**Chapter 25**

**The Ransom of Success**

**23 December 2006, somewhere in the Pacific, the Ruins of Ogygia Island**

Athena had never visited Ogygia in the last three millennia. The Goddess of Wisdom was many things, but she didn’t believe herself to be a hypocrite. Most of the agreements lying underneath the peace accords which had been signed in blood at the end of the Titanomachy were carelessly violated or broken maliciously long ago. Throwing that in the face of spying a prisoner who had held true to her word was not just illogical; it was also of very poor taste.

And many Titans who had managed to escape out of Tartarus centuries later always chose to be cast back into the Pit rather than choose the tiniest possibility of being imprisoned in a replica of Ogygia. The fates of Atlas and Calypso had ensured matters always came to violence between Othrys and Olympus, nothing more, nothing less.

Athena had never visited Ogygia, but she had sent Odysseus there to save his life, and she knew it was a beautiful island, a refuge of beauty beyond the ravages of time. It was a garden untroubled by wars and mayhem.

It had taken mere minutes for it to become devastation incarnate.

The traditional villa where the daughter of Tethys had stayed during her imprisonment was gone.

There was nothing left of it.

Instead, a gigantic crater had taken its place, and the black rubble was everywhere, accompanied by cutting-sharp debris from what might have been furniture and garden embellishments.

This was pure speculation, of course. Everything on Ogygia was just too damaged to have a strong assurance of which part had served which purpose. Hecate was going to have some considerable work to hide this island, now that the wards and all the prison’s divine protections had utterly failed.

One crater would have been bad enough, but it was not the only massive crater to disfigure Ogygia. There were at least half a dozen more of such gigantic holes, and all of them were so huge that save ballistic missiles and the biggest bombs available to humanity, there wasn’t a lot to compare it to in terms of explosive lethality.

The Ogygia-that-was had perished in lightning bolts, flames, and fury. The sand had been turned to glass. The trees were turned into ashes. Whatever animals had not the instinct and the speed to flee in time had been killed.

Athena kept a stone-faced expression. Deep inside however, the Goddess of Strategy was seething. It was senseless, gratuitous devastation.

There was no purpose to it. The ‘door’ Perseus Jackson had made was closed permanently again, courtesy of Hades. Ogygia couldn’t serve as a prison anymore. And it wasn’t like the island was responsible for the escape breakout. It wasn’t sentient. As for the guardians, well, the Strixes had never expected an opponent like the son of Poseidon. And most of them were dead. Bombarding their graveyard was disrespectful in the extreme.

None of that crossed Athena’s lips as she stepped forwards to face her genitor.

“**Athena. I hope you bring good news**.”

One day, the Protector of Athens would say everything she believed about certain Olympian’s methods, and how they were able to find defeat even in the jaws of victory.

But today wasn’t that day.

“**No**,” she replied as bluntly. “**I could confirm Perseus Jackson indeed returned from the Underworld with Hera in tow. I was unable to confirm Calypso’s presence, either from the Underworld or from Circe’s herald. With Hecate herself present, spying on who is hiding inside the Spa is the next best thing to impossible, and my eyes are insufficient for the purpose**.”

To be honest, Athena didn’t believe magical talent would have changed her answer. There were many reasons why Hecate was so feared on Olympus; the ability to hide mere feet away from you was just one of them.

“**In my opinion, Calypso has returned among the living. They must be a reason after all why the son of the Seas took the risk of freeing her, and facing the Titaness of the Seas is the only one which makes sense**.” Athena paused for a couple of seconds. “**As for the ransoms, evidently, the sorceress gleefully followed Perseus Jackson’s recommendations. She wants her due**.”

“**SHE WILL HAVE WAR**!”

The world turned into light and explosions. Overwhelming power shook the world.

When the ashes and the dust dispersed, Ogygia had a new huge crater to add to the already impressive number of impact sites.

Athena didn’t bother blinking or showing any sign of emotion.

“**Declaring war on Circe, in these circumstances, is very much akin to declaring war to the Titaness of Magic**.”

The Goddess of Olive Trees and Owls didn’t bother wasting her saliva saying it was a very bad idea. The blatant act of aggression would likely lead Hades and his two wives to side with Hecate immediately. Poseidon, in the best of cases, would be neutral; in the worst case, he would side with the Underworld because of his son. Zeus was incredibly powerful, no one would naysay it. But if the Seas and Hell united to topple him, Olympus would face a long and cataclysmic war they may not be able to win.

“**This is not over. When I will have this spawn in my hands, I will strangle him very, very slowly and**-“

The rest was a series of threats mumbled and very dark promises.

Athena only listened with one ear, waiting until the angry rant ended.

“**I will not pay this ransom**.”

“**This isn’t against tradition**.” Of course, since only a few mortals had pulled the unconventional provocation, there wasn’t a tradition in the first place, but best to not mention that out loud. “**I must unfortunately point out that Poseidon is willing to pay it, however. For the moment, he is too busy laughing and watching the replays of his son’s...outrageous adventures. But it is not going to last. And in that case, the rules are clear. If the Throne of the Seas pay the ransom for a son of the Seas and his band of Questers, the members will be guests of honour of Atlantis for one year, the time for the Great Quest to be declared officially successful or failed**.”

Realistically, without the Suicide Squad on the battlefield, this Quest’s failure would not be in doubt for a minute. A year was just near-perfect insurance for that.

“**NO**!” Zeus shouted, before calming himself after a considerable effort to restrain his temper. “**I won’t tolerate it. I won’t tolerate this spawn avoiding the consequences of his crimes**!”

The hypocrisy would have left a lesser Goddess speechless, given how many children of Zeus and Jupiter had flaunted the rules in the past and gotten away with a mere pat on their heads.

Fortunately, Athena wasn’t a lesser Goddess, and she was used to this level of hypocrisy.

“**Then it is necessary for an Olympian who isn’t Poseidon to pay the ransom**.” She spoke neutrally. “**If the Suicide Squad is removed from the Quest, we will have only the broken remnants of the Roman Cohorts to work with, and we won’t be able to reinforce them before Spring arrives. And I am certain Hephaestus must be freed before any liberation attempt can be planned for Ares**.”

In other words, if the Quest failed, it would be up to the armies of Olympus to wage a direct assault against Tethys. Since the Titaness in question would not have to limit her strength according to the Ancient Laws, the losses promised to be particularly heavy.

“**We can be very unhappy about it, but assuming they have Calypso in their Quester group, the Suicide Squad has a chance to score a victory and free Hephaestus**.”

“**The Suicide Squad**,” the Lord of Thunder growled, “**is so far creating more problems than they resolve**.”

Athena felt her lips burn, and temptation danced in her throat to ask exactly what he was thinking when he killed the boy’s mother. Or when he killed the Di Angelo’s mother too. Or-

Athena abandoned this thinking perspective. Zeus had not been thinking. Athena wanted it to be the truth. The other options were all worse.

“**Perhaps. But in this case, the laws authorising the Demigods to challenge everyone, up to the Titans and the Gods, without creating diplomatic complications, are in Olympus’ best interest. While any Olympian would risk triggering a war with the Titan of the Sea by attacking his wife, the Questers won’t begin a long and incredibly difficult period of bloodshed. Whatever the outcome of the battle, it will begin and end in the Sea of Monsters**.”

At least, the Goddess of Wisdom hoped it would.

After the slaying of a Drakon, the journeys through Hell, the taming of Moby Dick, and the damnation of Chrysaor, the Goddess of Strategy seriously wondered where the limits of Perseus Jackson’s madness lied, assuming they existed in the first place.

“**We need them to deal with Forge MP-42**.” Zeus said slowly, his distaste clear.

“**Yes**.”

“**But the use we have for them ends when Hephaestus is freed. If they free my son and happen to survive, they will be bloodied and weakened; as punishment for their crimes, I will command exile in this Zone Mortalis for the rest of eternity a suitable punishment for their crimes. With the Titaness no longer a concern, one Olympian Army will largely be enough to deal with these pestiferous cockroaches pretending to be a legitimate Triumvirate**.”

No mention was made of what would happen if the Suicide Squad failed, but it didn’t take an arch-genius to guess the likeliest outcome. Either the Demigods would be killed by Tethys...or the Master Bolt would make them regret they weren’t already sent to the Halls of Hades.

“**I don’t care how you do it, but make sure this treacherous sorceress lowers her ridiculous demands. Then pay this outrageous ransom. Atlantis will reimburse you once the whole affair is over**.”

“**By your command**.” Athena doubted Poseidon ever would do something like that, of course. But the anger she felt was not directed anywhere in the direction of Atlantis anyway. It was very Zeus-like to give orders and try to ruin financially someone else after his own temples were in peril.

And no, this wasn’t a figure of speech. Two properties of the Master of Olympus had detonated when the God of Thunder realised Calypso had accepted Perseus Jackson’s help to escape Ogygia.

“**Gather the surviving Legionnaires of the Roman Expeditionary Force, and send them to the sorceress’ Spa and Resort. You will deliver them my secret orders; during the battle, they will recover the Golden Fleece for the glory of Olympus. It is out of the question to leave this priceless and unique artefact into the hands of the sea spawn and his band of walking catastrophes**.”

Athena hadn’t tried yet to study the question, but she could recognise an atrocious idea when she heard one. So far, Perseus Jackson had a gift to eliminate traitors and spies, and somehow emerge uninjured from the conspiracies. The surviving Legionnaires, in many cases, weren’t even aware the Suicide Squad had been sent to win where they had disastrously failed.

Yes, this was a command reeking of brazen stupidity.

But looking at the stormy eyes of the Master of Olympus, what little desire there was to tell the truth died instantly.

“**This is their last chance**!”

Yes, it was. But for whom? The Legionnaires and the Suicide Squad...or for Olympus?

**24 December 2006, C.C’s Spa and Resort, the Chambers of Healing**

When Perseus opened his eyes again, it was a room of white colour and smelling very flowery which welcomed him.

Since the ex-Tyrant knew he was never going to end in any divine-created paradise, that left a hospital or something similar.

Something strongly supported by the various medical diagrams waiting near the white bed, many of them describing the wounds he had arrived with.

Good, he hadn’t been completely hallucinating when Cerberus charged back across the Labyrinth.

The black-haired Demigod stretched and carefully moved towards the edge of the bed. The effort it took him justified a few disabused grimaces. Nyx hadn’t even touched him, and yet her mere presence had almost killed him. Primordials were really bloody cheating incarnate, weren’t they?

But he was a villain. He was a Demigod. He had bathed in a small pool of Drakonic blood.

Victory had never been handed to him like the children of Zeus and many other heroes took it for granted.

His breathing was erratic for a moment, but Perseus managed to crawl to the end of the extremely long bed, and position himself so he faced the old-fashioned mirror.

The image which the glass was courteous enough to send back wasn’t the one he had imagined.

One of his eyes had turned red.

This was...really unexpected.

Yes, the iris and the pupil of his left eye had turned a deep crimson and flamboyant red. One might almost describe it as *malevolent* red.

And the sclera surrounding it was a deep black.

Fortunately, though the appearance was a bit intimidating, the effects appeared to be purely cosmetic. The left eye worked exactly like the unmodified right eye did, and if there was a curse, it was beyond his ability to detect it right now.

It could definitely have been worse.

Leaving this matter aside for now, Perseus removed the bandages covering most of his left arm.

As he had feared and hoped, when the palm of his left hand was revealed, a crude sun glyph was carved in his very flesh.

“The Titan of the Sun faded long ago, but his flames contain what remains of his wrath. You are lucky to be alive.”

Perseus turned his head to nod at the young woman who entered the room.

Like the furniture and the decorations, she was dressed in white. There was a strange aura surrounding her, one demanding instant respect. Her brown hair were braided, but in a strange style looking quite severe. And her eyes were cold.

Too cold to be...ah.

“Lady Athena,” the son of Poseidon saluted before laboriously turning to present his back to the mirror.

The young woman blinked, before her height gained twenty good centimetres in a single second and her appearance was slightly altered. The eyes became a piercing grey. The hair turned blonde. Although Perseus wasn’t going to be stupid enough to utter it, it was strange to see what an older version of Annabeth could look like.

“**How**?” The Goddess of Wisdom asked, visibly interested in the answer.

“It was the eyes.”

“**I changed the colour**.”

“The colour is just the beginning of a good disguise, though it can fool the people not paying attention. Hiding who you are requires...it requires truly becoming someone else. There’s a reason why actors have all my respect...well, the good ones have.”

Perseus breathed out.

“But I doubt you did come to speak of how realistic one could push the disguises to the next level, oh Goddess of Heroes.”

“**No. I have come to give you a last chance, per the will of the Master of Olympus**.”

The former Tyrant snickered.

“In other words, Ethan must have surrendered hours ago to Circe, and as a result the Golden Fleece is beyond Zeus’s reach. Since this must have healed most of the curses and injuries my Quester Group endured in the last week, we remain the only force in the game. I have a plan, and we are within striking range of Forge MP-42. How am I doing so far?”

