘moment of her time’.

Of course, this being Perseus Jackson, he had to list all her titles, even those he should have no rights to know. Yes, the address was perfectly respectful and all, but he had saluted her as ‘Goddess of the Nile, Protector of Alexandria, Apex of Black Mamba Nest, Lady of Transformation done by Love, Shield of Love Marriages, Queen of Love through Water’, and plenty of other names that she was sure she’d never revealed to anyone but her husband.

The son of Poseidon was really as smug as an Olympian when the latter happened to be drunk on victory. It remained to be seen if it was his greatest strength or his Fatal Flaw.

And yes, she approved the request-invitation. Immortal she may be, but she was in dire need of valuable information.

Fifty minutes later, the Adjudicator of the Suicide Squad entered in her private apartments, the blonde daughter of Athena and Hera following on his heels.

“Oh, your Immortal Worshipfulness,” the Demigod began with a grin that was mockery incarnate. “How radiant you are! How-“

“**Stop this immediately, or we will see if there is a way I can transform you into an hippopotamus**.”

“I would think you would have preferred crocodiles.” The illegitimate son of the Earthshaker wasn’t taken aback by her reaction. “An angry hippopotamus is very dangerous.”

Isis rolled her eyes, and decided to not reply.

“By the Ancient Laws and the regulations governing the role of an Adjudicator, it is my pleasure and my duty to inform you that your husband has challenged my honour and my right to be your Adjudicator.”

So the Triumvirate had found a loophole. It should have resonated like good news. But Queen of Egypt or no, she was naturally distrustful of triumphal acclamations that seemed too good to be true. Especially when they were uttered by one Perseus Jackson.

“**And when will these...Adjudicator challenges take place?**”

“They will begin on the twentieth of January,” before the Lupercalia? This was incredibly fast! “The High Judge has sworn the vows, and thus Olympus and the entire divine world are invited to watch the Labours of Neo Hercules!”

And just like that, all the optimism Isis could have felt was incinerated within a heartbeat.

“**The High Judge is Commodus**.” The young Goddess hissed, her mouth instantly transforming to let her snake fangs appear. “**Are you insane?**”

“Lady Isis, that’s frankly a question you will have to ask your husband. It is him who chose the Adjudicator, not me.”

The Protector of Alexandria and Lady of the Nile wanted to believe Jackson was lying. But his grin was too satisfied for it to be a lie. And what would be the purpose of distorting the truth anyway? In a few days, she would know everything about the challenge from other sources. No, the Demigod was saying the truth.

“**And I suppose you had no part in limiting the options available to my husband?**”

“I did,” the black-haired boy admitted shamelessly. “But Commodus was not my choice. I tried to bribe him so he removed himself from play, but the blackmail attempt failed, alas. For understandable reasons, I believe, I would have been far more pleased if an Olympian took the role of High Judge.”

“**I will take you at your word. I am a bit rusted when it comes to the regulations of what you call ‘Adjudicator challenges’**.” It had not been called like this in the old days, and unfortunately, Isis had been far, far away when the one which had occurred in her lifetime had been organised.

“Then I will also add that I have chosen my Referees for the challenge, as per my rights and privileges.”

When she reunited with her husband, Isis was going to have a very serious conversation with him. Damn the male pride, an exchange of prisoners would have been preferable compared to the sheer chaos she felt was coming this way.

“**Who are they?**” she asked, dreading the answer already.

“The First Referee will be Lord Dionysus, God of the Wine, Madness, Leopards, and many other amusing Domains. The regulations imposed an Olympian, and he was too happy to accept my nomination.” Yes, she was sure Dionysus did. By this point, Perseus Jackson was more or less his unofficial High Priest, given how much madness he left in his wake.

“**And the second?**”

Perseus Jackson’s grin widened.

“Commodus was very eager to tell me his ‘games’ would be following the theme of the Twelve Labours of Hercules. So I thought why not provide a Referee who met the legend, while keeping it in the family?”

Isis didn’t like hearing that at all.

“I have nominated my half-brother Antaeus as the second Referee.”

This was just madness. Antaeus had been defeated by Hercules, yes, but he also happened to be a half-giant obsessed with skulls and making an arena of them by killing as many opponents as he could. If the legends were true – Isis had never met him before – he was a son of Poseidon as well as Gaea.

And the currently black-haired Goddess didn’t believe for a single second a bloodthirsty maniac like this one would be content to play ‘Referee’ for several hours, never mind one day or two.

“**You are playing a dangerous game, Perseus Jackson**.”

“It is your husband who refused to be blackmailed. He has chosen to escalate, not me.”

Isis refused to be baited in that sort of debate, no matter how correct the arguments were. Jackson was very much like Julius Caesar in that way: you began the conversation certain that the sky was blue, and you ended it praising him for convincing you that the Gods had turned the clouds green while you weren’t looking.

It was best to not give him the opportunity to screw up with her mind.

Instead, the Goddess of Marriages and Love looked deeper, searching for something that she had noticed right after the recent battle.

“**You have been Marked by Aphrodite. Or should I say Cursed?**”

By the way Hera and the Demigoddess’ eyes widened in surprised, they clearly had not been informed of this ‘detail’.

“What? Please tell me she is wrong!”

“Oh, she is completely, deadly right.” Perseus Jackson shrugged with a detachment bordering on arrogance. “This is fine.”

“This is no laughing matter!”

Isis huffed.

“**For once in my life, I have, with incredible regret, to agree with Hera. The Curses of Aphrodite are vicious and humiliating, and can permanently destroy body and mind even if you burn through them as fast as possible**.”

The history of Pasiphaë and the Cretan Bull was just one example among many of Aphrodite having the ability to ruin your reputation and your life for as long as you lived.

“**You are running out of time, Perseus Jackson. For now, your status of Adjudicator protects you, but the moment it will be removed, you will have to endure the full power of the Curse. And looking at the Lust magic woven around your soul, I can tell you it is something particularly dangerous and unpleasant**.”

Many Demigods would have fallen to their knees in despair, shouted awful things, or proved their ignorance in an unquestionable manner.

Perseus Jackson yawned in an exaggerated fashion.

“I thank you for the warning, Lady Goddess, but I already knew that. Your warning is touching, but you don’t have to worry. *Everything is proceeding as part of the plan*.”

Isis wanted to shout back he was utterly insane. There were only two ways to cancel a divine-cast curse: either you somehow convinced the immortal to cancel it, or you became a deity yourself, breaking the curse by overwhelming it with divine power of your own. As Aphrodite was not exactly known for her generosity and the curse had been cast with the near-totality of her power concentrated in a single location, the former was improbable. As for the latter, it was even more so; for all his strength, Perseus Jackson was clearly far from Apotheosis, despite being a massively powerful Demigod.

“Jackson,” the blonde daughter of Athena was not hitting the nearby wall with her own head, but she was not far from that point. “What did we say about calculated risks?”

“To take them, and worry about the mathematics later?”

**8 January 2007, near the Scylla Gate, Entrance and Exit of the Sea of Monsters**

“An oath was made that the world would be shaken, one way or another.”

