**Chapter 26**

**Clash of the Titans**

*On the beautiful morning of December 29, the newly proclaimed ‘Force S’ left anchor and sailed away from C.C’s Spa and Resort.*

*It was a powerful naval force: though Perseus Jackson had deliberately left the* Second Chance *inside the Forge of All Perils, Force S boasted fifteen warships, a giant Mecha-Whale, and one capital submarine.*

*It was, by all things considered, a far more considerable gathering of firepower than the Roman Expeditionary Force had possessed when they had entered the Sea of Monsters months ago.*

*The goal?*

*Challenge the forces of Tethys, Titaness of the Seas, and free the captive God of the Forges.*

*Or die in the attempt.*

*Did we realise how hideously outnumbered we were going to be?*

*Yes. Yes, I think all the intelligent officers had this thought in a corner of their head.*

*But there was still a certain amount of confidence bordering on arrogance.*

*Everyone in Force S had survived trials which would have killed lesser mortals. These were not novices aboard the warships, but long-lived veterans of the Zone Mortalis.*

*The day and the night passed almost without incident, with only nine monster attacks reported and dealt with.*

*And then at dawn, when Forge MP-42 was almost within strike range, the wind abated.*

*Operation Titanomachy really was about to begin.*

Beginning of Chapter 15 of *Seas of Madness: Chronicles of the Suicide Squad Volume 2*, by Annabeth Chase, daughter of Athena

**30 December 2006, Super-Mega Yacht *HPMS* *Inevitable Doom*, the Sea of Monsters**

It had been only three days since Octavian had been forced to obey his commands, and he already hated Perseus Jackson.

The bastard treated him like a vulgar plebeian, and summoned him when he wanted for the most futile reasons! He also had refused to name him as second-in-command!

But the worst part was without question the clothes. The son of Poseidon had donned a parody of a proper eighteenth century naval uniform. Why parody? Because Octavian was not aware of any navy where an orange tricorn and a red-and-black striped cloak were mandatory. And the less said about the parrot on his right shoulder, the better.

“Right,” the mad Demigod gave them a disturbing grin. “Captain Bonney, I trust you won’t ask again why I didn’t take the *Second Chance* with Force S? In case you had any doubt, yes, it is exactly to not deal with situations like this one.”

The daughter of Demeter – dressed like a pirate prostitute – nodded humbly.

“This is all fine and all,” and Octavian had to control himself to not react to *his* voice, “but many warships are still becalmed. Plenty of your modern toys can sail without the wind, but the *Queen Anne’s Revenge* and others aren’t so lucky.”

“Indeed, Admiral Blackbeard,” Jackson seemed to find the entire problem amusing, for some reason.

“The Titaness really intends to stop us before the battle even begins,” Tribune Erica Keller grimaced.

“Oh, it isn’t the Titaness’ fault,” the bastard-in-command corrected her. “The command of the winds, be it in a Zone Mortalis or elsewhere, is only the prerogative and the duty of the God of the Winds, which we may call Lord A, for the simplicity of it. And yes, before you ask, Lord A doesn’t take orders from the Titaness.”

There was a fake shrug.

“He does, however, take orders from Olympus.”

“This is bad,” the daughter of Aphrodite commented. And what was it with these women all dressing like whores and prostitutes? “For the moment, the Titaness hasn’t reacted, but if we stay becalmed here for too long, she’s going to get impatient and send the sea monsters. Without wind, many warships will be easy prey for them.”

“This is a correct description of what is about to happen should not a solution to be found.”

Octavian cleared his throat.

It enraged him that the bastard completely and deliberately ignored him.

“Fortunately for you, I anticipated this childish attempt to delay the attack of Force S.” The mad grin was so reckless, so dangerous, that Octavian knew plunging his gladius in the back of this traitor couldn’t be a sin.

“While I appreciate the defiance and the will to only obey your own laws,” Blackbeard rumbled, “the winds and the tide do not listen to mortals like us.”

Perseus Jackson bared his teeth, his red eye was full of malice...and then he turned away.

The black-haired Demigod slowly walked towards the prow of his super-mega yacht, drawing a small bronze-coloured Trident from his pocket.

The Trident was thrown overboard, and there were murmurs of incomprehension.

“Oh, Kymopoleia, beloved sister, Mistress of Violent Storms and Black Seas, I humbly request your help.”

What? But the Olympians had told everyone that he wasn’t to be helped-

It was-

No way a true Goddess was going to answer-

The blue sky suddenly became not-so-blue after all.