“**One day, your lack of respect will see you crucified and flayed, insolent Demigod**.”

“I have great respect for your strategic skills,” Perseus decided to amend. “In my humble opinion, however, they are far too...conventional. They work for you, but any Demigod trying to emulate your exploits will become predictable fast, for he or she will not have your eye and your ability to react and correct the tiniest flaws in a grand battle-plan.”

As the Goddess’ face might as well be a block of granite right now, it was difficult to say if the answer pleased or angered her.

“**I paid your ransom of two million Drachmas**,” the blonde Goddess revealed, surprising him for the first time of the conversation. “**Circe graciously accepted to not be paid for the rest of your band provided certain favours were offered**.”

That fast? Something was definitely fishy there...

But clearly, Circe wouldn’t have invited Athena to set foot on her island if certain negotiations hadn’t taken place.

“Okay? Thank you, Goddess, and I am going to repay you these two million Drachmas, like tradition demands. Give me a day, and I’m sure I can arrange a transfer at the Forge of All Perils-“

The grey eyes didn’t glare or act in any threatening way.

Yet they seem to pierce his soul nonetheless.

“**Do you really think, Perseus Jackson, that I need two million Galleons? I am the Goddess of Strategy, boy**.”

And she closed her mouth, as if she had already said too much. Which was...not incorrect, in a way.

“So you are building up your personal fortune thanks to insider trading.”

And being an immortal Goddess, Athena had had centuries to exploit the flaws of the world market.

“**The God of Trade and Thieves should really know better than trying to crash the Stock Exchanges every Thursday in the hope it will give him the upper hand over me**.”

Ouch! Perseus wanted to report a murder. Yes, it was a real one. Luke’s father was going to jump from the window on the one hundredth floor, helped by a certain Goddess of Wisdom.

“If money isn’t the repayment you seek, what is your will, Protector of Heroes and Athens?”

“**I want you to end the curse on my wayward daughter**.”

As Annabeth wasn’t cursed anymore to believe she was a giant spider trapped in a human body and the daughters of Athena weren’t present in the Sea of Monsters in overwhelming numbers, that left-

Oh, no.

“As the attack on Forge MP-42 can’t be delayed for long,” Perseus replied in his most reasonable tone, “I am going to guess and say the Titaness hired a certain trio of Gorgon sisters. They are going to be among the monsters defending Hephaestus’ prison, aren’t they?”

Athena merely watched him emotionlessly, confirming he had correctly interpreted her information.

“But how do you know that when even my drones couldn’t-“

Perseus tried to not show his shock when the truth smacked him in the face.

“You. You are the Titaness’ spy among the Council.”

How could he have missed that? Athena had been raised by-

“**These are very dangerous words, Perseus Jackson**.”

And the ex-Tyrant noted, she didn’t lose ten seconds to protest her innocence.

How good to see that many Olympians were engaged in various shenanigans Zeus would mightily disapprove of if he knew, including and up to high treason.

“I may have prepared a contingency plan to deal with...your wayward daughter and her two not-so-infamous sisters, Lady Athena. But the plan in question assumed it would be a one-on-one duel. It was not imagined to be feasible in the middle of a large-scale battle.”

“**I am sure you will find a way**.” The blonde Goddess replied totally unsympathetically.

Why, oh why, Dionysus had not been the one to pay his ransom? It better be because the God of Wine was busy dying with laughter at his exploits!

“Respectfully,” Perseus scowled in a not very respectful tone, “in order to do that, maybe it would have been better for the curse to not be *monstrously* powerful. I can deal with someone transformed into a snake hybrid, no matter how trained she is. But the snakes playing sentinels and magical detectors on her head are already bad enough. And then there’s this awful power which changes the living into stone-“

“**The Petrifaction Curse is not *my* curse**,” Annabeth’s mother interrupted, and for the first time, something looking like frustration or anger was visible on her face.

“Really?” the son of Poseidon questioned in a voice betraying his disbelief.

“**Really**,” the Goddess of Strategy answered flatly. “**I have some authority over different species of snakes; I am not going to deny it. This part is my fault. I was angry, and I cursed her**.”

It must be something she regretted too, because for now, the name *Medusa* hadn’t been uttered once in this conversation, and it wasn’t because speaking a being’s name could alert said monster of your location.

“**But the power to change the living into stone has never been within my power to bless or curse someone with. I do not have this ability**.”

This really was a morning which began with bad news. Theoretically, you could add one curse on top of another, but the more powerful the curse, the more chances it was going to turn ugly. Yet Medusa had not been transformed into a mass of tentacles and mutated flesh, but into something truly...*uniquely monstrous*.

That didn’t leave many possibilities, and if he had to be honest, Perseus thought all of them were problematic in the extreme.

“Possession,” the irony was very much not enjoyable, given what he had started with Miranda and the Sand Drakon.

“**Yes**,” his Goddess visitor replied.

She didn’t add anything else...and to be honest, was there anything that could be said?

Perseus grimaced deep inside.

It was, in many ways, an impossible Quest.

For thirty seconds at least, silence was king and sovereign.

“I hope this is enough to repay the ransom in full.”

It better be. The carnage awaiting the Suicide Squad on Forge MP-42 didn’t need more complications.

“**It will be. So I swear**.”

The Goddess paused.

“**But my protection will end when you free Hephaestus. By your actions, many members of the Council want to get rid of you**.”

Perseus chuckled.

“Let me guess...I am to be abandoned in the Sea of Monsters, never to return to New York. And I suppose that there are wheels in motion to steal the Golden Fleece, thus guaranteeing there is no need to pay the Suicide Squad with a single Drachma for the bloodshed done in Olympus’ name.”

A second was sufficient for him to give the Goddess a mask of utter vindictiveness.

“As you warned me, I am returning the favour. I want it entered for the records that if the Lord of the Sky sends one of his armies to the Triumvirate’s island-fortress, it is going end in a disastrous defeat. And whoever he hired to stab me in the back, this time, I will not waste my time creating a Gallowborne Division. I will crucify them.”

“**The words have been duly noted**.”

Well, clearly this was Zeus’ idea, and Athena had been against it. It was really typical arrogance from the most arrogant deity of Olympus.

Perseus sighed.

“Fine. I am healed, and there is little time. I suppose I better get back to work.”

“**Yes, do so**.” Athena commanded. “**And Perseus Jackson?**”

“Yes, Lady Goddess?”

“**If you break Annabeth’s heart, I will kill you**.”

And on this promise, the Goddess of Wisdom left. This was for the better, because he couldn’t think of a good repartee...

**24 December 2006, the beach of C.C’s Spa and Resort**

Annabeth had to admit, she was fully relieved when the two Champions came into view, swimming forcefully to reach the pristine beach.

And it was kind of strange, because they weren’t exactly friends or anything like that.

But after the madness, after the chaos and the mayhem, there were certain bonds created between each other.

Most of them were emotions including despair, misery, and resignation about whatever madness Perseus Jackson had in store for them next, but still.

After the blood and the fury of the battle, it was good to see two members of the Suicide Squad were alive.

As they advanced, the blonde daughter of Athena had to amend her words though.

There was something...dark approaching. The two young women looked almost the same as they when they had sailed away from New Byzantium, except a bit older.

However, Athena could easily tell they were making an effort to present an appearance of normality.

Drew was the first to speak.

“You can sense it, do you?” The daughter of Aphrodite smiled, and it was a very predatory expression.

Denying would be futile, and Annabeth didn’t try.

“You have a part of the Underworld inside you now.”

“Yes,” Jade replied, before breathing out. Immediately, her hair turned entirely white while her eyes shifted to a glowing magical blue irradiating frost and cold. “But you don’t have to worry, we will stay with you until the end of the Great Quest. Jackson was very careful when it came to negotiating his oaths.”

This time, the grey-eyed Demigoddess couldn’t help but groaning in consternation.

“Ah yes, you’ve discovered part of what he was busy plotting in the shadows.” Drew said in sympathy. “Did he explain everything when he arrived?”

“No, he collapsed on the spot and left us to deal with to deal with the fallout. He has been unconscious for the better part of a day now-“

“He’s woken up a few minutes ago,” Jade reassured her, looking in the direction of the spa with her powerful eyes. “I can sense his presence.”

This time Annabeth had to show her surprise, despite her efforts to hide it.

“You can sense him from that far?”

The ex-Huntress smirked.

“Annabeth, do you have any idea how powerful he has become? Our dear leader is insane, that much isn’t in question, he had to be to push the Primordial of the Night to a challenge by Champion-“

“He did WHAT?”

The Champions of Persephone and Khione exchanged very ironic smirks.

Oh, Annabeth didn’t like that at all...

“In all fairness, said Primordial was about to devour him body and soul,” Jade pointed out reasonably. “It wasn’t like he had a lot of choices.”

“He stole some old flames of Helios to kill an entire army of Strixes and defeat the biggest Lydian Drakon of Tartarus, Drew,” Drew Tanaka sniffed with an expression reminding her of the times before the Suicide Squad. “Perseus has always a lot of choices. It’s just that he’s always deciding to pursue the craziest outcomes, no matter how much it costs him.”

On this one, the blonde Demigoddess had to admit the currently black-haired Demigoddess was completely right.

“In that case,” Jade smiled, “maybe we should hurry? I, for one, have no doubt that his third journey into the Underworld has *not* convinced our not-so-beloved leader to stop the race of madness. The Great Quest is not over, after all.”

Annabeth grimaced...and began to run in direction of C.C’s Spa, escorted by a lot of Amazons which had the same idea.

**24 December 2006, C.C’s Spa and Resort, the Sealing Chamber**

“PERSEUS JACKSON!”

Good news: the surviving Huntresses didn’t shoot silver arrows this time.

Bad news: given how much the leader of the Suicide Squad was grinning, this state of affair was likely not going to last.

“Yes, this is my name,” the son of Poseidon proudly spoke, not a hint of apology in his voice. “Though these last days, I have entertained it to change it. I think ‘Perseus Hellwalker Jackson’ sounds more...formidable. Wouldn’t you agree?”

There were days you really should stay in your bed, because it really didn’t pay off to wake up and acknowledge the world was filled with madness.

“Jackson.” Ethan wasn’t going to groan. He wasn’t going to groan. “It doesn’t work like that.”

“Well, if it doesn’t, it should!” The finger raised didn’t sound threatening, but the lesson about to be delivered reeked of madness already. “I mean, in the Episode I of Star Wars, I believe the film scenario-makers lost a golden opportunity to explain where the name Skywalker came from. It should have been earned by a slave boy achieving what no one else could: winning the Tatooine Pod-Race!”

Ethan sighed...and cleared his throat.

“So yes, I went to Hell thrice, and escaped every time with my life. Glory to me, glory to the Hellwalker-”

“Barely,” a Huntress growled angrily, with the tone of someone who wanted to correct that ‘mistake’ as soon as possible. “You were almost dead on your feet when you returned here.”

“That’s what the Golden Fleece is for, no?” The son of Poseidon shrugged, like it was no big deal, except there was a little problem with it...

The son of Nemesis cleared his throat for the second time.

“Actually, I didn’t use the Golden Fleece on you yet, Jackson. I used it on the rest of the Suicide Squad first...well, the ones who needed it. You recovered thanks to the healing of C.C’s Spa personnel...and your own abilities.”

“Oh?” Miracle of miracles, there was something Perseus Jackson didn’t know? “Well, I’m naturally awesome, in addition to being invincible, of course.”

Ethan facepalmed and at least two-thirds of the Suicide Squad present followed suit.

“Seriously, Jackson,” Elvis Knight complained as several locks were opened, freeing a certain duo of penguins. “How in the name of the Pit are you doing it? Fergus Cook tried to shout it in the middle of the beach battle, and he got skewered by Amazon’s spears immediately after.”

“He did?” Perseus grinned. “I knew I was going to make disciples before the end of this Great Quest!”

“Dead disciples,” Bianca di Angelo grumbled, stepping forwards. “We took huge losses, Mister Hellwalker-Invincible. The Gallowborne Division was wiped out. And several of us would have been useless for months if we hadn’t great healers and the Golden Fleece to heal us.”

At least the black-haired Demigod didn’t smile anymore. The serious expression was frightening, however. In fact, with this new red eye surrounded by darkness, it looked like incredibly threatening.

“I never hid from any of you that if we didn’t come here first, the assault against Forge MP-42 was going to end in a one-sided slaughter, and yes, it would be the Titaness’ forces doing the slaughtering.”

“And...” Luke Castellan intervened in a voice far more subdued than his usual one. “In your opinion, have we done enough to avoid the slaughter you predicted?”

“I believe so.”

And his head turned towards the small prison where the daughter of Demeter was chained and kept immobile by powerful enchantments.

“But before anything else, I am going to make sure Miranda is able to control the powers of her ‘passenger’.”

“There’s nothing to be done!”

Here the big problems were about to start.