It was an old promise.

It was a murmur in the winds.

It was a rumble in the water.

It was a fire in the hearts of his men.

“Captain? The men are ready and waiting for your commands.”

“I know, Lafitte.”

His bones hurt, but it had been a long time since he could say he felt *alive*.

He wasn’t going to say he reached the forecastle of his beloved *Queen Anne’s Revenge* like a young man.

But he did it on his two legs, and that was all that mattered.

The fall could have killed him, but it didn’t.

What better proof that Fate had decided that he wouldn’t die on that day?

“We are brothers, the last true Heirs of the Golden Age of Piracy.”

There were no shouts, no insults. They all knew he was saying the truth.

“I know you’ve heard the tales spread by the Suicide Squad and all former allies of Force S. They are the truth. The sorceress made sure we were guinea pigs and other horribly cute animals for centuries, all the while time continued to run its course.”

Edward Teach opened a rum bottle, and took a large gulp of it.

“They have forgotten us. The Gods and Goddesses have taken everything from us, beginning with the legend of our exploits.” He showed his teeth to his audience. “I propose we remind them why the sailors feared the sight of our Jolly Roger.”

Boarding sabres and many bottles of rum were raised in approval.

“The moment is right. Olympus, the Triumvirate, the Suicide Squad, the other players...all are watching each other, baring their fangs, plotting and preparing for the final battle. They are blind to plenty of things. And this gives us *opportunities*.”

He had recognised the implications the moment his feet landed on this beach of black sands. And honestly, he had been surprised more pirates didn’t speak of it at first. It may be that the astonishment and the sheer absurdity of what had happened had broken their minds.

But he had not forgotten, oh no.

“Before us, brothers, the Charybdis-Scylla Gate awaits. Except there has been a minor change, as I’m sure you are aware! One half of the monstrous duo is no more! And without it, the Gate to enter and exit the Sea of Monsters has enormously decreased in lethality.”

Grins spread like a gust of wind among his crew.

They realised the truth at last.

“Yes, brothers. Without Charybdis, the threat of Scylla is manageable at last. It won’t last long. In fact, I would be very surprised if the Gods don’t have a replacement for the sea-swallowing maw before the end of the moon! But for today, the Gate is vulnerable. The Straits’ dangers are minimal.”

He drank more rum.

“The Brothers of the Coast are no more. The tricorn of the King lies in other hands than mine. But all of that can be returned to us in time. There have been many times in history where the colours were lost. Kings and Gods alike have proclaimed dozens of times we were annihilated. Thousands, no, tens of thousands of the men, women, and children who lived thanks to our pillages and victories have been sent to the gallows. The songs of piracy went silent. But all of that *can* be changed, brothers. All of that *will* be changed. The Golden Age ended centuries ago. This just means we will have to resurrect it with our bare hands!”

“BLACKBEARD! BLACKBEARD!”

“A NEW WORLD AWAITS US! BROTHERS! WE ARE ONCE AGAIN FREE TO FORGE OUR FATE! WHO ARE WE?”

“WE ARE THE BLACKBEARD PIRATES!”

“WE HAVE SURVIVED THE MADNESS AND THE TERROR! WE HAVE CHARGED STRAIGHT INTO THE JAWS OF HELL! WHAT DO YOU SAY, BROTHERS?”

“WE ARE WITH YOU? CAPTAIN!”

“ADMIRAL BLACKBEARD!”

“FOR THE GOLDEN AGE OF PIRACY! FOR THE BROTHERHOOD!”

Blackbeard laughed with all the strength of his lungs.

“FORWARDS! WE LEAVE THE SEA OF MONSTERS TODAY!”

**8 January 2007, Grand Strategium, Forge of All Perils**

Naively, she had once thought that if she gained a tiny measure of her full strength back, the infernal and insane Demigod would give her proposals the seriousness they deserved.

Hera didn’t entertain any of these delusions now.

“I don’t think you understand how bad the Curses of Love are, Jackson.”

“First objection: it is a Divine Curse of Lust-“

“Lust, Love, what does it matter? It alls end up in broken hearts, destroyed cities, and tragedies in the end!”

“That’s where you are greatly mistaken, my seasonal lieutenant!”

The former Queen of the Gods groaned in exasperation.

This joke had been lamentable when it was made right after the last battle, and it was growing more and more exasperating as it spread through the Forge of All Perils.

“Okay, the lustful Dove herself threw all caution to the wind and blasted you with one of your most powerful Lust Curses. Happy?” It was very much a rhetorical question, and she didn’t give him the opportunity to find a cryptic reply. “You need to stop-“

“And do what? Crawl in front of her and beg her mercy? Propose to polish the skyscraper-sized temple where she keeps all her shoes? Bargain in the faint hope the punishment would be merely to pay for one of her shopping sessions in the luxury shops of Milan or Rome?”

The currently brown-haired young woman grimaced.

Yeah, Aphrodite would love that, wouldn’t she?

“Besides, even if I was willing to go with this humiliation, I would have to summon the entirety of the Goddess at once, much like what was accomplished in the entrails of the volcano recently. And I have no longer the resources or the story weight to do that.”

That was absolutely not reassuring.

“Three and Thirteen, Jackson, it is-“

“The Three are for the women or any person I have strong emotions for. Once the Lust Curse activates, they will experience near-unbearable lust for me, and I will have the power to dominate them physically and mentally. The Thirteen, however, will be beings in a certain radius who have at one point experienced lustful feelings for me, but that I haven’t reciprocated. And I will suddenly ‘enjoy’ near-unbearable lust for them, so much that I, a strong-willed madman, would be perfectly willing to let them enslave me. Moreover, the Curse, if any of the recipients struggle against it, happens to be infectious. It can rapidly spread to an entire city and more.”

Hera gaped for several seconds. She had not expected such a devastating sum-up of the Lust Curse!

“How did you-“

“This is not the first time the Goddess uses that specific Curse, I will remind you.”

“No, but in most cases, the Council cleaned up behind her.”

And, she didn’t add, it had never been a pleasant duty.

“I’m just worried, okay? Last time this Lust Curse was active, it was horrible.”

“Yes, it was. Worried you will be among the Three?”

Hera glared.

“For all your attempts to convince us you are insane and out of control, I don’t think you are the kind of villain that delights in raping your girlfriend and the Demigoddesses of this Squad who have some measure of affection for you, Jackson.”

“You’re right. I don’t.” The lone red eye shone malevolently. “That’s why nothing of the sort is going to happen.”

“The Lust Curse of Three and Thirteen may not leave you the choice.” She insisted. “And the Goddess you ‘adjudicate’ for may be sharp-tongued, but she is not completely wrong. You are running out of time. Whether we win or lose the challenge, you will have to abdicate the title and duties by the end of it. And I seriously doubt it will last more than one week.”

“The point of how little time remains is accurate,” Perseus nodded. “But I can assure you that the Curse won’t control my actions, and the collateral damage should be limited.”