The brilliance of the sun dimmed.

The waves, almost inexistent, suddenly began to take strength anew.

There was an explosion of water several metres before the *Inevitable Doom*.

The wind hissed and Octavian shivered.

And then *she* rose.

Octavian began to truly felt fear.

This was a Goddess, all right. She had to be at least six metres-tall, and her white face shone with some ethereal bioluminescence. Her clothes appeared to be made from algae. A large Trident of bronze was in her hands.

“**Brother**,” the immortal spoke in an irritated tone. “**I see you’ve remembered my existence**.”

“You wound me, sister. I remember the existence of all my siblings...if only to swear to them all my eternal friendship.”

“**You are a miscreant, and if you abuse the good will of Rhode, I will tear you apart and feed you to my sharks**.”

“Does a good fisherman call a force of elemental destruction to catch a salmon?” the bastard asked with a bravado that would be impressive if the consequences weren’t going to get them all killed. “I request the help of the appropriate Goddess at the right time, no more, no less.”

“**And what would this help entail**?”

“I want you to raise the storm, sister. The greatest storm, and the last. I want the winds and the currents to push us to the gates of Forge MP-42, and then laugh as two enemy fleets will fight in the middle of an aquatic battlefield darker than ink. I want my enemies forced to choose between your hurricane and my missiles. I want even sea monsters to feel fear.”

Octavian felt his stomach sink with the weight of despair. Jackson was completely mad.

“After all,” the black-haired monster laughed, “it will be difficult for Tethys to turn the sea against us if it is already in fury!”

No. No, he couldn’t mean-

“An eye for an eye, and a storm for a storm,” the mad Demigod proclaimed. “She raised the Maelstrom once, and I will retaliate. Let there be no peace until one fleet has been sunk and swallowed by your storms!”

The worst part, the Centurion acknowledged, was that Perseus Jackson had now his sister’s undivided attention.

“**I can do that**,” the smile was cruel and inhuman. “**But I want a payment**.”

“I can free *her*.”

“You-“

The haughty expression was replaced by something that could only be replaced by *shock*.

“I can free her. I swear it on the Styx.” Something infernal growled on the horizon.

“**If you do**...” Kymopoleia seemed suddenly hesitant and purposeless. “**Then I suppose Atlantis will be in your debt. If you fail**-“

“If I fail, Styx will have her due, yes.”

“**True**.” Kymopoleia grew several metres higher before shaking her head. “**I want a temple on my own inside the boundaries of New Byzantium**.”

“Consider it done.”

The grin which followed proved that the two were indeed children of Poseidon.

“**And you will build it with your bare hands**.”

“Oh, come on, sister...”

“**Did I stutter**?”

Perseus Jackson huffed.

“Fine. But can I at least hire an architect for the plans? Building something is one thing, but mathematics, foundation, and masonry have never been among my strengths.”

“**You can**,” the Sea Goddess conceded generously, certainly eager to have a temple which looked like a temple, and not the Tower of Pisa. “**Do we have a bargain**?”

“We have.” The son of the Earthshaker nodded...right before the bronze Trident was thrown back at him.

“**Then you will have your storm, brother. Strike when you are ready**.”

There was a titanic explosion of water, and Kymopoleia was gone as fast as she had appeared.

But this point was almost forgotten, as a cold wind blew around them, and a devilish red eye stared at them.

“No more becalming, no more retreats,” the Pirate Lord in charge of the Suicide Squad told them. “It is time to go to war.”

**30 December 2006, *HPMS Red October*, Sea of Monsters**

It didn’t seem possible that mere minutes ago, the sky had been entirely cloudless and a terribly hot sun had made them sweat.

Why? For the good reason this tropical summer weather was entirely gone.

The sky was a dark grey, and the sun was nowhere in sight anymore.

And it was going to get worse.

Marko felt it in his bones.

Oh yes, it was going to get worse.

The dark waves were of a shade he didn’t like at all, and the splendid blue was no doubt soon going to turn into the kind of dark ink no one wanted to navigate upon.

The waves were rising high.

Kymopoleia had promised a storm, and it was going to be a cataclysmic one.

“Are we ready to dive?”

“We are.”

“Then do so without losing a minute.” Marko ordered. “The storm is almost upon us, and I prefer to be at least one hundred metres below the surface when the full wrath of the Goddess will hit.”

“Yes, Captain. Our orders?”

“We are going to keep the sea monsters at bay, and participate in the missile salvoes. I trust the tubes are loaded?”