Ethan wasn’t surprised that Perseus didn’t even flinch when two irate Demigoddesses drew their swords and took fighting stances.

“Hylla Ramirez-Arellano. Reyna Ramirez-Arellano. The daughters of Bellona. Legionnaires of the Twelfth, once assigned to the carrier of the Expeditionary Force, officially missing in action after an idiot decided it was a good idea to attack C.C’s Spa and Resort without any magical support.”

“You know who you are?” The youngest of the sisters asked astonished.

The expression she received from the lone green eye was one of pity.

“Unlike some pathetic Roman leaders, I did my homework before leaving for the Zone Mortalis, and it included compiling a list of the Legionnaires that Olympus sent to its death.” The leader of the Suicide Squad said emotionlessly. “Next question, please?”

“Why shouldn’t we kill where you stand? You...you...”

“I made sure you were involved in an orgy, and if the healed wounds on Dakota’s back are any indication, one you thoroughly enjoyed. Yes, how sad.”

Reyna was the first to attack...and Perseus didn’t even try to draw his own weapon.

The swords of Imperial Gold were impressively resistant. They had to be, given the calibre of foes the Roman Legionnaires were expected to slay.

This one broke in two neat parts when the son of Poseidon used his own arm to counter the blow.

The daughters of Bellona gaped.

Perseus grinned.

“Welcome in the Suicide Squad, Hylla, Reyna.”

“Wait a minute...we aren’t part of-“

“Per the Achaia Convention, our hosts are to treat us courteously and not make a single physical threat against a member of the Suicide Squad. Since you evidently did that, either your mistress threw you to the wolves...or you are already members of the Suicide Squad, making this an internal affair. Which is it, oh daughters of the Roman War Goddess?”

Silence answered him.

By the whip of his mother, the son of Nemesis had to acknowledge that Jackson had a talent to turn the situations around that no one else, not even the Gods, could equal.

“Now please don’t shout and keep conversations to a minimum. I have to uphold a promise. Asterius!”

“Yes, short one?” The Minotaur grunted.

“The chains aren’t going to resist for much longer.” Many were unnerved a bit by that, including the Amazons who had been busy laughing as the conversation took place. “Hold her in place while I create the seal.”

“Jackson...” this time the daughter of Hades looked deadly serious. “I understand why you feel you have to try, but it’s not possible. The essence of the Sand Dragon is way too powerful, and classical demon-containing seals are just going to fail in time. The Immortal Sorceress and I are not friends, but she had a point when she came to see Miranda and said it was hopeless. The Drakonic essence is going to tear apart everything organs and muscles before attacking her mind. If I had the resources of a Dread Empire behind me, we could do more but-“

Perseus Jackson yawned.

There was a wave of a hand, and the transparent prison disappeared, revealing the struggling form of Miranda, whose hair had lost almost all colour in the last twenty-four hours. One of her eyes had turned a reptilian yellow. Her skin was sickly, and this was when you didn’t consider that on the arms and legs, some scales had grown to replace the skin.

The Demigod who had descended into the Underworld three times searched inside his pocket and removed a little object...one Ethan honestly admitted he didn’t recognise at all.

But Bianca di Angelo did.

“It is an inkpot, Jackson.”

“Indeed.” Perseus nodded. “To be accurate, it is an inkpot filled with magical ink...the very blood of a Primordial imbued with the ashes of the Underworld.”

The Lightning Thief stared at him speechless.

Everyone in the room did the same.

Perseus Jackson used the opportunity to take a lot of pencil brushes from his pocket and get to work.

As Jackson had told them, the first chain broke five seconds later.

But the Minotaur was already there, grabbing the freed arm, and placing it behind Miranda with inhuman strength most of the Demigods here wouldn’t have been able to summon.

Something hissed, using the daughter of Demeter’s lips to speak hateful words.

“*You arrive too late, son of Poseidon. She was too weak to control me*.”

The son of Poseidon raised an eyebrow and opened the inkpot.

Ethan shivered immediately, and it was as if all sources of light faltered, before illuminating the room with only a tiny fraction of their former power.

“I am a Drakon-Slayer.” The red eye shone malevolently in the midst of this incredible scene. “I freed the former Titaness of your species, and assisted in the rise of another who will rule the Drakons of Frost. Taming and sealing you is just me continuing a Quest! ALPHA!”

Perseus ripped apart the decoloured clothes of Miranda, revealing her belly, and then he began to use the pencil brushes in a frenetic manner.

And damn, he worked fast.

With every second, the swirl of pure night emerging from the inkpot was hurled on Miranda’s skin, and then changed into several dark glyphs. Ethan was pretty sure it wasn’t Greek, though the style seemed to be a cousin of it.

“*No! You will not use my power! I refuse! I am the Messenger! I am the One who buries the Empires into the desert storms! I AM*-“

“**Shut up**.” Perseus commanded, and while the power of the Drakon grew to be suffocating and the Minotaur vacillated, the two words of Charmspeak struck with the might of an Angry God. “This is almost over.”

There were many hisses, and grains of sand tried to coalesce to attack the ‘painter’.

Unfortunately for the Drakon, there were now hundreds of glyphs, and the flow of liquid darkness ceased.

And now that they were added in a coherent structure, Ethan saw that the entire painting effort strangely appeared as a trident. A Black Trident, made from ink and darkness.

The sand began to fall, a rain which looked as beautiful as it was lethal.

“**By three, they came. By three, they will rule into Hell. By three, I have survived where no mortal is meant to thread. I am Perseus the Hellwalker, and I seal you for three thousand nights! OMEGA!”**

Ethan wasn’t too proud to say that the sheer power their leader conjured with these words all brought them to their knees.

You couldn’t breathe.

You recognised the words, but they washed all over you, and suddenly it was over.

The sand had disappeared.

The chains had snapped.

“Wow, wow...” the son of Poseidon was heard coughing. “It was really close. It isn’t like I could order more of the ink on Amazon...”

There was more coughing, and as Ethan was able to watch again the Earthshaker’s son, he knew the effort had cost him a lot. Worse, he hadn’t recovered completely from his previous ordeal...

“You really need the Golden Fleece now,” the son of Nemesis told him.

“Yes. Yes I do. But before...Miranda?” The daughter of Demeter was immobile on the cold white floor, with Asterius the Minotaur standing as a dark sentinel over her. “Do you hear me?”

A loud groan, a very *human* groan, answered him.

Plenty of Demigods relaxed.

Miranda Gardiner slowly moved until she was on her knees.

“It hurt.”

“Well, sorry about that, but-“

She opened her eyes.

Yellow eyes. Yellow reptilian eyes.

“IT HURT YOU BASTARD!”

And in a move that was so fast no one had the time to react, Miranda Gardiner was standing and striking.

SLAP!

The slap echoed thunderously, and Ethan had no doubt this was going to leave a very red cheek.

“Okay, maybe I deserved this a bit-“

SLAP!

The other cheek received the same ‘treatment’.

“Do you have anything else to say in your defence?” the Drakon-Possessed daughter of Demeter growled, with murder in her eyes.

“Err...everyone lived happily after in the end?” The leader of the Suicide Squad blinked. “This wasn’t what I was supposed to say, right?”

An aura of sheer murder began to cloak the now sandy-haired Demigoddess.

“Okay, I hear a Goddess calling me in the distance! Ciao!”

“RETURN HERE AND TAKE YOUR BEATING LIKE A MAN, JACKSON!”

After all these adventures, wasn’t it understandable that everyone exploded in laughter watching the son of Poseidon run away for his life?

**24 December 2006, C.C’s Spa and Resort, the Tropical Pools**

Perseus Jackson wasn’t late. He wasn’t early either.

But if there was something that could be said for the son of Poseidon, it was that he was quite dishevelled.

His cheeks were also quite red.

“**Quester problems**?” Calypso asked, as if the whispers of C.C’s Spa and Resort had not arrived to her ears.

“Nothing that time and large bribes can’t be solved in due time,” if there hadn’t been this mad red eye encircled by the dark, the Titaness could almost have been fooled by the reasonable tone.

Almost.

“**Will she accept**?” She asked as she left the pool, and got no reaction from the Demigod.

Calypso was a bit impressed, because to be honest, she had chosen a very attractive body today. As the darkness burned the old her, it hadn’t been a problem to turn her hair black and give her skin a shade which was somewhere between silver moonlight and ivory. And Circe had accepted to loan her some quite revealing two-pieces swimsuits which left her almost naked.

It wasn’t that the son of Poseidon wasn’t watching her. He was. It was more that he was studying her on a level which didn’t register things like sexual attraction.

“I don’t know.” The Demigod replied bluntly.

Calypso raised an eyebrow.

“**The truth, without any evasive speech**?”

“I was told, in no ambiguous terms, to be more honest about my plans and every contingency I keep in mind.” Perseus Jackson rolled his shoulders while taking a fruit juice from one of the nymph servants after a polite ‘thanks’. “Let’s see how long it will take to the Questers to wish a return for the old state of affairs.”

“**Honesty has its advantages**.” The former General of the Titan Army pointed out.

“It can also become the rope which will strangle you when the odds are stacked against you.” Perseus replied as easily before sipping his non-alcoholic beverage. “To return to the topic which matters, Miranda has just been stabilised. She will then learn to use her powers and acknowledge the raw power of the sand with the Drakon solidly dissolving and returning the sand as an elemental force. As the leader of the Suicide Squad, I have fulfilled my duties of protection and guardianship. If you want her as your Champion, it is your decision, not mine.”

Calypso wasn’t surprised. The oaths the black-haired Demigod had sworn left very little in terms of leeway. If he tried to influence her, the judgement of Styx would not be long in coming, and it would not be merciful.

“**I will have a long conversation with Miranda Gardiner soon, then**.”

Calypso had been dreaming a lot in the last hours, and many of them had been of darkness and black sands.

The former Warden of the Garden of the Hesperides had received visions of a large city on the shores of the Styx Sea, a Grand Bazaar of where all the commodities in existence could be bought or sold. And where the Sea of Hell had been waiting on one side, three large realms had been coexisting where the Underworld’s continent was located. The Titaness had flown over gargantuan canyons where magma flowed and audacious miners prayed before trying to recover priceless gemstones. Calypso had transformed as blizzards raged and primal dances were made while snow fell high enough to arrive to her belt. And then there had been the last third realm. A Domain of black sands and calm oases, a kingdom of beauty and danger, for the Hydras guarded the oases and the desert created powerful mirages which would ensnare the unwelcome visitors.

It was her realm, Calypso Tenebrae, knew, and it was waiting for her.

Yet unlike the other Queen of Hells, the daughter of Tethys didn’t have a Champion. There was nothing preventing her from waiting for her, but her instincts urged her to claim one within hours. Persephone and Khione had both accepted a Demigoddess of this Great Quest, and there were many reasons, among them the sheer potential they all had.

“I didn’t have time to apologise, by the way.”

This time, Calypso felt a great deal of amusement in her heart.

“I didn’t mean for you to exchange one prison for another.”

“**Whether the Underworld will be my prison or not depends a lot on my new husband and his other two wives**,” Calypso mused. “**I am cautiously optimistic in that regard**.”

Hades wasn’t his brother, and unless he wanted to lie by way of dreams – something that would be both out of character and stupid – he really would leave her plenty of freedom to rule her Underworld Domain as she wished.

“**And in the unlikely case it isn’t the case, well, the size of the prison is in many ways greater than the world mortals are free to enjoy while their hearts beat inside their chests**. **I won’t be alone. Hell will not be another Ogygia**.”

“True,” Perseus Jackson conceded. “I expected you to be angrier.”

“**Political marriages were common in the age where the Titans ruled supreme**.” The General commented idly. “**I would have been forced to accept one if the Titanomachy had not forced my father and many others to focus on war to the exclusion of everything else**.”

The glance the Demigod gave her proved beyond doubt he had never been married...how long it would stay true when he had all these Demigoddesses deciding to rein in his incredibly destructive plans was one of those questions that had to make a killing in bets and other forms of gambling.

“**How long do you intend to wait before challenging my mother**?”

“How much time do you need to completely master your new form?”

Yes, she should have expected he would answer question with another question...

“**Two days**,” she admitted. “**Every day after obviously will bolster my powers to a significant degree, but the closer we will be to the deadline of one moon, the greater the risks will be for every Demigod, Demigoddess, and Legacy you will commit to the battle**.”

“Excellent,” and for the first time, the infernal grin was back. “It should take three days to accomplish my own preparations, gather the reinforcements, rest, and make some necessary bargains with our host.”

“**And what do you intend to do, *General* Perseus Jackson?**”

“Why, *General* Calypso Tenebrae, I intend to fight the most epic battle the Sea of Monsters will ever see in a thousand lifetimes.”

It was a smile filled with a determination of steel.

“And then I am going to win it, to prove once again to Olympus that it can be done.”

The lone red-eye didn’t twitch.

“But I suppose it was more about asking the details of the operation?”

Calypso returned the smile.

**24 December 2006, C.C’s Spa and Resort, the Solar Dinner Restaurant**

The evening began rather spectacularly.