“You have a strong will,” she conceded, “perhaps one of the strongest I’ve ever encountered. But no mental fortitude can hold for long against a divine Curse. Everyone breaks at some point.”

“And I will repeat you what I told Isis, Hera. I have a plan. A plan and plenty of contingencies. Do you really think I began this Quest without thinking of the eventuality I wouldn’t be cursed by an Olympian or a being of equivalent power? This would have been extremely narrow-sighted of me, given how many times heroes of the Antiquity have been on the receiving end of them.”

It was always annoying when he brought out something there was no reasonable way to argue against.

“But enough about Curses. What are your thoughts about the new High Judge of the challenge, His Imperial Majesty Commodus?”

“I wish I could assassinate him,” Hera told him honestly. “Your little attempt to be his friend spectacularly backfired, Jackson.”

“I just wanted to blackmail him, and if not to bribe him,” the son of Poseidon sniffed out disdainfully. “Friendship was likely a doomed effort from the start. I’m not sure Commodus ever had a true friend in his life.”

“He had one, I think.” The former Queen of the Gods cleared her throat. “The current God of the Sun.”

Perseus blinked before showing an unconvinced expression on his face.

“They were very close,” she said before shifting to her Summer-touched appearance and turning her hair from brown to blonde. “I mean, like-“

“I am aware Commodus and Apollo were once lovers, don’t worry. The Sun God never tried to hide it for many years. Of course, it was before the latter drowned the former with his bare hands. I’m sure that must have inflicted significant damage to their relationship.”

“Is it because of that factor you didn’t choose my husband’s bastard to be your First Referee?”

To her consternation, Perseus cackled evilly.

“It would have made an epic mess, wouldn’t it? I was really, really tempted to go with it.”

“But you didn’t.”

“Well, I think that if I pursued that course, the star-crossed lovers would be in a very murderous mood, and they likely would unleash all that honest and pure hatred on the competitors fighting in the arena. I’m sure I would survive it, but I can’t say the same thing about all the other people who will fight by my side.”

“And the God of Wine is a better choice?”

“Of course! To begin with, we are sure to not die thirsty!”

Hera sobbed in consternation. Why did she think the leader of the Suicide Squad was going to listen to sane arguments, really?

**9 January 2007, Healing Wing, Forge of All Perils**

“Jackson, I’m beginning to think I’m losing my mind.”

“Hmm...interesting. What convinced you of that?”

Michael adjusted his position on the large red couch before answering.

“This morning, I dreamed I saw Miranda’s body cover in black scales while she was in the swimming pool.”

“I’m sorry, my bard lieutenant, but it was no dream. Our dear daughter of Sands has accepted the proposal of the third Queen of Hell to become her Champion. As a consequence, she’s progressively imbued with the essence of a Night Hydra. I don’t think she will be able to fully transform before the end of the Quest, though. And she doesn’t have the poison breath. She just will be the Hydra of Black Sands! Nothing to worry about!”

The son of Apollo took a deep breath of relief...before other images flashed into his mind.

“I saw Leo Valdez shrouded in flames, roaring and throwing anvils across an entire hall.” The blonde musician swallowed heavily. “He was so muscled he looked like a beardless dwarf, and without warning, he self-combusted! He was a torch! What was wrong with me?”

“Nothing is wrong with you,” the madman said reassuringly, taking notes in his notebook. “I’m afraid however I’m going to have to reprimand the penguins. Their explosive talents don’t give them the right to requisition the tools of Leo for their own experiments.”

“But he was built like a son of Hercules!” Michael protested. “Minus the height, of course.”

“Yes, it seems that whatever blessings the Heart of the Forge gives out, a growth spurt towards the skies is not one of them. It did marvels for his pyrokinesist abilities, so as his commander, I’m not complaining. Anything else?”

“I saw Hera and Jade do some cross-country skiing on the upper levels!”

“They have to push their powers beyond their limits, and what better use for Winter and Snow powers than some friendly ski competition? Honestly, once we return to New Byzantium, I am very tempted to sponsor an all-year winter sports resort! I’m surprised no one thought of it besides me!”

“Err...Jackson...” Michael was almost sure he was hallucinating right now. It had to be insanity. The reality couldn’t be *that* crazy. “I’m pretty sure we won’t be able to return to New Byzantium. With the sort of trouble you unleashed, the majority of the Council will want you dead.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, my bard lieutenant. Many things have changed in the last ten days. With the Lord of Fire and Forges freed, our star is on the ascendant once more! Many important immortals are willing to sweep our eccentricities under the carpet now. Of course, the accumulating of diplomatic immunities is fiercely fought against, but I’m sure it will end in our favour. Only a fool would ask for less than what he really desires, no?”

“This is a nightmare,” he moaned. “I want to wake up!”

“Don’t worry,” Jackson was writing further in his notebook. “The challenge of the Triumvirate is the endgame of this Great Quest. We just have to keep a layer of loyalty and have fun in front of the Olympians, and all will be well! Okay, not for the Triumvirate, and in all likely not for Commodus, but who cares about them?”

The smile was terrifying.

“I won’t deny you will need to see a few psychologists once we’re back at New Byzantium, though.”

“What?” Michael exclaimed. “You assured me everything I saw wasn’t a hallucination of mine!”

“It wasn’t,” Perseus drawled. “But I just want you to acknowledge, my bard lieutenant, that you’ve been staying on this couch for a good hour.”

“And?”

“And unless it is a curious technique of seduction, I must point out you are stark naked on this couch of the Healing Wing.” To his disbelieving eyes, the son of Apollo realised it was no joke. He was as naked as the day he was born!

“Oh, Gods, if someone saw me on my way here-“

“Don’t worry, there were no Huntresses as witnesses. It certainly saved you from being used as a pincushion for their arrows.”

“It isn’t reassuring at all, Jackson!”

“Then I’m willing to tell you that apart from the occasional crises of exhibitionism, Elvis Knight and yourself are getting better. You’re less and less trying to speak the language of fish monsters, and I’m pretty sure that you did recover ninety percent of your brain’s capacity. All in all, I’m sure that before the end of next week, you will be as sane as me! What do you say?”

“I want new clothes!” He shouted.

“Ah, no problem.” Perseus shut his notebook and grinned. “Light orange or dark orange?”

Michael groaned pitifully. He was sure he was mad now, and unfortunately, it was getting worse...

**9 January 2007, Drone Command Centre, Forge of All Perils**

Bianca cursed profusely during the two minutes she watched the video of the aerial view obtained by his long-range drone.

And as much as he wanted to chide her for the insults, Perseus didn’t have in it to chide the former Dread Empress today. The reaction may be a bit vulgar, but there was every reason to be surprised.

Who would have expected for Commodus to build a Coliseum in the middle of nowhere?

“How in the name of my father did he build something like that without someone noticing it?”

“I have a better question.” The former Tyrant mused. “How in Hell did he pay for it? Unless my memory has suddenly become unreliable, this Coliseum is far bigger than the one built in Rome ever was, and the latter is not exactly a small structure.”