“Everything is loaded and ready to launch.” His second told him before finishing with a grimace. “I’ve never thought we would do it against monsters and angry deities.”

“I didn’t plan for this either. But it is a way to pay our debt...and certainly our very last chance to one day escape the Sea of Monsters.”

The *Red October* began its descent into the dark depths, and many men shuddered as the presence of Moby Dick made itself felt, already savaging several groups of scouts sent by their enemies.

“It is time, Captain.”

“Very well,” Marko replied, showing more serenity to his men than he felt deep inside. “You can fire the missiles.”

**30 December 2006, Forge MP-42, Sea of Monsters**

Before today, Isthmus had been confident the anti-missile batteries of the Forge could handle everything a warband of Demigods could throw at them.

This wasn’t the case.

The Suicide Squad had launched when they were incredibly close, and the storm blinded many sensors. Worse, the new Telekhine designed missiles were found in no mechanical database, and they ‘skimmed’ over the waves, making detection horribly difficult.

“Launch,” the dusky dolphin commander grunted, wishing he had more than ten seconds to react.

But there wasn’t enough time.

The flak and the anti-missiles illuminated the dark sea and the tormented sky.

The hyper-sophisticated automatons and the defending servants did their best.

It wasn’t enough.

There were two hundred missiles in the initial salvo, and by a near-miraculous performance, Isthmus’ subordinates managed to stop eighty-nine of them.

All the rest got through, and Forge MP-42 trembled as explosion after explosion engulfed it.

Seconds later, the sections where ammunition storages had been hit detonated too.

The ground trembled under his fins, and without anyone needing to inform him, the dusky dolphin knew many of his warriors had just been sent to the Underworld.

“Damage report,” he commanded.

“All the ships in the Beta docks are gone, Commander. The sluices to open the Gate are out of service too.”

“Secondary explosions in the Iota Assembly Line. Losses estimated at over three thousand automatons and rising.”

“Energy shortages on Anti-Missile Batteries Kappa and Theta.”

“Communications are jammed outside of Forge MP-42. We have lost contact with-“

One salvo.

One salvo and the Suicide Squad had done more damage than a thousand Legionnaires would ever be able to inflict.

“Retaliation?”

“We don’t have...the storm is shutting down all our advanced fire-control systems, Commander. And the electronic warfare potency the enemy ships have is far better than what the Triumvirate recorded days ago!”

If he had not been on the receiving end of it, Isthmus would have spent several seconds admiring the beauty and the simplicity of the scheme. ‘Raising the storm’ should have been one of the greatest hidden aces of his side, but the son of Poseidon had right from the start made it his own. And far from being a mere throw of the dice, the Demigod had been able to build a strategy all around it.

“We can wait it out,” one of his lieutenants suggested. “Damage remains light. Surely they don’t have enough missiles-“

“Second salvo! Second salvo incoming! Two hundred missiles in attack mode!”

“You were saying?” Isthmus asked sarcastically.

“I...yes, this was a mistake. Orders, Commander?”

“We have to destroy their missile launchers and their arsenal ships,” the dusky dolphin replied grimly. “And since the storm is covering their approach, I fear we are going to have to kill them at close-quarters.”

Explosions rocked his command headquarters as more missiles evaded the counter-fire of his tubes. Tons of metal were sent to the sky. Torpedoes and drones disappeared into several huge pyres. Lights flickered.

“This isn’t going to be easy.” Oh yes, this was the mother of all understatements.

“No, but the Goddess who supports them can’t do more than raise the storm, otherwise Lady Tethys will be free to intervene and give her a lesson.” Isthmus looked at the figures and acknowledged the inevitable. “Mistress, I think it is best for us to counterattack. We are not going to win this battle by standing on the offensive.”

“**I agree. Fight as you wish, Isthmus**.”

“Thank you, Mistress,” the Commander answered with a military salute before turning towards the rest of his command staff. “No more restraints, no more fighting with one fin tied behind our backs.”

“The fleet is sallying out of the docks?”

“The fleet is to sally out, yes.” Isthmus confirmed. “And all the maritime automatons, the drones, the warships we raised from the sea bed, and of course the sea snakes are to go with them.”

It might seem a little overkill, and it was going to leave it with few reserves. But at this point, Isthmus really didn’t want to know what Perseus Jackson had planned to storm Forge MP-42.

It was better to engineer the destruction of his entire fleet command – the so-called ‘Force S’ – before an amphibious landing could take place.

“Tell the Gorgons tactical command of the fleet is theirs. In the mean time, we are going to strike back with our missiles.”