Yes, Dakota was speaking about Hera slapping Perseus Jackson.

The cheeks of the son of Poseidon had been red all day, and it wasn’t likely to change for the next hours.

Jokes aside, though, the evening was really good. Their not-esteemed leader had decided to apologise by booking an entire wing of C.C’s Spa and Resort in order to offer them a highly expensive Christmas Eve’s dinner.

Okay, nobody had given him the price tag, but the son of Bacchus was sure it had to be really expensive. The large numbers of delicious crustaceans delivered in exquisite plates combined with the divinely-scenting sauces were not something you saw every day at a table of New Byzantium.

And it had been just the beginning. From the lobbers to the fruits, every bite of food smelled and tasted better than Ambrosia ever did.

Alas, all things had to come to an end, and while the ‘Christmas Dinner’ was rather heavy on the stomach, it remained quite tolerable...meaning it didn’t take too long.

And that now that everyone was satisfied from a culinary point of view, there was nothing stopping a duo of Roman sisters from facing Jackson once again.

“Apologise,” Hylla growled.

“*I* am supposed to apologise when you got a sizeable power boost from all your intimate battle?” Perseus Jackson outright snickered to their faces. “Try again.”

Dakota wanted to scream in warning. It was going to get explosive.

But to his great surprise, the eldest of the Ramirez-Arellano sisters managed to control herself.

Instead, the daughter of Bellona turned her expression into a nasty smirk.

“Someone might wonder why you are so insistent in powering up the women of the Suicide Squad. The Amazons had quite a few theories about it, you know.”

“Oh?” For once, the interest didn’t seem to be faked at all.

“Yes, there are a lot of them who believe you are a perverted male who is trying to gather a harem of Demigoddesses around you.”

Perseus looked at her silently for a couple of seconds...and then exploded in laughter.

“Oh, that’s a good one.” The red eye shone with joy and malevolence. “Can we do it again?”

“You’re finding it extremely funny, this is not-“

The black-haired son of the Earthshaker rolled his eyes and raised a finger to stop her from continuing the argument.

“While I am sure this amusing theory is backed by some facts, it is not the truth. Do you want to hear the truth, daughter of War and Bloodshed? The reason why I am triggering events whose outcome ends in Demigoddesses getting more powerful?”

“Yes!”

“This is because you are *weak*.”

Silence suddenly ruled, and Dakota realised that many conversations all over the gardens and the pools had abruptly stopped.

“There are a few exceptions, of course.” The mad boy continued with the shadow of an apology somewhere around his lips. “Clarisse needed a path, not raw power, she already had the former. But overall, yes, I did what I did because many Demigoddesses needed a considerable power boost. Otherwise they were all going to die during the First Great Quest I was ordered to lead, or worse.”

The two sisters had no repartee for that, and Perseus Jackson took it as a sign to continue.

“Unlike many Demigoddesses, the Demigods of this fine Suicide Squad didn’t really need the initial power boost to survive, and most of them haven’t decided the path they were going to take. As a consequence, I was only tangentially involved.”

“Tangentially involved?” Reyna seethed.

“Was Dakota’s performance in bed that unsatisfactory?” Perseus raised an eyebrow. “Assuming you used a bed that is.”

Dakota couldn’t see his own face, but he had to be redder than Reyna and Hylla...and the two girls were as crimson as tomatoes could be.

And they weren’t the only ones to blush when listening to this conversation.

“No! I mean, yes!”

“So you used a bed at some point,” Perseus, insane madman, had grabbed a note book at some point. “On a scale from one to ten, how would mark the-“

Hylla had to restrain Reyna from trying to kill the leader of the Suicide Squad on the spot.

“Jackson, stop doing...that.” Hylla ordered. “After you brainwashed us-“

“No.” The son of Poseidon suddenly returned to a more sinister grin. “I have many flaws, oh daughter of War, but I do not brainwash people into following my commands. If you want to throw this sin at someone’s feet, try our hostess. What I did when triggering the orgy you so eagerly participated in was to lower the inhibitions of everyone present in this VIP suite.”

“This was dishonourable!”

This time the roll of the eyes was so exaggerated it had to be seen from Olympus itself.

“Stop being so dramatic. I know our hostess handed out magical contraceptives to everyone in time to prevent any untimely ‘accidents’.” Decidedly, Perseus had a gift to make girls blush. “And yes, I know the Immortal Sorceress kicked you out officially as you are now members of the Suicide Squad, but it is not the end of the world.”

“We had a proposal to join the Amazons. It is now impossible, thanks to you.”

“Why?” Perseus asked.

Judging by the gaping and the shocked expressions, this was not the reaction they expected.

“The Amazons are your enemies.” Hylla tried.

“Nah, there’s just an extremely competitive environment regarding certain misappropriated artefacts and weapons.” Perseus smirked for a few seconds. “If they want you to join, who I am to oppose it? You will have to wait for the end of this Great Quest, though. This is the only restriction I am going to enforce.”

“You really don’t have any problem with anyone from New Constantinople joining the Amazons?”

Perseus gave Reyna his ‘I don’t care’ expression.

“Why should I? I am a Demigod who was ordered to successfully complete two Great Quests, one of which is ongoing. What you do outside of these adventures is none of my concern as long as it stays *reasonable*.”

In Perseus’ throat, the word resonated like a joke.

“You have potential when it comes to fighting skills, and you are Demigoddesses. You will be highly-valued recruits for the Amazons.” Perseus smirked. “Just don’t forget to take your boy-toy with you.”

“JACKSON!” And this time, it was his own voice which had screamed in outrage...and many Demigods laughed, the bastards.

“As for why it is in your best interest, Reyna, Hylla,” Perseus grinned, ignoring his outburst, “well, I thought it was obvious. Participating in the Great Quest will give you a small share of the loot, and reputation. For now, you have been only associated with the disastrous fiasco of the Roman Expeditionary Force; if you fight under my banner and end up being part of the crew who will have conquered the Sea of Monsters, no one will care about your past defeats.”

 “You made...plenty of good points.” The eldest daughter of Bellona replied. “But I can help but think you have more plots which involve meddling with our future.”

Perseus Jackson laughed gregariously and walked away. This time neither Reyna nor Hylla chose to follow him.

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This conversation had been really satisfying, in more ways than one.

Hopefully, this would be the beginning of a plan that would lead the Amazons to reform. The current Queen was old, and Hylla could be a worthy successor. One which hopefully would lead to the progressive abandonment of the male slave trade the female warriors were doing in everything but name.

Yes, the Amazons were better than the Huntresses – they could and did fall in love pretty often – but they treated their male partners awfully. ‘Boy-toys’ was not alas an insult, it was the way things worked in the ‘Amazon Kingdom’. Perseus had seen it firsthand when he had sneaked inside their main warehouses.

But it was a concern for the future. For now, removing his shoes and socks, the son of Poseidon plunged feet and legs into the water, and waited for another member of the Suicide Squad to begin the second post-dinner conversation.

Fortunately for his impatience, it was a matter of seconds before *she* arrived.

The former Dread Empress was predictable that way.

“If you tell me ‘I told you so’, I will slap you.”

“You would neither be the first nor the last one tonight,” Perseus assured her. “What it is with all this ‘let’s slap the son of Poseidon’ game, by the way?”

“Perhaps you deserved it?” The daughter of Hades suggested.

“Nonsense,” the former Tyrant said cheerfully. “And remind me for the next Great Quest to write a rule how slapping me will be considered high treason, and be punished by wearing bright orange for the rest of the Quest.”

“This might increase the number of slaps, if anything.” Bianca told him with a voice soaked in scepticism.

“Good! I have a lot of orange clothes to hand out.”

Ah, the groan was music to his ears!

“Anyway, I happened to listen to your conversation with the former Legionnaires.”

“How shocking! I’m sure you were only one of out a hundred to do so. You know, beyond the Suicide Squad, there were about fifty more Amazons trying to be discreet, our hostess, and more Goddesses who will recognise themselves.”

Bianca huffed.

“It figures you would notice them too. Anyway, this isn’t what I wanted to talk about. I fought...I fought our hostess, and I lost very badly.”

The young Demigod was pretty sure the ‘hostess’ part would have been replaced by something far less courteous if they didn’t happen to be inside C.C’s Spa and Resort.

“Yes?”

“I can’t afford to let my magical skills stagnate. I have to become stronger. But if I stay as I am, I won’t be able to grow in a way which matters. So I’ve been thinking about my options.”

“And my previous conversation created the idea in your head that the Amazons are a possible option?”

“Yes. You disapprove?” While she wasn’t going to like it if he said it aloud, Perseus thought in that moment that her defensive tone showed how human the former Dread Empress was, beneath a layer of confidence and arrogance.

“My dear Bianca,” the leader of the Suicide Squad smiled, “I am many things, but I am not a hypocrite. I just told two sisters that I didn’t care what they did after this Great Quest. I am not going to say something for them and immediately change the rules for another member of the Suicide Squad. That would be short-sighted, stupid, and of course it would reek of hypocrisy.”

And yes, all of that was true.

“And yes, before you ask the question, I think the Amazons would accept you. Their business model involves the handling of many magical artefacts and disposable sorcerous items, and to reduce the risks, the benefit of having ambitious witches and sorceresses is kind of obvious. You’re talented and powerful; I have no doubt you would be hired the same day you declare your intention to join them. But there are going to be things you might not find to your taste.”

“If it is a worry about not having a ‘boy-toy’, I can find a solution rather easily, I assure you.”

Perseus chuckled. That said, when it came towards it, unlike many Demigods and Demigoddesses of the Suicide Squad, he had really no idea where her sexual preferences lied. Bianca loved power, but besides that, the son of Poseidon was very much in the dark.

“I was more referring to the fact that for all their mercenary actions in service of our hostess, the Amazons are still theoretically and technically servants of Olympus. It’s just that currently, with their patron God prisoner, they are more or less free to do what they want.”

Although to be honest, even when Ares was not a prisoner, the God of War gave an enormous amount of freedom to the Amazons. The idea to build a mega-corporation which would trigger trade and conventional wars across the world was the Amazons’ idea, not Ares’.

“You are saying the Gods might oppose it.”

“I am saying that whatever you decide to do, you better leave before we sail back to New Byzantium, because I don’t think Olympus will let you work for the Amazons, officially or unofficially. Yes, you did not infuriate the Lord of the Skies as much as I did, but you were an accomplice, and he won’t have forgotten your little robbery and other usurpation attempts. So whatever you decide, once we leave this island, don’t shout it for everyone to hear, because I can already guess certain deities would prefer to drag you back in chains to New Byzantium.”

“All of this assumes, clearly, that we won’t be declared enemies of the Gods in a few days.” Bianca remarked.

“Yes, it does.” Perseus clicked his tongue and continued. “If we end up this Quest as wanted fugitives, something I sadly admit is a possibility, working for the Amazons may not be an option for you. Hylla and Reyna might be forgiven; you and I will not be included in any amnesty. And in that case, your best bet is to convince one of the Immortal Sorceresses to act as your instructor.”

“Lou Ellen has already been chosen by one of the Immortal Sorceresses.”

“That leaves you two out of three, Bianca.”

“You always have an answer for everything, don’t you?”

“It’s a gift,” Perseus said smoothly. “And speaking of gifts...”

The black-haired Demigod looked at his watch, and sure enough, it was time.

“MERRY CHRISTMAS!”

**25 December 2006, the beach of C.C’s Spa and Resort**

The fireworks were splendid.

Leo was a bit miffed not having been authorised to see how they were made, though.

All the pyrotechnics were superb, but he didn’t know how they worked?

“Superb isn’t it?”

The voice caused him to jump in surprise.

And yes, yes, it was the leader, the Big Boss, the most insane Demigod of all Creation, also known as Perseus Jackson.

“Err...”

“You shouldn’t stay alone, Amigo!”

“Why? Because something bad is going to happen if I do?”

One second later, Leo wished he could place a fist in his mouth to stop himself from saying that. Stupid, stupid!

“No,” fortunately, the son of Poseidon didn’t look offended. “I’m just saying that staying alone like that isn’t going to convince the girls to come to you.”

“I’m not trying to seduce girls!” The son of Hephaestus protested loudly...and regretting instantly, as in the distance, many heads turned to watch him.

And despite the fireworks providing the only illumination on the beach, Leo knew several Demigoddesses had *excellent* night vision.

“Then perhaps you shouldn’t have stared at Lady Calypso all dinner, Amigo.”

“Err...I didn’t...” Leo blushed.

“I assure you, you did.”

The younger Demigod wished at that moment the earth would open and hide him.

“You are saying I...oh Gods, I’m an idiot, am I not?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Amigo! You just had your first crush.”

Somehow, it didn’t reassure him at all, because it was Perseus Jackson speaking...

“I...she is beautiful in darkness, she is...she is...”

“She is the darkness, yes.” The son of Poseidon finished. “You are the fire.”