Bianca glared at the video playing again the details of the ‘Colony Lucia Annia Commodiana’ before speaking again.

“The Sire of the Drakons, you think?”

“Too obvious,” he shook his head. “Oh, I don’t doubt Nocturna’s master whispered some ideas in the ears of Commodus. But giving all these resources away when the Sire didn’t have any certainty this Coliseum would be used for the challenge? No, this doesn’t fit the Sire’s modus operandi.”

“Wonderful,” they both knew it was anything but. “The size of this Coliseum is a headache by itself. There is no practical limit to what can wait for us on the sands of this arena.”

“True. But having contacted some of my sources, I think we can bet on exotic gladiatorial games. There will be monsters too. There will be dangerous animals broken to wage war against anyone who stands in their way. And assuming whoever supports him financially still has some funds for more extravagance...the ‘show’ might include mercenaries.”

“Grant was right,” the black-haired sorceress sneered. “The man is a megalomaniac. What is this thing about a Colony Lucia Annia something?”

“This is how he wanted to rename Rome in the old days.” The former Tyrant revealed. “And I think Commodus is a narcissist above all, not a megalomaniac.”

“From our perspective, does it make a difference?”

“No, he doesn’t,” he acknowledged. “Well, it is going to be a problem.”

“Are you sure you don’t have British family in this world? You seem to have a gift for understatements.”

“One tries, your Dreadful Majesty,” his smile didn’t stay for too long, he was not in the mood for puns and jokes today. “Did you manage to read the rules?”

“Did I peruse this scandalous succession of articles dribbling of honeyed self-satisfaction? Yes, I did. And it can be summed up as ‘Imperator Commodus will decide the rules of each Labour when he thinks it is the opportune time’. You disagree?”

“No.” Perseus admitted. “And I feel very happy knowing the Referees will be on our side. They may not be able to stop every stupidity, but they will be able to stop the things which will go against all decency and Olympian-enforced laws.”

“That still leaves a lot of loopholes for the very bad stuff.”

“I know,” and there was more exasperation in Perseus’ voice than he wanted to. There were many reasons why he had wanted to avoid participating in a series of challenges where the High Judge was an enemy. “The only consolation I can find in this affair is that the Triumvirate will be in an even worse position than us.”

“They are the reason why we couldn’t just do a prisoner exchange and go back to New Byzantium, so screw them,” yes, Bianca was now aware her father had agreed to the bargain proposed by Olympus. There would be no escape for her to Amazon HQ. “Right. The rules. What do you think?”

“At first glance, it sounds relatively reasonable.” The black-haired Demigod answered. “There will be twelve Labours, for we know the narcissist-in-charge desires to surpass the God of Strength in every way. There will be two teams, ours versus the one of the Triumvirate. I, as Adjudicator, will be the Captain; Mark Antony will be the leader of the enemy team, since he is the Challenger. Should one Captain descend into the arena for one Labour, the other is forced to imitate him, otherwise it’s a forfeit. And if one Captain dies, it is game over, the other team wins, whatever other rules Commodus will add as afterthoughts.”

“Yes. To be honest, I’m more worried about the part where the spectators can invade the arena under specific circumstances.”

“You’re completely right. In fact, it may be worse than you think.”

“How so?” the girl who had been Triumphant asked with curiosity.

“Look at the stadium. There are lodges for the VIPs, and plenty other seats for the immortals in the upper levels. But there’s no way someone like Commodus can find at least eighty thousand spectators in a few days. Logically, that means there’s going to be a lot of hooligans in the stands of the Coliseum. And in these post-Treaty days, hooligans mean *Centaurs*. And I’m not speaking of the ones who follow the orders of Chiron at New Byzantium.”

Bianca predictably groaned.

“I will kill this megalomaniac at the end of the challenge.”

“You will have to beat Richard.”

The Lightning Thief sniffed arrogantly.

“Have it your own way.” It might be amusing to bet on whether Commodus was going to be to cut in a thousand pieces or crucified. “Another point that I don’t like is the teams themselves. We are authorised teams of one hundred each. But once you dig, it stinks.”

“I can’t say I disagree. One hundred beings per team is a big number, but given how Commodus is fan of blood sports, probably reasonable. But you as Captain can only choose the first fifty members? What kind of joke it is?”

“A very dark one,” Perseus grimly retorted. “Commodus can speak of luck and drawing lots all he want, I’m ready to bet all I own the fifty ‘reinforcements’ of each side have already been chosen.”

Based on previous conversations with all the members of the Suicide Squad, he had heavy suspicions what sort of ‘allies’ could be included among these numbers.

“How does the megalomaniac think he is going to survive this? He’s making an enemy of Olympus, my father, yours, and the Triumvirate!”

“If we were on Calernia, I would joke he’s trying to replicate the victories of Dread Emperor Irritant, since when you have the entire world against you, your enemies will have no choice to form a line. But we’re not, and Commodus is no Irritant.” Perseus gave a last look at the video before nodding. “I will study the documentation once again, but I don’t think we will have an answer before these stupid ‘Commodus Games’ begin. There is a more pressing matter.”

“And it is?”

“We can’t do anything about the fifty this treacherous Emperor has prepared for us, of course, but we certainly can add a few assets to our ranks. And you are a daughter of the Lord of the Underworld.”

“You want me to do-“ Perseus gave her an innocent smile. “He will never agree to release fifty hard-bitten killers into the world of the living, even if this lasts a week!”

The son of Poseidon rolled his eyes.

“Don’t be so dramatic, your Dreadful Majesty. It can’t be fifty, I am the Captain, and most of the Suicide Squad will certainly participate in one Labour or another.”

“Still-“

“Ideally, I would settle for three. But the basic minimum is one.”

“One? What can one man do that we won’t?”

“I thought it was evident, my sorceress lieutenant. He is going to kill a lot of Romans.”

**10 January 2007, Council Room, Olympus**

The meeting was not considered a ‘proper’ Council.

And it was a good thing, because as his sister left in a flash of silver fury, they surely wouldn’t have reached a quorum for it.

Apollo cleared his throat.

“**I’m not saying she is completely right, but my little sister has a good point: Commodus is guilty of mistreating countless animals**.”

“**Then she should have killed him when she had the chance to do so**,” Jupiter rumbled. “**Intervening in an Adjudicator Challenge would be a violation of so many laws that only a lawyer would check for the precise count. Killing the son of Marcus Aurelius *again***,” Apollo grimaced inwardly, “**would have been perfectly fine a month ago. It is not an adequate response anymore, not as long as this traitor is the High Judge**.”

“**And speaking of things which are troubling**,” Hermes coughed. “**The Suicide Squad**-“

“**Victory excuses many things, and they have succeeded in two of their goals**.” The Roman Lord of Thunder grumbled.

Apollo wondered if this semi-reasonable behaviour was due to the shock of Perseus Jackson accomplishing one more thing that should have been impossible for Demigods, or it was simply that all the aspects of Zeus-Jupiter were still busy fornicating and sleeping with plenty of Goddesses, nymphs, and mortals. The God of the Sun knew for sure he personally was very affected by it; it had been a long time since he had seven girlfriends and five male lovers at once.