“Commander Isthmus, the accuracy of our salvoes is going to suck, it’s horrible out there, the storm-“

“I know, the storm is wrecking everything.”

The images made it very clear. There were winds of hundreds of kilometres of hour out there, waves as tall as an aircraft carrier, and things far more terrible. The divine daughter of Poseidon had seriously gone all out to support her mortal brother.

“But we have a lot of missiles. They aren’t going to miss all.”

“Third enemy missile salvo incoming!”

“ALL MISSILE BATTERIES! FIRE AT WILL!”

**30 December 2006, *HPMS Inevitable Doom*, approaches of Forge MP-42, Sea of Monsters**

If they didn’t have a Titaness and several sorceresses to defend them with magical shields, they would all have died in the last minutes.

Richard wasn’t sure of many things, but he was certain of that.

The entire battlefield was hell in water.

They were all tied by enchanted ropes, otherwise the waves would have propelled them into the dark cauldron raging everywhere.

The wind bit them and was devastating in the extreme.

And it was raining missiles.

Dozens, then hundreds of missiles tried to kill them, and they could only endure and launch more missiles at the Forge, far away in the darkness.

And yet they had to be there, on deck, for while *Moby Dick* tore apart the huge monsters, there were thousands and more of smaller monstrous crabs and other crustaceans trying to board them.

His blade was covered in blue-green sea blood.

The son of Hercules was desperately trying to catch his breath, and trying to convince himself the enemy would find no flaws to exploit.

Ten seconds later, the enemy proved him wrong.

The *Inevitable Doom* and the *Jupiter Invictus* were leading the battle-line of Force S. This was only good sense, for theirs were the best magical defences of the entire fleet.

Which meant that when the missiles changed their targeting priorities, it was extremely bad.

There was only a second to realise that this time, the servants of the Titaness had focused on the *Etna*.

There was only a fraction of second to wonder how many missiles had hit.

And then the *Etna*, imitating the volcano it had been named for, blew up as the fire hits the ammunition stored inside its belly.

It was a horrible flame rising to the black stormy skies.

It threw quantities of debris everywhere.

And Richard knew that all the crew of the *Etna* had perished within a few seconds...which was probably for the best, for no Demigod could really survive in these monster-infested waters which had waves as tall as skyscrapers.

“JACKSON!” The son of the God of Strength screamed.

Seriously, it was perfectly reasonable to never call Kymopoleia during a Great Quest! What good did it do to hide your fleet into a storm if the storm almost sank you before the battle started?

“KEEP YOUR CALM!” The son of Poseidon shouted back from his position on the rear of the ship where he fired some sort of gigantic laser cannon at a target Richard couldn’t see. “WE HAVE ALMOST DONE THE MOST DIFFICULT PART!”

The most difficult part?

It was not-

There was an explosion behind them. Another ship lost. Hundreds of lives gone.

“That had to be the *Light of the Orient*!” Luke Castellan commented. “I told him this junk had nothing to do in this battle of madness!”

“NONSENSE! I ASSURE YOU THIS WAS THEIR LAST MISSILE SALVO!”

“Why in the name of my father Bacchus would they stop firing?” Dakota McDonald powered the words with everything he had in his lungs.

The timing was horrible...or the Fates hated them. Or both.

Suddenly, the Sea of Monsters began to illuminate itself. It was some sort of underwater bioluminescence, no doubt. They were in a cauldron of darkness, so the light wasn’t coming from the Sun or the Moon!

It could have been comforting.

It was not.

Not when it meant that they could see on the port side of the *Inevitable Doom* an immense armada charging to kill them all.

“Fifty, fifty-five...” mental calculus had never been his strength, but here you could guess in a few seconds they were going to be incredibly outnumbered. “At least sixty ships, and the Titans only know how many are unseen in the darkness.”

“Don’t forget the damned sea snakes!”

Richard would have preferred to forget them, thank you very much.

As many of the monsters revealed themselves, it was evident some of them were so colossal their heads were as big as the *Inevitable Doom*.

Tattered sails and poison-foaming maws; this had to be the spear the Titaness had kept assembled to destroy every Demigod so stupid as to challenge the defences of her prisons.

“Change the priority targets of the missiles!” Richard barked to the cackling penguin. “We need to kill these damn beasts before-“

“Ignore that order!”

Jackson, somehow, had rushed behind him.

“Captain, if we don’t do that-“

“Don’t worry, we are going to deal with them,” the son of Poseidon smirked. “But it will be my way. Missiles and cannons are not the weapons we need here.”