Leo expected something like ‘it would never have worked between you two’, and one or two evil grins, but it didn’t happen.

Jackson didn’t laugh or mock him.

“No girl likes it when I speak about machinery or something like tinkering the fireworks,” he mourned.

And no, the Telekhine girls didn’t count. They were big, big sharks. Leo wasn’t interested in trying to date a demon-fish.

“Girls prefer it when *someone* gives them the opportunity to speak,” Perseus corrected, keeping his eyes on the fireworks. “If you can’t restrain yourself and end up stealing all the conversation time for yourself, they are frustrated to begin with and then they get *really* bored...or angry. A monologue from time to time is fine, Amigo. ‘Monologues all the time’ is not advised. This is a master of monologues teaching you his wisdom.”

“Err...”

“But it is enough about crushes and immortal girls stealing your heart.” Leo blushed again. “I was told you experienced a flashy transformation during the last battle.”

“What? Oh, yes. I was just about to become super-powerful when the Amazons defeated me with a nasty trick! I was about to become a superhero! I was about to become-“

“Invincible? No, you weren’t. In fact, the Amazons saved your life, Leo Valdez. If they had not doused you with multiple jets, you would be really, really dead before Ethan could have any chance to heal you with the Golden Fleece?”

“What?” Leo really felt like a poor parrot tonight...

The leader of the Suicide Squad sighed.

“Leo, your father gave you a rare gift when you were sired. You can create and manipulate the flames, and you have a near-supernatural resistance to the element of fire. But that’s all. You are resistant to fire attacks, much like I’m resistant to water. If your body burns too hot inside, you overheat.”

“But...but...err...”

“Yes?”

“You used the flames of the Titan of the Sun! And you didn’t have the overheat-thing!”

“I did, but only for a few seconds, and I did injure myself badly. And yes, I am not a child of Fire. But unlike you, I bathed into Drakonic blood. You didn’t.”

“Oh...” Leo swallowed. “Oh...I screwed up, didn’t I?”

“You did the best you could do with the tools you had.” Perseus replied. “You saved the part of the Suicide Squad and defeated a Destroyer. Take pride in that.”

“Err...thanks...I think.”

The compliment made him a bit uneasy...mainly because at the time, he had improvised, and his thoughts of the final seconds had been to do something, anything to stop the giant silver automaton from killing them all.

It had worked, but it had been so painful!

“Err...speaking of the Drakon...err...wouldn’t it have been good for me to bathe in its blood too?”

This time, the red eye turned and the smirk reappeared. Ah hell, he had said something stupid...again.

“You are a Child of Fire, Amigo. The Drakon was the Primordial Drakon of Ice. Do you want to imagine what would have happened if the sea of Ice engulfed your body of Fire?”

“Err...nothing good?”

“As some penguins of our fearsome squad would say: Kaboom.” Perseus Jackson bared his teeth and *grinned*.

“Err...I will not do it again?”

“Not without preparation at least,” and no, the son of Poseidon didn’t miss his surprise. “As I said, the transformation was very interesting. The big problem was that your body and your soul weren’t prepared for the change. As long as it is true, trying to repeat the same stunt will result in you overheating again.”

And if Leo wasn’t doused in water immediately, he would die.

“What...what I am going to do, then?” He wasn’t whining. He wasn’t whining! Really! “If he can’t use too much of my fire in battle, I have nothing! I am too thin, too small-“

“The last overheating saw you gain two centimetres of height in a single night.” The other Demigod killed his argument effortlessly.

“Err...it’s true? You aren’t joking? Lying?”

“This is the truth.” The ‘Hellwalker’ assured him. “Now I see two possibilities for you. The first is rather risky. I throw you into a large fire and force you to overheat, then plunge you into a pool and heal you with the Golden Fleece. Rinse and Repeat, and I assure you that in a few weeks, you will become one of the juggernauts of the Suicide Squad. This might a bit painful, though.”

“A bit?” Leo asked horrified. This sounded like torture.

“Okay, it will be agony in fire and flames.” Perseus Jackson admitted.

“And the second possibility?”

“We ask your father how to train you.”

“Err...I didn’t expect...that.”

“You didn’t think you would hear these words from me? I don’t blame you.” The mad Demigod chuckled. “Leo Valdez, if you are to take a single lesson from me, know this: no matter how much you learn during your long and dangerous life, there are things that you will never know. There will be times when it will be necessary to bluff in order to ensure your survival. And there will be times when humility and acknowledging your ignorance will be the best policy.”

Leo didn’t know what to say.

There was...okay, be polite.

“Thanks?”

“You’re welcome.” The leader of the Suicide Squad said in a happy tone that sounded like very bad news. “Now be prepared, we have-“

KABOOM!

“The new fireworks our explosive-experts and superb fighting penguin insisted to give to the Amazons for testing on Christmas night...we will have to work on their timing, though.”

**25 December 2006, C.C’s Spa and Resort, the Throne Room**

For the life of her, Lou Ellen hadn’t discovered how Perseus achieved the feat of being so energetic that early in the morning.

Of all the mysteries puzzling her, it was one of the most vexing.

Drakonic blood or not, it shouldn’t be possible to appear so well-rested, especially when she knew for sure he barely slept for five hours after the various Christmas celebrations.

Alas, the questions were going to have to wait.

They had been allowed to enter the throne room her half-sister and future magical teacher, and a light conversation as they stepped forwards would have been very disrespectful, to say the least.

There weren’t any magical guards escorting them or waiting on each side.

But then, mortal guards were both superfluous and useless here.

The ranks of lifeless statues were enchanted, and the moment Circe wished it, they would act and try to slay any intruder.

Several pigs were waiting in cages too. Yes, not guinea pigs, those were true pigs.

If the daughter of Hecate was to guess, it was her half-sister’s pointed message to Perseus, a silent warning that more ‘creative interpretations’ of his terms of surrender would not be tolerated one more time.

It remained to be seen if that hope was going to survive the next seconds...the blonde sorceress found it very unlikely.

The throne room was grandiose, beyond the pigs. It looked like Circe had gathered extraordinary things from all over the world. There were jade gemstones from China, with the decoration to support them. The structure used pure white Greek marble, and flamboyant gold burned over their head.

And everywhere, there were purple banners. The sigil of Circe was simple, yet elegant: three golden suns on a darker shade of purple.

It was time to show their respect.

Lou Ellen chose to kneel.

Perseus instead chose a complicated reverence that he had evidently trained for in order to avoid slamming nose-first into the soft and comfortable purple carpet.

“Oh wise and powerful Goddess, I thank you in advance for the help you’re going to provide the Suicide Squad,” Perseus didn’t wait at all before beginning another chapter of insanity.

Thank the Magic, Circe appeared to be in good mood this morning.

Maybe it was because Perseus had paid a premium price for the dinner and the fireworks of last night?

“**I have not decided if I will help you further than I already did**,” the Immortal Sorceress mused. “**After all, Olympus is about to discard you the moment its Lord judges it is convenient for him. Gambling on you could be a dreadful mistake**.”

“I find this argument...illogical.” Perseus made another reverence, which managed to bow in an even more ridiculous manner than his first ‘mark of respect’. “When we will free the God of the Forges-“

“***If* you manage to free him**,” Circe corrected with a grin, changing her position of seating so that there was no doubt she wore nothing today aside from her perfect purple cocktail dress and her high heels.

“*When*,” Perseus insisted mischievously. Lou Ellen glared at him, and this convinced him to stop going for a third reverence.

Yet Demigod and Goddess remained staring at each other for long seconds after that.

“**Your argument**?” her half-sister asked.

“When we will free the Lord of Fire and Smiths, the sorcerous spells protecting the fortress-island of the Triumvirate will be revealed to Olympus as a whole. In turn, the Olympians and their agents will analyse the defences, magical and conventional, physical and enchanted. And they won’t be very happy to discover who helped Mark Anthony and Cleopatra hiding themselves for so long.”

“**Yes, they won’t**.”

The blonde-haired sorceress had to give it to her half-sister, Perseus’ subtly accusing her of protecting the Triumvirate’s base didn’t create any visible reaction.

“**And**?”

“And while the Master of Olympus won’t declare war now that he’s very busy dealing with a lot of other problems, there are retribution measures which can be exerted against your island. You know which ones I refer to. Should I say them out loud?”

“**No, Perseus Jackson, that won’t be necessary**.” The black-haired beauty spoke in a low voice that retained extraordinary musical power. “**However, it is also logical to conclude helping you likely won’t stop retribution from coming either. The Goddess of Love is already getting cold feet after your extravagant tactics result in disasters and savage upheavals. The God of Wine is too busy partying to be of any importance. And your most solid allies are busy adapting to the boons you gave them. You have many enemies in the halls of Olympus, son of the Earthshaker**. **Why should I risk everything I possess to help you**?”

“’Everything’ is such a tragic exaggeration.” Her boyfriend smiled. “I think you find my demands most reasonable.”

“**I will judge that myself**,” Circe’s black eyes began to swirl with incredible power. “**Name them**.”

“First, I want to deliver these letters to several persons of interest.” Three golden and purple envelopes appeared in the leader of the Suicide Squad’s right hand. “I would arrange the delivery myself, but alas I have no idea how to contact them.”

The letters flew into Circe’s hand, and there was a barely perceptible frown.

“**Those are unpleasant men, Perseus Jackson**.”

“The good ones are perfectly content to obey the Olympians’ whims, Goddess.”

By the way her half-sister said nothing more, Perseus had clearly scored a point.

“My second reasonable request would be for you to teach a high-level sorcery spell to Lou Ellen, before our departure of this island.”

“**This can be arranged**,” the divine black eyes met hers, “**but my new Apprentice will be the only soul to be granted the intricate knowledge of it. Should it change, the spell-thief stupid enough to steal from the daughters of Magic will taste my wrath**.”

“Third,” the green eye watched Circe with caution now, “I want the *Red October* and its surviving crew.”

Sometimes, the daughter of Hecate wondered how many super-weapons they were going to acquire before finally going to challenge Tethys and free Hephaestus.

But the next seconds after, she remembered the opposition they were going to face. It was entirely possible all these war machines and devastating amounts of magical power may not be *enough*.

“**And what do you offer in exchange, son of the Seas**?” Surprisingly, Circe didn’t say outright no. “**I have indeed some officers of this submarine left. But I rather like them as cute and white guinea pigs**.”

 “Well, should the battle end in the outcome I want, I could arrange the sale of a brand-new Destroyer straight from the God of Forges to your hands.”

“**Enticing**,” the Immortal Sorceress replied emotionlessly. “**But not enough. I love my Spa, and I want it to still be standing by the Spring Solstice**.”

There was something Lou Ellen didn’t recognise in that voice, and she turned towards Perseus.

And the black-haired Demigod sighed.

“Must we play that game, Lady Goddess? We both know the Summer Solstice is a fabulous misdirection. Mark Anthony aims to usurp the God of War, and ushers his apotheosis as Neo Romulus. He wants to be the Founder of Empires, the glorious Ruler of New Rome. Why would he lose his time with an Equinox or a Solstice? It was always his plan to begin the apotheosis ritual on a certain day, no matter what the initial Expeditionary Force or the Suicide Squad did. If he wants to become Neo Romulus, then he will act during next year’s Lupercalia.”

This time, Perseus had said enough to gain Circe’s undivided attention; there was no doubt about it anymore.

“**Fascinating**,” the purple-dressed Goddess commented in a murmur.

By all the hells, it was a correct guess? But then...the Lupercalia days were the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth of February. At least it was the days the Romans celebrated it at New Constantinople. And since today was Christmas, they didn’t have two months left!

“**I won’t deactivate the enchantments I cast for the Triumvirate**,” her half-sister seemed to read her mind, though what could be read on her face hadn’t to be too difficult to decipher.

“I wasn’t expecting you too,” Perseus replied, and for once, it rang like truth in her ears.

There was something flying in the air as he finished speaking.

Circe caught it easily, and it was revealed to be an old-fashioned medallion.

“And I want to modify this medallion.”

This time, the smile of the millennia-old child of Hecate was assuredly *smug*.

“**You indeed thought your divine accomplice was going to try to renege on her deal at the last minute**.”

“I am many things,” the Demigod who had been the doom of Drakons and Elder Giants said seriously, “but stay assured that I am not someone who relies on something as unreliable on *dumb luck* to win.”

Circe nodded.

“**Yes, you are no fool, no matter how much you love to behave like one. Very well, Perseus Jackson, your requests are indeed reasonable**.” The divine black eyes tried to pierce her boyfriend’s by sheer intensity alone, and the son of Poseidon stoically held his own without flinching. “**But each request will have to be repaid. You will owe me, and don’t think my new Apprentice having feelings for you will save you if you fail to give me my due**.”

**26 December 2006, Ticonderoga-class Cruiser *Jupiter Invictus*, approaching C.C’s Spa and Resort**

Erica Keller was in a foul mood today.

Actually, she had been in a foul mood for the last forty-eight hours.