But asking the question here wouldn’t be well-received, and it wasn’t like the answers would be representative. Artemis had just left. Athena, Dionysus, Hephaestus, Aphrodite, and Demeter had not bothered to attend. As evidently Ares and Hera were not going to make an appearance, that just left Jupiter, Neptune, and Hermes plus him to debate.

“**Okay**.” The God of Speed replied hastily. “**But I wouldn’t be the God of Merchants if I wasn’t aware that the tickets for this ‘Adjudicator Challenge’ aren’t on sale**.”

“**I have no doubt many of this Council have already decided to attend, in one form or another**,” Neptune chuckled.

“**Err...yes**.” Hermes coughed again. “**It was more of...never mind. It was an introduction for the big question. What if the Suicide Squad loses**?”

“**Depending on their losses, they will have the time to continue their Quest**.” Jupiter didn’t hesitate. “**The situation obviously wouldn’t be good for them, with Isis on the enemy side, but she is hardly the equal of a Titan**.”

“**Victory in an Adjudicator Challenge doesn’t translate into a successful ritual of usurpation**,” Neptune agreed. “**The loser of Actium is at a serious disadvantage on that front. The pressure is already there for him to settle everything during the Lupercalia. A botched ritual at the end of January would likely blow up in his face and cause tremendous damage to his claim**.”

“**But it doesn’t mean others can’t see a way to exploit it for the uses of their personal ambitions**.” Jupiter icily remarked. “**As many Demigods have remarked justly, this narcissist would-be usurper calling himself Commodus is neither a servant of the enemy Triumvirate nor of ours. He may be willing to distort the ancient traditions for his own ends**.”

Apollo avoided thinking about *him* as much as he could. There were things he didn’t want to remember, and most of his time with Commodus entered this category.

“**I will watch for now**.” Jupiter’s eyes were sparkling with lightning. “**And if he steps one toe outside of what is authorised, I will destroy him so thoroughly that whatever form of immortality he uses to keep himself in the mortal world will be extinguished forever. And then I will throw him myself into the Pit. Any other points, Neptune?**”

“**Aside for the need to have a dangerous replacement at the entrance of the Sea of Monsters? We need to speak of what we do about the base of the Triumvirate**.”

“**They no doubt have done their utmost to evacuate all the valuable artefacts, military forces, and other resources from Guadalcanal. But the ritual grounds are still there, and if they aren’t dealt with, these Roman rebels could return here in due time**.” Jupiter passed a hand in his black beard. “**I think they are in dire need to be reminded that their imprisonment of my son is a terrible decision for them. Yes, I think they need a powerful sign to spread the word that I am very displeased by their actions. Mars is not a dutiful son, but only I have the right to punish him! Brother!**”

“**Yes!**”

“**Prepare yourself. With the Great Quest not over, a tsunami would have too many downsides**.”

The admiral-clothed Lord of the Seas nodded.

“**We will have to cover a lot of things through the Mist, but it can be done immediately**.”

“**Then**,” the voice rose as it became a hurricane, “**we can begin**.”

**10 January 2007, Solar Ark *Spear of the Gods*, some distance away from Guadalcanal**

Medea knew something was wrong when her sensing ability *screamed* something was coming.

Then there was the song.

Many would have not described it that way, but she didn’t care for their opinions.

It was a familiar tune.

One which warned her there were powerful force-fields slamming into existence.

All of the agitation came from the island that the squadron before her had departed yesterday.

All of it came from Guadalcanal.

“Centurion,” the black-haired sorceress ordered. “Go tell your master that it is vital the magical shields of the *Spear of the Gods* and the entire fleet are raised now.”

“Yes, Lady Sorceress! May I ask why?”

There was a powerful blast of wind, and in three seconds, the sky turned from lipid blue to dark.

It was obscurity in the middle of the day.

And it could only mean one thing.

“Does it answer your question, Centurion? Run!”

The mortal ran. For all his feeble wits and his peasant ancestry, the man could understand the word *celerity*.

Medea could have laughed at his panic, if the circumstances were not so dangerous.

The sea had high waves forming. It was unimportant for the Spear of the Gods and the two other flying ships escorting it, but for the ships stuck on the sea below, it was very much a point of concern.

She never stopped watching the sky for long, however.

It was the source of the danger.

It was a boiling cauldron of storms, and the Princess of Colchis could feel its fury.

The sea emitted a loud complaint, the wrath of the elements made manifest.

And lightning came as an answer.

Not just one or two bolts, no.

There had to be dozens of lightning strikes, and the clouds generating them were all converging on the island that was just beyond the horizon.

“Come on,” she murmured, “get us away from here. There are force-fields active, but I don’t think they’re for us. The shockwave is going to be formidable...”

At last, too slowly to her taste, the magical shields were powered and the fleet changed course, increasing its speed to push westwards, away from the darker clouds which had plunged everything into obscurity.

Power imbued the sky, and Medea licked her lips.

She was no stranger to demonstrations of strength, but this was way above everything she had imagined.

It was more than a Domain; it was more than a single artefact. It was raw, overwhelming power.

There was-

She cast the most powerful shield she knew to increase the protections of the Solar Ark.

And then for the first time in decades, Medea prayed.

The apocalypse came in the next five seconds.

It was as if ten thousand lightning bolts struck at once, so many the separation between the strikes would be impossible for mortals to distinguish if they didn’t have her abilities.

It was nothing but a warm-up.

“Close your eyes!” She shouted as the power tripled and the sensation of danger *increased*.

Seconds later, light engulfed everything.

In the next days, the Triumvirate specialists would tell her that there had been enough energy in the explosion to surpass the Tsar Bomba by an order of magnitude. Without the force-fields erected around Guadalcanal, it was likely the Sea of Monsters would have been changed forever, and it was better not to say what the islands of the Pacific would have looked like.

For all these precautions, the attack was just too powerful.

The shockwave arrived like the hammer of the Gods. The shields were there, mercifully.

But not all held true. Many had been prepared by amateurs, or were simply powered by third-rate magical practitioners.

It was an outbreak of violence which shook the sea and the sky, along with everything in the vicinity.

After long minutes, it began to calm down.

The Triumvirate had lost three ships, and the casualties were in the hundreds.

Medea had only eyes for the enormous columns of smoke on the horizon.

Trembling, she cast a long-view incantation.

Guadalcanal was mostly gone.

Oh, there was still technically enough land to call it an island, but the majority of the island was now under the waves. And what wasn’t sent to the bottom of the Sea was burning, ruined beyond any possibility of rebuilding.

The golden defence obelisks Circe had been paid to enchant had broken in plenty of parts, when they had not outright melted. The massive fortress was swallowed by the voracious waves, what had not been carved apart and vaporised at least. Cannons and bunkers were pushed towards the abysses. The surplus of ammunition stockpiles which had not been evacuate was burning and detonating, tiny candles in the periphery of the inferno.