To be truthful with herself, she was enraged and boiling with fury.

This was what generally happened when you realised you were a mere afterthought for ‘your’ Gods.

They hadn’t received a single message for months. They had been abandoned in the middle of a Zone Mortalis, left to sink or swim with dwindling resources.

They hadn’t a chance in Hell to triumph and free the two Gods they had been sent to save. They couldn’t save themselves.

And then in a flash Hermes arrived, informed them that a group of Questers had been sent into the Sea of Monsters while they fought for their very lives, and recovered the Golden Fleece.

All of these metaphorical bombs had been dropped upon their heads before the God-Messenger of Olympus gave them marching orders.

The aforementioned were revolting and insulting.

“There’s something incredibly wrong with this entire expedition and the fools who asked for it,” the female Tribune cursed under her breath.

“Sorry?” Centurion Michael Kahale rushed by her side, but fortunately not in time to hear her semi-treasonous words.

The senior survivor of the Roman officers shook her head.

“I was saying that I really hope the locals aren’t going to fire on us and demolish us like they did destroy the *Dominus Caelum*.” Erica grimaced. “We can’t afford to lose more ships, not when our squadrons were savaged by storms and monsters.”

The 1st and the 2nd Squadron had charged into the Sea of Monsters with thirteen ships. The *Emporiae* had been lost with all hands to Charybdis’ maw, but the twelve others had gone through.

Of these twelve, only four were left under Legionnaire’s command, and all were with her today.

That was a loss ratio of sixty-six percent...and they had not seen a single major objective. Honestly, they had spent their time fleeing the major dangers and trying to survive as best as they could.

“How is the *Corinthus* today?” She asked.

“The machinery holds, for now.” The son of Venus replied unhappily. “If we didn’t need it so badly, I would have already suggested abandoning it.”

“But we need it.”

It was the only Neosho-class oiler at their disposal. For the same reason, the *Etna* was indispensable; without an ammunition ship to replenish the stocks, her Legionnaires wouldn’t have survived that long.

“I think the locals have been alerted of our presence.” The female Tribune of the Third Legion preferred to change the subject before saying something which could be considered treasonous.

“There’s certainly a lot of agitation on the beach and near the aquatic resort.” Michael conceded. “But I don’t see the ship the Greeks used to reach the island. Aside from this monstrosity of a super-yacht which no doubt belongs to a VIP, there’s nothing in sight looking like a proper warship.”

That was certainly a good point...there was a lot of agitation everywhere, including on this gargantuan white ship...seriously, it was almost as big as a proper Cruiser like her *Jupiter Invictus*!

Listening only to her intuition, Erica seized her top-class binoculars and placed them before her eyes.

The details were both illuminating and terrifying in equal measure.

Everywhere on the giant yacht, it was crawling with Telekhines, and the shark monsters were transporting a disturbing amount of things which could only be ammunition.

By itself, it shouldn’t have been an unreal sight; they were in the Sea of Monsters, after all.

What made it completely insane was that the bipedal sharks were clearly taking orders from Demigods. And Erica recognised a few of them: Luke Castellan and Ethan Nakamura weren’t as famous as the crazy psychopath they served under, but they were known to all the Legio officers having enough intelligence to seal their shoes without asking for instructions.

Then the binoculars found the name of the ship, and everything became clearer.

*INEVITABLE DOOM*

There was only one Demigod who would be insane enough to choose such a name for his flagship.

“We’re looking at the flagship of the Suicide Squad.”

“What?” Michael uttered, aghast. “But that’s a yacht!”

“A very big yacht,” the female Tribune corrected. “And given the amount of ammunition and certain missiles I see the Telekhines loading on the deck, I am almost certain this super-yacht is anything but defenceless.”

Moreover, it looked pristine and undamaged.

The paradise environment made it look like it was normal, but it wasn’t.

The four ships of New Constantinople which had survived so far were not pretty at all. Their grey paint – all the paint, truly – was flaking and cracking. Many batteries and important parts of the upper structures had been destroyed or lost in the terrible storms.

The *Jupiter Invictus* and the *Rhenus* could still fight, yes, but they needed important repairs, and only a proper dockyard could give it to them.

“That still feels...wrong.” Her second-in-command protested. “Okay, I can understand using a Q-Ship for your sea operations, the enemies likely underestimated them for the first battles they had to fight. But working with the Telekhines? That’s...I understand why Lord Mercury wanted to give the orders-“

“Be quiet,” Erica ordered. “We’re in the middle of enemy territory and we don’t know who is listening.”

Erica didn’t add that many of the people she didn’t trust were aboard the *Jupiter Invictus* and the four other ships of her improvised squadron. You didn’t trust everyone in your Cohort at the best of times, but their ‘reinforcements’ of the Twelfth Legio made a bad situation worse.

The First Cohort of the Fulminata had fallen far from grace, and it was a pit of vipers.

Erica knew she had deep reservations about their new orders, and so did many of the boys and girls she trusted.

The same couldn’t be said about the scum who sometimes obeyed Michael’s orders.

“I...you’re right. Okay, the big yacht is a surprise, but I suppose it is the last one of importance. With such a small group of Greek and Roman Questers, I suppose they couldn’t-“

As if someone had just been waiting for that comment to be uttered, there was an enormous geyser of water on the starboard side, and then the sea seemed to turn alive.

“Monster!” A Legionnaire shouted. “Prepare to-“

But it was not a monster which emerged to challenge the ships of New Constantinople.

It was a shape of black metal, a leviathan of the deep imagined and built by mortal hands.

It was a Typhoon-class submarine.

“BWHAHAHAHA! THE WORLD BEST PREPARE FOR THE STORM!”

And on the prow of this Cruiser-sized submarine, there was a Demigod who was eminently recognisable.

He had changed. He looked older, and Erica was pretty sure one of his eyes hadn’t been red when he routinely warned them the Romans were not ready for a journey into a Zone Mortalis...something that alas had proven quite true.

Perseus Jackson saluted them by waving forcefully a large orange-coloured tricorn.

“Welcome to C.C’s Spa and Resort, Legionnaires. We are going to have so much fun together!”

He knew. Erica couldn’t say how it was possible, but immediately she knew for certain the son of Poseidon knew of their orders.

“Let’s see the positive side of things,” the female Tribune managed to articulate after she recovered from the shock. “We aren’t going to die bored...”

**26 December, C.C’s Secret Submarine Base, Typhon-class Submarine *Red October***

Some of his old mentors had told him long ago that luck was a fickle mistress, and could abandon you at the gates of the Kremlin much like it could return when you believed everything lost.

Still, even they might have been unwilling to believe the turn of events of the last twenty-four hours.

In that amount of time, Marko Ramius had been returned to his old human body, after being an object of ridicule as a guinea pig for decades, and suddenly propelled back into the command seat of his submarine.

And the responsible party for his sudden good turn of fortune? It was a boy who had the age to be his grandson.

“And this,” the dark-haired boy who happened to be his saviour, “is the Megalodon X-20 Torpedo.”

The period of silence was just for show, and they both knew it.

“And what are we going to hunt with this torpedo?” The weapon was about twenty percent heavier than the old ones he had been given for the Red October’s maiden journey.

“I’m so glad you asked, Captain! The Telekhines copied the schematics from an old anti-Kraken weapon built by the forges of Atlantis. But I think it will be useful against all types of sea monsters.”

Decades ago, Marko would have believed the boy was totally mad. The words would have resonated like the delirium of someone only good to be sent to an asylum.

After being shown in no ambiguous term that Gods and monsters were indeed very real, there was no way to deny that alas this world was far stranger than what they told you at the Naval Academy.

And no, the monsters didn’t stop trying to eat you because you didn’t believe in them.

“This will be indeed very useful.” He approved. The Red October had used plenty of torpedoes before being captured by the Immortal Sorceress, and alas some of them had just been enough to annoy the undersea denizens of the Sea of Monsters, not to injure them severely. “And the ballistic missiles?”

The young boy took an expression that tried to be innocence personified...it failed utterly, obviously.

“Our hostess alas has refused to hand me the nukes you had once ago aboard your submarine. The Telekhines are going to try to adapt the light missiles we have on the *Inevitable Doom* so you can launch them on ground-based targets, but in the time we have, we simply don’t have any ballistic missiles that can really provide good substitutes.”

“She fears we would turn the remaining nukes against her the moment the decisive battle is over?” It wasn’t an idiotic concern, given how many of his twenty-plus remaining crew blamed her for their envies of carrot and lettuce.

“No,” the young boy loved to grin, Marko had already acknowledged that. “She fears what *I* would do if placed in control of this small arsenal of nukes. And she doesn’t want to listen to the complaints of Olympus and other important powerhouses.”

“She fears you more than my crew?”

“To be blunt, Captain, yes. You have to understand her, though! Within twenty seconds, our beautiful hostess had transformed you into guinea pigs. Whereas my associates and I raised a ruckus that is going to shatter her worldview for at least twenty *years*.”

Evidently, seen like that...

“Plus I’m pretty sure C.C. has kept some enchantments on all your crew, waiting to be triggered in case you tried to take revenge against her.”

That was far more worrying and disturbing.

“You can cancel them, I hope?”

“I can and I already did try, but she already reapplies them when I have my back turned.” This time, Perseus Jackson winced. “It will have to wait until we are no longer within reach of her magic.”

“After the decisive battle, then.” Marko caressed his white beard. “How likely do you think it is she is going to stab all of us in the back at the worst possible moment?”

“Not very,” the heterochromatic-eyed boy shrugged. “I have tried my best to give her several incentives to not betray us. Our hostess will win more by giving us a fighting chance in the battle to come than by watching us die powerlessly as frightened and very mortal pigs.”

“The risks are limited, then?”

“Oh no, Captain,” the boy laughed. “I’m afraid it just means that the betrayals will come from every other direction.”

Ah yes, that would have been too easy for this incredibly dangerous sea...

**26 December 2006, Guadalcanal, Triumvirate’s Fortress**

The air had been humid in the morning, and now at this late hour, it could be described as suffocating without any risk of exaggeration.

The pale blue had long disappeared, and Boreas was unleashed, northern winds generating high and dark waves.

Zeus had not abandoned the effort to collapse the magical spells protecting the Triumvirate forces from his view, and dark clouds coalesced everywhere his eyes watched.

There was a storm coming.

And, Mark Antony knew, this was an apt summary of the entire situation.

“Still no word from Circe?”

“None.”

This was not good.

“Then we must prepare for the worst: Perseus Jackson has likely convinced the Immortal Sorceress to turn against us.”

His wife gave him an amused glance for a couple of seconds.

“Fine,” the Roman leader groaned. “I know she was never really on our side. It was just that her goals and ours had a lot in common, and she didn’t like Olympus much to begin with.”

Clearly, something had changed. But what?

“If the rumours I’ve been paying good sesterces to have are true, C.C might think siding with Perseus Jackson is not synonymous with siding with Olympus. And let’s be honest, the sorceress mustn’t have given the son of the Earthshaker everything at her disposal. Otherwise, I’m sure we would already be on the receiving end of a tide of zombies or something outrageously devastating. Yes, we swore Oaths on the Styx, but an Immortal Sorceress didn’t survive three millennia in one of the most dangerous seas to ever exist by not learning how to dance around promises and words.”

This...this was a good point. So Circe had agreed to provide some help to the Suicide Squad and its leader in particular. They didn’t know the importance of said help, however, which was frustrating in the extreme.

“The most troubling question is what persuaded her to help the Suicide Squad when she had vocally assured us – without an oath, I might add – that she would refrain from doing exactly that.”

“Sorceresses love two things: magical power and the winners.” It was a really good thing no immortal magical practitioner was anywhere near their headquarters at the moment. “Therefore, it is my opinion C.C. thinks the chances of Perseus Jackson winning outweigh any actions we might consider to show our displeasure.”

“I was afraid you were going to say that.” Mark Antony admitted. “And we don’t know how the Demigods were able to change her views.”

“I told you about the destruction of Ogygia.”

“I haven’t forgotten,” he assured his wife. “But I also remember you telling that this Calypso is, according to the rumours, a lesser Titaness of no importance. And honestly, Jackson is certainly insane, but even this mad boy would not rely on something as ridiculous as hoping motherhood bonds would refrain Tethys from smiting him down.”

By now, there must have been ten thousand letters pledging the eternal friendship of the son of Poseidon to every faction of importance in the Sea of Monsters. It was worth a good laugh to be sure, but nothing significant had come out of it.

“I’m afraid I can’t help you.” The future Neo Isis told him with a thoughtful expression. “I trust enough my sources to confirm that yes, Perseus Jackson managed to engineer the evasion of the Titaness out of Ogygia, and yes, the Goddess Hera in mortal form was also involved. It seems that to avoid the Lord of Thunder’s wrath, he went through hell...again.”

Sometimes, Mark Antony wondered if Perseus Jackson intended to reach the age of twenty. There could be a long-dead hero who had accumulated more enemies than him in thirteen or fourteen years of existence, but for now, the Second Imperator of the Triumvirate had not the faintest idea who this hero might be.