The Altar for War had become an Altar of Ruin.

Medea shivered.

But she didn’t shiver in fear.

That was true power. The power of the Gods.

It was the power that she had lusted for since her teenage years, and it had been denied to her.

Yes, she was one of the three Immortal Sorceresses, but unlike her sisters, she was no true deity. For all her talents, for all the infamy attached to her name, Apotheosis had been a far-distant dream. Olympus and all the other factions had made sure the status quo was preserved, no matter how much blood they would have to shed in the process.

But now, everything had changed.

“I acknowledge the lesson,” the Princess of Colchis whispered. “But I sincerely doubt this was the one you had in mind when you decided to annihilate this island.”

“Lady Sorceress?”

“Alea Jacta Est, Centurion,” the Immortal Sorceress answered. “There’s no return possible for any of us now.”

**10 January 2007, New Byzantium, United States of America (de jure)**

Once upon a time – which might have been one year ago – one of Jason’s Grace biggest sources of trouble had been to decide how he would convince fellow Legionnaires that he was ready for greater duties while at the same time proving the accusations of nepotism whispered behind his back were untrue.

These days, he thought rarely of it.

Life was funny – and far weirder – than what his younger self had imagined.

“I’m told they have caught all the sons of Dionysus and imprisoned them in their own Barrack,” Frank told him, not bothering hiding his amusement.

“Come on, they had attenuating circumstances,” Jason pleaded back, not believing his own words.

“Three of them attempted to conquer Manhattan using the ‘power of wine and debauchery’, all the while kissing and doing other indecent things with the daughters of Aphrodite.” The son of Mars shook his head, trying his best not to laugh. “And I won’t mention what the others did-“

“A wise choice, my friend, a wise choice...”

“Hush, you! But we can all agree that the children of Aphrodite and Venus did worse!”

“Well, they were the core of this disturbing wave of madness which struck New Constantinople and the rest of the city’s boundaries.” And in the process, Jason had kissed a girl for the first time, when a daughter of the Greek Love had tied her tongue with his. The son of Jupiter didn’t know if he had to consider himself lucky or unlucky that several Legionnaires had knocked out the Demigoddess before it could progress further. “For good or worse, the first seventy-plus hours were the worst. Now I’m just sure that it’s several Demigods and Demigoddesses wishing to grab the power and destroy all their inhibitions in the process.”

“That’s certainly the case, yes,” Frank approved. “The question is what will happen to the Suicide Squad when they will return.”

“*If* they will return,” the blonde Legionnaire corrected. “And I will tell you what will happen: Perseus Jackson will be blamed for this epically disturbing crisis. Which is fair, you know, because it is his fault.”

“Come on, Jason,” his friend snorted. “It’s been several months they’ve departed, and according to all the connections we have, the ‘attempted orgy-conquest of Manhattan’ was one of the consequences of this madman somehow saving the Lord of Smiths and Fire. Two points have become evident: the Expeditionary Force failed, and the Suicide Squad is winning the critical battles of their Quest one by one. They have the Golden Fleece, if the sea nymphs’ gossip is true.”

“If,” Jason breathed out, “no, you’re certainly right. I just hope that whatever the final outcome, there won’t be another crisis like this for the next God. Breaking the chains of the Smith God by tying him in fire with his wife is one thing, and we saw all too clearly how bad it could be.”

“I don’t think it was so bad.” His fellow Legionnaire smirked. “You’re just jealous so many girls of Venus decided they liked big muscled boys who worked in the forges of the Legion.”

Jason glared at him. The worst part of the affirmation was that as much as he wanted to deny it, the son of Mars was not completely wrong. For a couple of days, he had felt like that.

Of course, right now it was getting better. Many relationships had lasted only as long as the time for the Lust wave to be extinguished. Once it did, the majority of the new ‘sex friends unions’ had broken up. There were still some Demigods and Legacies who had decided they’d found a decent partner during the crisis, male or female, but they were in the minority. Several information-brokers had gathered enough blackmail for several years, but the incident’s consequences were dying down.

“My non-existent jealousy aside,” he wasn’t going to admit the truth in public, not when the last days had proved how scandalous gossip could travel at lightning’s speed, “I am genuinely worried by what will happen if the God of War is freed in a similar manner. If we have a new ‘Lust crisis’, so be it. But if it’s a ‘murder aura’ which spreads, it’s going to be incredibly bad.”

Frank Zhang immediately lost his smile. Yes, as a son of said War God, he could very well understand how awful it would be.

The parties-conquests of Bacchus-Dionysus’ children were drunken brawls that were more comedies than proper battles. And the biggest victims were the perpetrators themselves, because after emptying a barrel of wine alone, they had the headache of a lifetime. Their bodies hurt like hell, especially those you generally didn’t mention in public. Mortal bodies, inhibitions or not, had limits, and plenty of the children of Wine were not skilled in gymnastics to begin with.

If Mars released an aura of bloodlust and madness of the same potency, there would be nothing funny about the massacre.

“You’re right; we must pray it won’t happen.” His friend grimaced. “It isn’t like we can do anything save praying. The rumours about the Suicide Squad are getting more and more ridiculous; I’m pretty sure some of them are blatantly false, like the one with Dakota ‘honouring’ all the nine Huntresses during the same orgy. And if we don’t know what rumours are true, it’s not like we can intervene and communicate with this band of insane Demigods and Demigoddesses. All messages to the Sea of Monsters are jammed by something.”

“Yeah, and the Gods are very tight-lipped in public.”

“Chiron knows something.”

“Chiron knows a lot of things.” Alas the old centaur was keeping a lot of information for himself. “Why is there a crowd forming ahead?”

“I don’t know, but since we’re supposed to patrol, well-“

“You just want to satisfy your curiosity!”

“Guilty as charged. Do we go?”

“Lead the way, Frank.”

It took some threats and pushing aside several Legacies who should have known better, but Jason managed to reach the front and the centre of the squad.

Before today, there had been an enormous statue of a past Roman General.

Now it was no longer there.

Instead, there were twelve golden statues.

Twelve very realistic statues of gold.

Twelve statues so life-like that Jason could name all of them, since they were part of the First Cohort of the Twelfth Legio!

It didn’t take long for the hundreds of spectators to explode in laughter.

The announcement carved into the white marble supporting them might have something to do with it.

TO THE GREATEST BACKSTABBERS AND IMBECILES OF NEW CONSTANTINOPLE

ARTWORK CREATED BY LOU ELLEN BLACKSTONE, ON THE ORDERS OF PERSEUS JACKSON, SPONSORED BY THE GREAT GENEROSITY OF LORD DIONYSUS

“I told you the son of Poseidon was a bad influence on our sister,” a witch in the crowd shouted.

“Don’t you mean a very good influence?”

More and more people chuckled, giggled, or manifested their hilarity in some way.

“Midas’ Curse,” Frank muttered. “It must be some sort of Midas’ Curse, no one had that much gold to spend on a wasteful project like that!”

“I suppose that’s true. But how do you free them?”

“Do you want to free them?”

“No! Yes! I mean...that’s Octavian!”

“That’s a no, then.”

That’s when one of the sons of Bacchus – after the latest days, all Legionnaires knew exactly who they were – raised an enormous golden cup over his head.

“I PROPOSE A TOAST!” The drunk-looking brown-haired ruffian shouted. “FOR FIRST CENTURION OCTAVIAN MCARTHUR SWORE TO US HE WAS GOING TO ENTER THE HISTORY BOOKS OF OUR CITY, AND HE CERTAINLY DID! TO THE GREATEST IMBECILE OF NEW CONSTANTINOPLE!”

Jason could only facepalmed as plenty of cups were passed, many bottles began to be opened, and toasts were raised with unrestrained laughter.

“TO THE GREATEST IMBECILE OF NEW CONSTANTINOPLE!” The crowd chorused.

“Frank, I have a feeling this madness is contagious!”

“Do like me,” his friend was already munching some grape, the traitor, “blame Perseus Jackson. It’s his fault, no?”

**11 January 2007, the Docks, Forge of All Perils**

“And the maintenance of the *Ave Caesar* was shoddily done,” the Telekhine shipbuilder affirmed. “If they were still alive, I would recommend the Legionnaires of the Twelfth to be shot!”

Months ago, it would have disturbed Ethan to speak with a marine demon taking the form of a giant shark. These days, it was barely worth commenting anymore.

“At least you will have time to do the repairs,” the son of Nemesis replied. “Jackson has been very clear we will take only the *Inevitable Doom* to ‘Narcissist Island’.”

After reviewing the videos a few times, no member of the Suicide Squad really bothered using the names given by the arrogant Emperor.

“The modifications the Boss wanted for his flagship are over, and we will return it to the lake in a few hours.” The expert shipbuilder adopted a tone that for a giant shark was probably intended to be reassuring. “Though we have not yet been given a schedule for the opening of the gates.”

“That’s because unfortunately we haven’t a precise one for now,” Ethan shook his head. “We have a full strategic meeting in a few hours where that issue will be debated. Most of our members are pushing for tomorrow or the day after that. The island we have to sail to is estimated to be three to four days away, depending on the storms and the vigour of enemy attacks attempting to intercept us.”

It would require using the full power of the *Inevitable Doom*’s engines, but hopefully they still would have a large margin to arrive before the twentieth.

The Telekhine saluted, and returned to his shipbuilding hobbies.

Ethan watched the large lake for several seconds, before turning away and soon after being intercepted by Anne Bonny. The daughter of Demeter had chosen a blue and gold attire of pirate princess to replace her usual one, he noted.

“Good news?”

“The *Inevitable Doom* is ready, plenty of the other ships are not.” The black-haired Demigod grunted. “I suppose it could be worse. The boys and girls who won’t leave for the challenge will likely get oversight duties for the rest of the fleet.”

“And once the new Labours are done, everyone will join up with the *Inevitable Doom* and leave the Sea of Monsters?”

“That’s the plan, I think.”

“Good,” Anne said bluntly. “I am sick of this Zone Mortalis, I want to see how much the world has changed outside.”

“You best prepare for a shock,” the Gods were still there, but this was pretty much the only constant across the centuries. Nations had disappeared, and humanity had expanded and developed quantity of new things. Oh yes, the world had not waited for those who were trapped in the Sea of Monsters.

“I will. Did Jackson mention anything about the selection of the forty-nine people he intends to bring along in what promises to be a spectacular butchery?”

“No, I suppose the soon-to-come strategic meeting is going to be about that. He’s been in contact with his Lord Uncle, apparently.” And wasn’t it terrifying to know that a Demigod had a direct line to the Lord of the Underworld? “You’re not confident we can win with only a minimum of violence, then?”

“This ‘Suicide Squad’ thrives on violence and spectacular damage, Ethan Nakamura,” the daughter of Demeter pointed out acidly. “And even if Jackson was willing to restrain himself, I’m pretty sure Commodus won’t. The man is a mad dog.”

“You’ve met him before?”

“Never had the displeasure. But I’ve heard a lot from other pirate crews. The man was already willing to break all the traditions of Rome while he was alive. In the Age of the Imperium, the gladiator games were reserved to the scum of Roman society, the indebted citizens, the criminals, and generally those who had nothing to lose but their lives. Commodus was the only Emperor to descend into the arena as a gladiator, and the senatorial elite of Rome hated him for that, among many other things.”

“Jackson mentioned that.” The son of Poseidon had added that pretty much everything about the movie *Gladiator* was wrong. Though honestly, it had been a bit redundant to tell him. The real Commodus had very few things to do with the movie one, save the narcissism and the megalomania.

Commodus may be ridiculous and was incredibly arrogant, but just looking at him, Ethan wasn’t sure he could handle him in a duel. The former Emperor was a mountain of muscles, and there had been videos of him alongside the rules showing him train against two or three gladiators at the same time, and *winning*.

Commodus was really that dangerous sword in hand, and if someone had to fight him one-on-one, it was better if it was Perseus or Bianca di Angelo. Ethan wasn’t feeling suicidal enough to verify if Luke or himself could do the job.

“Where is our peerless ‘King of Pirates’, by the way?”

“I don’t know. He told me he had something to check alone, and that he would be back by noon. Since it has been very calm, I presume he doesn’t work on a bomb to destroy Narcissist Island.”

“Yes, the last thing we need is Jackson to challenge the Master of Olympus to a contest of who can generate the biggest explosion.” Anne Bonny approved. “I don’t think he would win this one, but I’m almost certain there wouldn’t be much left of the Sea of Monsters at the end of it.”

**11 January 2007, somewhere into the depths of the Forge of All Perils**

The experimentation room was dark and had been created specifically to repel all Oracle, Augury, and Prophet powers. It existed on no plan, and the operational secrecy had been maximal.

It was one of his darkest secrets, and so far, there was every reason to expect success on that front.

None of it provided much consolation when you screamed in agony.

Perseus did sigh in relief when the pain ceased and the metal circlets opened.

“This was unpleasant,” the former Tyrant remarked.

In fact, it had been far more than that. In his previous life, he had died and endured plenty of torment. And in this one, he was no stranger to pain and suffering either.

But this couple of minutes largely had their place in his memories of ‘things to avoid repeating for the rest of his life’.

‘I’ve never heard someone enjoying the examination of his soul,” the old white Telekhine answered. “And I had to be more cautious than usual due to the Lust Curse afflicting you.”

Perseus stretched and then threw himself into a nearby armchair. Seriously, he wasn’t going to stay in this torture seat for one more second than necessary, no matter how much his body protested.

“You will likely have to use the Golden Fleece.”

“I will do so as soon as this meeting is over.” The Demigod promised. “And I will note that I clearly fulfilled my part of the deal.”

“Yes, you did. The opportunity to study the Curse of Three and Thirteen on a live subject was assuredly...*illuminating*.” Like all scientists a bit too focused on their field of studies, the morals of this Telekhine had taken a few blows after decades of illegal experiments, assuming the white-finned monster had many at birth. “I’m going to prepare a full report, obviously. But I suppose you want a short resume right now?”