“Does he know about the Lupercalia, then?”

That was the kind of worry he had wanted to avoid, so late into the ‘game’.

Unfortunately, refusing to acknowledge the problem would not make it disappear.

“I think this ‘Lord of the Suicide Squad’ is alas far too clever for his own good. He’s largely capable of discovering the truth by himself, and if he didn’t before, C.C. might have said the wrong word at the wrong time. We better assume he knows.”

A hiss was heard, and the claimant to the Throne of Love began to pet the head of the female Black Mamba that suddenly wondered why the sun bath had stopped warming up her scales.

“All the war games we played indicates Perseus Jackson and his band of walking disasters do not have the assets or the power to win a battle against the forces the Titaness has mustered inside and near Forge MP-42...never mind fighting a second battle against the army and fleet we have here before the Lupercalia is celebrated.”

“Agreed.” Circe may have given them access to incredibly dangerous artefacts and perhaps a few submarines. Perseus Jackson may have found ways to bolster the inner abilities of his allies and some hastily-recruited mercenaries, immortal and mortal.

But against the might of Tethys, several Legions worth of automatons, more sea monsters than could be counted, and other very dangerous ‘surprises’, there was no question that mortals couldn’t prevail.

The Suicide Squad, as it was the name it had gained fame and fortune under, was powerful. But they also were very mortal. They bled. They tired.

And when Tethys unleashed her maelstrom, they would have to challenge an enemy which was so much powerful than them that it could bring even a veteran Legionnaire to despair.

“Many Olympians are convinced it will be his end.”

“I apologise if I am not exactly reassured about that,” Mark Antony went on to wield irony like a scalpel this evening. “Most Olympians have been wrong about *everything* during these last twelve months.”

The Black Mamba hissed as if to approve his words...or it might be because the mice for her dinner were in sight.

“We have prepared as much as we can,” his wife spoke with iron conviction, and it pleased him a lot. “I am going to prepare the *Spear of the Gods* and the fleet to react as fast as we can, just in case. Worst case but realistic scenario for us, Perseus Jackson triumphs, but his forces are crippled and need months of recovery. In that case, we will have an opportunity to finish the job the defences and the monsters of the Forge will have begun for us.”

“Yes, and it will be a relief when it happens. This Demigod is no longer an annoyance; he is a threat. The earlier someone makes his head explode and send him to the Fields of Punishment, the better.”

**27 December 2006, Skull Island, Nova Tortuga**

It wasn’t often Edward Teach wondered if his drinks plunged him into a world of lies and mirages.

The son of Ares blinked, before turning his eyes towards the bottle of rum in his hand.

Strange, it was one of his good bottles and-

“IT’S HIM! IT’S JACKSON! KILL HIM!”

One of his pirates ran in front of him and aimed with a good old pistol.

“Any last word, son of the Seas?”

“**Place this pistol against your head and kill yourself**.”

BLAM!

The power shook everything, and the Pirate Admiral barely glanced at the corpse of the sailor who just ended reddening the sands of the beach, with eyes still opened in disbelief.

It was the real Demigod, all right.

Half-bloods able to harness the power of Charmspeak were a rarity outside the lineage of Aphrodite-Venus and the other deities of love and sorcery.

It was him. No Demigod would have the audacity to stroll in the middle of his war camp like he owned the place.

“You have guts, Perseus Jackson,” the infamous pirate swallowed a good gulp of rum before speaking his piece. “I will give you that. But don’t think I am not aware how tiring Charmspeak can be, or what its limits are.”

He gave a silent command to Lafitte, and most of his officers rushed to open certain chests. Much like with sirens, mermaids, and other enthrallers, a Charmspeak user was best countered by wax in your ears. It was traditional...and it worked.

“You are here and you are alone. What stops me from giving the order and beginning this battle? The Triumvirate offers a mighty prize for your head, attached to the rest of your body or not!”

“The deep feelings of friendship you feel for me, no doubt,” in all his life, Blackbeard had possessed a gift, if he said so himself, to know what kind of man he spoke with.

Despite the smile, despite the respectful tone, there was absolutely no doubt.

He was speaking with a madman.

No wonder the Triumvirate and so many other factions feared this bastard.

“HA!”

A thousand men encircled the son of Poseidon, but didn’t load their muskets. The first death had told them how bad an idea it would be.

Edward Teach went on to sip his rum.

“I want freedom, and you know it.” Blackbeard looked cautiously at the red eye full of craziness. It hadn’t been here before, according to the records, but it suited the Demigod. Whoever told you eyes were open windows on your soul was definitely right. “And you can’t give it to me.”

“That’s where you are wrong, I’m afraid.”

The black-haired son of the Earthshaker drew an object which looked like a small music box from his pocket. And then from his other hand, an onyx gemstone was revealed. The latter shone with magic.

The music box was opened, and the onyx was thrown inside. The lid was closed again, and some miniature cogs of bronze turned.

He almost expected a song to play out.

Instead a tight beam of darkness struck him without warning.

Blackbeard knew he had reacted too late to evade but-

There was no pain.

There was no pain, and all his men were watching him in disbelief.

No, no they weren’t watching him.

They were watching the broken slave collar now lying on the yellow sands. The slave collar which, moments ago, had been around his throat.

A collar that many sources had told him it was impossible to remove without blowing up your head in the attempt.

“How?” Blackbeard didn’t try to hide his shock...in fact it didn’t even cross his mind.

“These old slave collars are really reliable, but they have a significant weakness.” There was no gloating, just a cold smile which was incredibly frightening. “They open when they think the slave is dead. I’m pretty sure this flaw came to be because some avaricious slaver wanted to reuse them over and over, in a ridiculous mind to make even more benefits along the way. Once you know that, you’ve won half of the battle. All that remains is to discover how to convince the collar that you’re dead without killing yourself in the process.”

Perseus Jackson glanced at the little music box he held in his right hand.

“It wasn’t simple, but I managed to obtain the permission to take a ‘Discordance Stone’ from the realm of my Lord Uncle. I can only keep it for one moon maximum, alas.”

Hades. The boy had gone through Hades’ realm, and survived...to earn himself a limited right to use this gemstone?

It was a hell of a determination, no pun intended.

And this was enough for all the pirates who had not already done so to lower their weapons.

Everything had changed.

The stakes of the game were entirely different now.

No longer were the pirates he had gathered under his black flag forced to risk their lives and their souls by trying to kill the son of Poseidon.

There was a far easier solution to be freed from the Triumvirate’s slavery.

“What do you want, *Captain* Perseus Jackson?”

“I want to become the King of Pirates, *Admiral* Blackbeard.” The grin was mad and was a promise to burn the entire world in the process. “And you are going to help me.”

**28 December 2006, aboard the *Inevitable Doom*, anchored on the doorstep of C.C’s Spa and Resort**

“I think it’s a horrible idea.”

“You complained we didn’t have ships yesterday. Perseus solved the problem.”

At this moment, Luke really wanted to sigh in despair. Of all people, he hadn’t expected Annabeth to make this kind of retort.

By the Pit of Tartarus, the son of Hermes had not foreseen his female friend defending Perseus Jackson, ever. And the impressed glance she gave to the son of Poseidon was not to liking either. The blunt conversation he had with Annabeth two days ago had consequences he hadn’t imagined.

“Okay, we have the ships.” Luke gritted his teeth and gave their leader this small victory. “But Blackbeard is going to betray us the moment he thinks he can get away with it.”

“Yes?” Perseus smiled. “It is half of the reason I chose this strategy to be honest.”

It made him scowl. The urge to strangle the younger Demigod was getting more and more powerful these days.

“You already told us most of the Triumvirate officers aboard the ‘Survivor Squadron’ were ready to betray us the moment Olympus gave the order.” How secret the orders could be when the target was aware of them was one of those questions that were better not asked in public.

“Indeed, indeed,” Perseus feigned to read a list of supplies before abandoning the pretense. “They all have orders to betray us, at least. Most of the Third Legio is very feeling ill-at-ease. They have embraced the power of eternal friendship!”

Annabeth gave him a disappointed look.

“And they’re intelligent enough to know that save that the one soul who will steal the Golden Fleece successfully, most of them will likely be abandoned in the middle of the Sea of Monsters for their trouble. It’s easier to explain how proud Legionnaires fought bravely to the last and heroically gave their lives for Olympus when none of the ‘heroes’ are here to contest the *official* version of the events.”

Luke grimaced.

“Why do we work for Olympus, again?”

“Because the alternatives are all worse,” Perseus answered without missing a beat. “And alas, the Olympians remain far too strong to be toppled given how weak we are.”

Coming from their madman of a leader, it had the merit of honesty for once.

“Anyway,” Perseus rose from his seat, “with the success of this little gambit, we have at last recruited enough forces that I feel confident attacking Forge MP-42 and not being wiped out in the first minutes. Annabeth?”

“Drew is on her way, in control of *Moby Dick*,” the blonde daughter of Athena recited dutifully. “The Telekhines have finished modifying the *Red October*, and Captain Marko Ramius is satisfied with the job. The *Inevitable Doom* has received every type of new ammunition you wanted, and it wasn’t damaged so we’re all good there. Tribune Erica Keller reports the problems with the *Corinthus* will be solved before sunset, courtesy of all the spare parts the Telekhines provided, meaning the four ships of her squadron, the *Jupiter Invictus*, the *Rhenus*, the *Etna*, and the *Corinthus* are ready for battle.”

It didn’t mean much in the case of the *Etna* and the *Corinthus*, though the two ships had received a significant number of old-fashioned anti-air guns on their decks alongside several dozen machine guns.

“Oh, and we have the *Ave Caesar* that Blackbeard graciously returned to us, in addition to the nine ships the pirate promised you.” Annabeth finished with an unimpressed expression.

“You have to admit it, the son of War has style,” Perseus didn’t snicker, but he wasn’t far from that threshold. “Returning this little arrogant bastard of Octavian McArthur to command when the Roman collaborators made his life a living hell for the last months is pure genius.”

Luke sighed again.

“You intend for him to attempt a betrayal too?”

“Oh, I have no need to do something so wasteful, my heroic lieutenant. Octavian McArthur wouldn’t recognise loyalty even if Annabeth’s mother appeared in front of him to teach him the definition.”

“That’s...that’s fairly accurate, yes.”

Twice in the same conversation Perseus and Annabeth agreed with each other. This was NOT a good omen.

“This is a game of betrayals, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know if you have noticed, my dear lieutenant, but none of the great captains happened to be summoned to this war council.” The leader of the Suicide Squad paused. “I could organise a fake one, sell them a fake plan...”

“The confusion would be total once the first shot will be fired.” Hera intervened, a frown on her face.

Perseus Jackson was...unimpressed by the argument.

“This battle is already to be an ungodly chaotic mess.” The evil grin made a triumphal return. “That’s why I called it Operation Titanomachy, after all.”

Hera crossed her arms, and you knew just looking at her she was displeased.

“We are going to sail and free your son, your Fallen Divinity. Isn’t it what you desire?” No time was allowed to voice a reply. “Once the God of the Forges is freed, his machines will be turned against the enemy, the power of Water will rapidly decrease, and Leo will have a whole bunch of automatons to play with. What’s not to like?”

“You turned me into a powerless Goddess of Seasons, you bastard!”

“Ah, that.”

Luke couldn’t help but laugh. If it hadn’t been anyone else...but it was Hera.

She had changed a bit, her brown hair were far more ‘normal’ than her first ugly appearance, though she had a neat single white demarcation separating her brown hair in two. The former Goddess of Marriages was also more muscled and athletic, and she had curves. However, all these changes meant she was pretty much an average Demigoddess if you compared to the standards in vigour at New Byzantium. Sending her to Bronze-level Quests would not raise eyebrows, but anything more than that, well...

“I gave you the Mantles, your Fallen Divinity,” as many people stared in incomprehension, the son of Poseidon clarified his previous statement. “I gave you divine titles just in time to make it a nice Christmas present. Is it my fault your brother and his wives declined to give you the power to back them?”

“Yes!”

The answer was totally predictable...and Luke wasn’t the only one to snicker.

“That was your plan, wasn’t it? To turn me into a useless Goddess of Seasons?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, I have far greater ambitions for you.” On that point, yes, the son of Hermes trusted the red-eyed monster enough to admit he had a point. “And technically, I want to insist you’re not the Goddess of Seasons. You’re the Goddess of Winter, Spring, and Summer. You’re a claimant to the Throne of Seasons. That’s a very big difference.”

“This is normal?” Of course Annabeth wanted to get more knowledge, and it was kind of funny she was taking notes.

“Not really, no,” Perseus said with a serious expression. “In most cases, the Domain comes first. Think of it as the divine headquarters, the sphere of influence, the headquarters, the powerbase, and the court all gathered in one package. But the Goddess of Frost released next to nothing aside from the title of Goddess of Winter. She wasn’t going to give away Snow and Ice Skating for a ‘Queen’ she’d always loathed. The repeated humiliations she forced her to endure are a bitch when payback time comes, after all.”