“You suppose correctly, Researcher.”

“Then I suppose I can begin by the very obvious,” the Telekhine bared his strange dentition, which had several missing fangs, and some curious replacement weapons in it that were in no way natural. “The Curse indeed fulfils the purpose you described. In a certain radius, no more than twelve kilometres, creation of magical lust-enslavement for three beings you hold attraction to, and the reverse where thirteen holds power over you. And no, it is not possible to transfer the Curse onto another soul, unless you happen to want to shatter yours in the process.”

“What a shame,” there were some things he wasn’t to do even with his life at stake, but sacrificing *someone* to prevent the activation of a high-level Curse would not be something he would regret for more than a few seconds. “The rest?”

“The Adjudicator protection functions correctly, and prevented the activation of the Curse in the first place, which is why we’re having this polite conversation. This is a fine soul-shield you earned, Perseus Jackson. But if it cracks-“

“If it cracks, I will know it in the next couple of seconds before becoming madder than I already am.”

“This is a way to describe it,” the Researcher replied. “You have heard of the incidents on Olympus and New Byzantium, I take it?”

“Who didn’t?”

The old white monster shrugged.

“Then you must know the amount of Lust certain immortals were influenced by. You would be on the receiving end of something twice stronger *at least*. That’s enough to be utterly consumed, mind and soul.”

“I know.” It took a serious effort of will to not rub his chest to attenuate the pain. It could wait for the Golden Fleece to repair the damage. “That’s why I think I have a solution.”

“I don’t see how this can be ‘solved’,” the soul-examiner specialist informed him truthfully. “As I’m sure someone as intelligent and resourceful is aware, a Divine Curse as a rule can only be cancelled by the divine party who cast it. If not, an infusion of divine power inside the mortal body is very much required. In turn, this results in the mortal becoming immortal or perishing in the process.”

“The dices are prepared so that the house wins.”

“What do you expect? Divine Curses is one of the methods the Gods have to keep mortals in line. That and making sure they can incinerate most of you when they take their divine form. And it is something that is true for most of the Pantheons.”

The old Telekhine cleaned the blood of some of his instruments.

“But I suppose my curiosity desperately is piqued by your words. Speak, Perseus Jackson.”

“First of all, you absolutely confirm the Curse is powered and based on a foundation of Lust?”

“I confirm it,” the Researcher didn’t hesitate. “This is fairly typical of the way certain deities operate when they are not sure the target can truly be in love with someone.”

The former Tyrant didn’t know if he had to take it as a compliment or an insult from Aphrodite.

“Good.”

“I wouldn’t call it good, but the Don said you are the Boss!”

“Did you hear what really happened to the Gorgons?”

“I have read the file you sent, but why changing the-“

This was really funny to watch a Telekhine get absolutely gob-smacked.

“You can’t be thinking what I am.”

“I do.”

“I would have thought,” the Researcher began hesitantly, “that Medusa and her sisters proved that piling up a Curse on top of another didn’t work. There was a boost of the Demigoddess’ power, but ultimately, the Curse was not cancelled, and Apotheosis was well outside their reach.”

“That’s indeed a correct sum-up of this disastrous endeavour.” Perseus grinned. “On the other hand, it could hardly be otherwise, no? Let’s think about it calmly. The Curses of the Snake the Gorgon Sisters suffered under had nothing in common with the Eidolon-offered Stone-Changing Curse. Or if it has, I’ve not found it, no matter how hard and long I searched.”

“That’s a fair argument.” The old white Telekhine conceded. “Of course, I would prefer to have the Gorgon’s testimonies-“

“The red folder.”

There was much grumbling, of course, but a scientist’ curiosity was a singular thing. And the Researcher wanted very much the answer to their questions.

“They screwed up pretty much everything. By choosing two curses so different in nature-“

“The possibility of them merging in a single Curse was nonexistent, yes. There couldn’t be any synchronisation. All they proved that, as you said, the Curses could be ‘piled up’.”

“I begin to understand the ‘solution’, you hinted at. But it remains extremely dangerous. For the symbolism to be maximal, you would have to be Cursed by the same Goddess, or by someone having close links to her. I don’t think the one you are the Adjudicator to is going to do you a favour, and the court of the Dove is not going to risk its mistress’ wrath. Both have too much to lose.”

“Who says anything with the *divine* symbolism?” Perseus asked with his favourite expression on his face. “The Goddess of Love cursed me with a *Lust* Curse. Something, that, unless I’m greatly mistaken, falls under the seven cardinal sins.”

“It’s not a concept the Greek-Roman Pantheon holds as a sacred truth.”

“But it’s not something they’ve been able to get rid of in the few decades they’ve had to spread their cults anew.”

The Telekhine tried to open his maw to speak, but for several seconds, words clearly failed him.

Finally, the old white monster burst into laughter.

“HA! HA! HA!”

It took a good minute for the soul-specialist to contain his hilarity.

“You are completely insane, Boss, you know that?”

Perseus delivered his most charming smile.

“Right. Given the circumstances, I suppose you want something to be prepared, but that you can trigger when and where you decide, right?”

“Yes.” The leader of the Suicide Squad answered truthfully. “I have a plan to convince the Goddess of Love to cancel her Curse, but I don’t know if I will be granted the opportunity to strike before the challenge is over. In case of failure, the counter-measure must thus be ready.”

“This is indeed wise of you. But the building materials will be expensive to acquire.”

“While some of my treacherous lieutenants were busy stealing toys of no importance, I stole the valuable stuff, including some enchanted gemstones.” It wouldn’t be said he would not see *that* coming.

“I will need twenty-four hours for the first studies. For the rest, I will likely have to go with you on the *Inevitable Doom*. Perfection takes time. What Deadly Sin do you want me to forge into a Curse?”

“Sloth.”

It was in all likelihood the only one which could fully neutralise Lust on short notice. He was certainly not going to risk Pride or Wrath. Assuming he survived, the Narcissist’s island and everything in the vicinity certainly wouldn’t.

“Of course, it is just an expensive contingency. Should things proceed to my satisfaction, before the end of this Great Quest, the Triumvirate will have been humbled, I will personally turn Commodus into my footrest, and the Council will have to grit its teeth and let me enjoy a life of disgusting hedonist behaviour at New Byzantium for the next year or so.”

“And if things don’t proceed to your satisfaction, Boss?”

“Why then,” the Tyrant grinned, “I will have no choice but to show why you don’t back a villain into a corner. I will claim the *Titan of Sin’s mantle*, and allies or foes, all will love me and despair.”

**Author’s note**:

Imperator Commodus cordially invites you to the Adjudicator Games. And you’re not authorised to refuse, heroes. Sorry.

The end of the Great Quest is in sight.

Everyone is about to converge on an island built by an Emperor not part of the Triumvirate.

Obviously, the carnage and the treacheries are going to be glorious!

The other links were the story is available:

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

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