Clearly, Hera preferred to not answer the last remarks.

“Spring and Summer yielded more power, but the latter title had already been severed from its Domain long ago. As for the former, I lacked the time to ask my Lord Uncle’s first wife what she did with it. I was a bit in a hurry a few days ago, you know.”

Yes, that what happened when you got too close to the Avatar of a Primordial. Luke almost hadn’t believed it, but the insane Demigod had indeed managed to escape the clutches of Nyx, the very Night itself.

“**This is one of the things I’m interested in knowing the answers too**.”

The thief extraordinaire shivered, for suddenly it felt as the shadows of the room were coming alive. Uncontrollable fear took hold into his body.

And *she* was here, on a seat mere feet away from Perseus Jackson.

*She* was incredibly dangerous. Her very presence screamed ‘THREAT!’ in highly-fluorescent colours.

Many times since his return, Luke had wondered what kind of monster the Suicide Squad was guilty of unleashing upon this poor world, and none of the answers had really satisfied him for long.

“**We are all ready, then**?”

“Yes,” out of character for him, the son of Poseidon didn’t give him one of his long monologues. “For the best and for the worse, we are ready to sail for the greatest battle of this Great Quest.”

A golden cup was raised.

“Enjoy these last hours, Suicide Squad, for tomorrow, we return to war.”

**29 December 2006, C.C’s Spa and Resort**

As satisfying as some plans were when you imagined them in your head, they simply didn’t compare to watching the wheels of each plot coming into motion before you.

In the case of Operation Titanomachy, it was even better.

Oh yes, it had taken him a lot of sweat, blood and pain to survive so far.

But who cared?

When you saw the Typhoon-class *Red October* slumbering like an enormous whale right next to Moby Dick, also known as the ‘mega Mecha-whale of Doom’ – Leo Valdez’s words, not his – everything else felt unimportant.

The Olympians had sent him with no support, hoping that being the equivalent of blind, deaf and having his hands tied behind his back would result in his permanent demise. The Triumvirate had thought he would be the Roman Expedition Mark Two, except smaller. The Eldest Giant had thought he was a simpleton.

The Sire of Drakons...this enemy had so far not underestimated. And by the time the Battle for Forge MP-42 was over, Perseus was sure he would get some answers. He just wasn’t sure how bad they were going to be.

But the point was this: the foes had been legion, and his own forces terribly limited.

And yet, here he stood, alive, and more powerful than ever.

“I hope you had a lot of fun leading the dance,” the former Tyrant mused, “because it is over. My campaign, my rules.”

It went without saying that not every point had been accounted for. Fortunately, this was why he was a Tyrant and a son of Poseidon, not a child of Athena.

It was why he had taken the very real risk of dying by assaulting Circe’s island.

The risk had paid off.

By the end of this battle, even if most of the battle-plan went wrong, the Suicide Squad would be able to flee to Atlantis and see the diplomatic formalities expedited in twenty minutes.

The battle-plan was not going to unravel that badly, of course.

That was why the potential traitors in his order of battle were for.

“No monologue today?”

The black-haired God authorised himself a small smile.

“Everyone is too busy dealing with the last details before your half-sister casts her Tide Spell, Lou. It isn’t really fun to speak for twenty minutes in front of a public limited to a few guinea pigs.”

In case you wondered, no, not every prisoner of Circe had his curse cancelled after Christmas.

Most of the male Legionnaires of the *Dominus Caelum* and the other ‘master strategists’ who had insisted to attack C.C’s Spa and Resort were still trapped into guinea pigs’ bodies, and nothing Tribune Erica Keller had promised was sufficient to change the mind of an Immortal Sorceress.

Yes, the grudges of the daughters of Hecate lasted a very, very long time.

“Could I ask you a question, Perseus?”

“You can ask, my dear sorceress lieutenant. I reserve myself the right to not answer if the answer will open too many problems at once...”

“Why,” the blonde Demigoddess asked, “did you not ask for the help of another Pantheon?”

Ah. It was *that* question.

“I suppose the Blackbeard Pirates were loudmouthed and eager to reveal some secrets that should have been best left ignored.”

One glance was enough to tell Lou Ellen wasn’t amused by his words.

And her black eyes indicated clearly she wanted a clear answer.

Perseus sighed.

“Since the Greek-Pantheon exists, it stands to reason other Pantheons are real. Why would the three brothers ruling the Sky, the Seas, and the Underworld exert major influence in our world and not deities like Horus or Odin? Gods and Goddesses exist. They are different and yet the same. There are extremely powerful Pantheons, much like there are weak ones.”

“And you didn’t tell us.”

“If you remember correctly, I felt like revealing the truth before the expedition to get rid of a certain Drakon began, but there were still many Huntresses around, and most of them were quite...confrontational.”

Perseus breathed out.

“Besides, I have to admit, it doesn’t really change the problems we face here.”

“Excuse me? The Olympians didn’t help us, most of the divine help you bargained for was obtained by going around them and keeping the Master of Olympus in the dark-“

“Sorry, I should really have said ‘it changes nothing, because we can’t be helped by other Pantheons’. It is the next best thing to impossible Lou Ellen.”

The seriousness he said it was enough to convince the daughter of Hecate he wasn’t joking.

“But the Blackbeard Pirates...some mentioned they made sacrifices to a Hindu Goddess before sailing for the Sea of Monsters...”

“The Blackbeard Pirates became a crew long before the Treaty of Jerusalem was agreed upon between the different Pantheons, Lou.”

And having all the Gods and Goddesses of War in the same place at once had made sure the ‘Holy Land’ wouldn’t know peace for centuries, maybe millennia.

“A treaty? Really?”

“Yes, a treaty. By the time the Second World War came to a close, every Pantheon realised that the wars were getting out of hand. You had my half-brothers trying to compensate for their weaknesses by hiring sons of Thor as Varangian mercenaries. You had sons of Sobek siding with the children of my Lord Uncle. You had Loki playing mayhem and allying with powerful Gods of twenty different Pantheons at once. The Second World War wasn’t an extinction-level event, both from a divine and mortal perspective, but the Gods and the human race came quite close to the abyss. So they decided all the Pantheons had to be separated from each other.”

“Gods tend to not respect their own rules, even when they swear on the Styx.”

“Yes.” The former Tyrant nodded. “That’s why the separation was complete, beyond the ability of someone like Loki to return it to the previous status quo. Tell me, what do you think of multi-universe literature?”

Lou Ellen Blackstone paled.

“No, surely they didn’t do that!”

“Oh, I assure you, they did.”

“But...but there are still worshippers of other Gods in this world! I mean, I had a few cousins who worship Norse Goddesses!”

Really? That was an interesting revelation, he was going to enjoy conversations on the subject as soon as they had the time for it.

“Assuming say, one of your cousins worships Thor, his prayers and the food and drink offerings he may give to the Norse God of Thunder are all going to him, of course. The big difference since 1945 is that Thor is fighting Giants into an entirely different reality, and he can’t send the Valkyries before your demise. However, should your cousin fall in a glorious battle, his or her soul will indeed go to Valhalla, in a world similar and yet very different from the one we currently live into.”

There was more to it, the entire thing was damn complex. And evidently, the original Treaty, the one which had been signed using near-unbreakable oaths, was not available to the public.

“I would have loved to bargain with Kali or Loki for a little divine help in exchange of maximum mayhem, Lou. I would truly love to. But unless somehow across the Multiverse the Treaty is made null and void, this simply won’t happen. And before you say anything, I’m pretty sure that even if we topple the current Olympians and become rulers and masters of this planet, it won’t return things to how they were before WWII’s end. The Greek-Roman Pantheon received this reality when it was time to divide the spoils.”

“It’s...but in that case, why were the Huntresses so angry that you spoke of it? I mean, this couldn’t change anything, since the other Pantheons aren’t able to help!”

Perseus grinned.

“First and foremost, Lou, the Gods don’t really want this information to spread. After all, it implies that no matter how powerful they currently are, there was a not-so-ancient time where they didn’t rule this reality as Overlords. They were mere Kings and Queens. Plenty of them absolutely hate being reminded of that.”

“Okay...that makes sense.”

“And as for the second reason...yes, the Gods of other Pantheons can’t help, be it by providing you the muscle, intervening directly, or selling you powerful artefacts. That doesn’t mean you are completely cut off from them. For those who have the ingenuity, there are still some methods to exchange information. Obviously, there is no guarantee the exchange will give you priceless information, and the waiting time before getting each answer is horribly long-“

“That’s how you get all the information no one else has a clue about, don’t you?”

“Oh, I have plenty of other methods to acquire information, Lou.” Perseus chuckled. “Many include sordid betrayals and great conspiracies.”

“Why I am not surprised?”

Alas, as fun as it would have been to continue this extremely interesting conversation, it wouldn’t be wise to force Circe to wait for them.

“Let’s go. I’ve always dreamed about proclaiming my eternal friendship to a Titaness.”

In the distance, he was quite sure the Immortal Sorceress eavesdropping upon this private exchange wanted to change him into a pig.

“Thanks to an abundance of low felonies, the Trident is about to prevail.”

**Author’s note**:

The next chapter (and it promises to be a big one, for sure) will likely be titled *Clash of the Titans*.

You think you have seen Perseus ‘Hellwalker’ Jackson escalate? You were totally mistaken. The escalation begins here, and it is not going to stop before the grand finale.

**Suicide Squad - List of Fallen**:

*Judith – Huntress of Artemis, now serving the Goddess Khione in death*

*Kalinda – Huntress of Artemis*

*Eudoxia – Huntress of Artemis*

*Douglas Smith – son of Volturnus*

*Phoebe – Huntress of Artemis, daughter of Eris*

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

*Gallowborne Division – all seventeen Legionnaires*

*Nick Coleman, son of Quirinus*

*Fergus Cook – son of Liber, transformed into a golden penguin and unfortunately for him, died as one*

**Wall of Dishonour**:

Bella Medina – daughter of Scotus: traitor and betrayer, became Nocturna and discarded her humanity before deserting from the Suicide Squad

Jade – former Huntress: denied the will of Artemis, and became the Champion of Khione

Drew Tanaka – daughter of Aphrodite: became a living weapon, and the new Champion of Persephone

Calypso Tenebrae – daughter of Atlas, joins the Suicide Squad for a moon, may have a slight grudge against Olympus

Hera – completely blamed for organising and celebrating marriages without the approval of Olympus. She is also a claimant to the title of Goddess of Seasons now.

Perseus Jackson – for reasons which don’t need to be explained

**Gallowborne ‘Division’**:

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

It must be alas noted that all the Gallowborne Legionnaires all perished during their Redemption Mission on the beach of C.’C’s Spa and Resort. Perseus Jackson has already declined all responsibility in the matter.

**‘FORCE S’ – Fleet order of battle for Operation Titanomachy**:

*HPMS Inevitable Doom* – Super-Mega Yacht, fleet flagship (Grand Admiral Perseus Jackson commanding)

*HPMS Moby Dick* – Giant Mecha-Whale (Drew Tanaka commanding)

*HPMS Red October* – Typhoon-class Submarine (Captain Marko Ramius commanding)

*Jupiter Invictus* – modified Ticonderoga-class Cruiser (Tribune Erica Keller commanding)

*Rhenus* – modified Oliver Hazard Perry-class Frigate (Centurion Michael Kahale commanding)

*Etna* – modified Kilauea-class Ammunition Ship, anti-air defences recently added

*Corinthus* – modified Neosho-class Oiler, anti-air defences recently added

*Ave Caesar* – modified Ticonderoga-class Cruiser (First Centurion Octavian MacArthur commanding)

*HPMS Queen Anne’s Revenge* – 42-cannons galleon (Admiral Blackbeard commanding)

*HPMS Brundisium* – pirate-captured Roman ship, modified Neosho-class Oiler

*HPMS Vesuvius* – pirate-captured Roman ship, modified Kilauea-class Ammunition Ship

*HPMS Burning Dragon* – 74-guns ship of the line

*HPMS Jolly Roger* – 48-cannons galleon

*HPMS Black Pearl* – 40-cannons East Indiamen galleon

*HPMS Royal Fortune* – 40-cannons frigate

*HPMS Ranger* – 12-cannons brigantine

*HPMS Light of the Orient* – 8-cannons junk

And yes HPMS stands for His Pirate Majesty Ship. Jackson insisted.

**Notable reinforcements of the Suicide Squad for Operation Titanomachy**:

Calypso Tenebrae, daughter of Atlas and Tethys

Hylla Ramirez-Arellano, daughter of Bellona

Reyna Ramirez-Arellano, daughter of Bellona

Captain Marko Ramius and twenty officers of *Red October*

And I believe that’s everything I wanted to write this time. See you on the other side of the Maelstrom soon...

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/

archive ofourown works /32339365 /chapters /80167612

ww w .pa treon Antony444