“Excuse me?” Richard retorted in a flabbergasted voice. “We are outnumbered more than five to one, and you want to discard some of our most powerful weapons.”

“Six-to-one, at the very least, but who is counting?” The son of Poseidon turned his head, and on this, the daughter of Hecate joined him. “Are you ready?”

“Not really,” Lou Ellen Blackstone was wearing only her S-Suit, and seemed extremely reluctant...which given past exploits, was a warning something incredibly crazy was going to happen. “Is it time?”

On this, Perseus Jackson drew an old-fashioned watch from his pocket, consulted it, before returning it from where it came before a wave drowned it.

“It is time, yes.”

“Time for what?” Richard knew his tone must betray his fear.

“This fleet is far too strong for Force S,” the scion of the Seas closed his eyes and explained calmly, as if they were not in the middle of a storm and about to be flanked by a titanic fleet of monsters and formerly sunken warships. “And even if we sank and killed every hull and soul aboard it, the Titaness would gather the pieces in a few hours and send them back on the surface. A conventional naval fight is one we lose, one hundred times out of a hundred.”

“But then...”

The blonde sorceress kneeled and a golden witch-circle materialised on the deck. Glyphs which weren’t Greek or Latin were lit one by one. And during all of this, the armada unleashed by the Titaness accelerated.

Already several ships of their own battle-line were disobeying and trying to change course.

“Idiots,” Perseus Jackson remarked, having perceived the same information relayed by the sea-protected tactical display. “Lou Ellen?”

“Almost done...yes. Your hand, please?”

“The things I do for my family,” Perseus smugly replied...but he extended his left arm.

The daughter of Hecate drew a curved ritual dagger and struck like a viper.

The blood of a Demigod flowed into the ritual circle.

And the future Apprentice to Circe – yeah, everyone intelligent among the Suicide Squad was aware of that – sang an incantation which gave him the urge to run away as far away from her as was humanly possible.

The seas shrieked.

The winds unleashed the totality of their wrath.

And as the sound ended, Lou Ellen Blackstone collapsed.

“Michael!” The son of Apollo rushed to their side. “Bring her to her cabin! Use the Golden Fleece for ten seconds on her!”

“You need healing too, Jackson, this blade-“

“I will be fine,” the son of Poseidon dismissed the matter like it was no big deal...and in fact the wound was almost already closed. “The dagger was prepared to give just one cut, don’t worry.”

“What was that supposed to do? We are down one sorceress now!”

“I thought it was evident, my dear muscled lieutenant! The Titaness brought her own monsters to kill us!”

There was a chorus of screams, and then a thunderous sound that resonated into the storm like the death of everything.

“So I thought it fitting that I brought another monster to destroy them all.”

The bioluminescence on the port side abruptly failed on a large zone.

No, Richard corrected in his own mind, it had not failed.

It had not been deactivated.

It had been *swallowed*.

Several warships and giant sea snakes were missing.

They were missing because fangs as big reefs were emerging.

They were missing because there was-

“What in the name of everything monstrous is that thing?”

“Grant, I present you my half-sister Charybdis. Annabeth! Tell Ethan we need all the speed we have, now! We are just on time! The sea-swallowing is about to begin!”

“It is-“

It was insane. But it was also mad brilliance.

The fleet Tethys had sent had thought they had them dead to rights, but in fact, with Charybdis suddenly in the very heart of their formation-

“You intended to kill them that way all along, didn’t you?”

“Guilty as charged,” the Lord of the Suicide Squad replied with a modest shrug. “I must also mention that for as long as Charybdis is here, the Titaness of the Seas won’t be able to summon a maelstrom to sink us all. You can’t create something like that when there is already a giant whirlpool monster so close.”

His mind was incredibly scary, that wasn’t in question.

And words failed him.

How it could be anything else when one by one, no matter how loud they shrieked, the sea snakes were unable to fight against the monstrous suction? Warships were capsizing and being dragged towards one of the most awful demises he could imagine.

In mere seconds, an armada that could have ruled several seas was broken, fighting for its very lives, and about to be *digested*. Many cannons and missile-launchers were pointed at the world-ending maw.

It had no effect. The sea was swallowed, and the enemy fleet was going down with it.

Of course, they weren’t the only victims. The *Burning Dragon*, the only 74-cannons ship of the line, had disobeyed Jackson’s orders, and now that it had tried to change course, it was out of formation and closer to the maw than any other ship under Suicide Squad’s command.

It was too close.

The *Burning Dragon* was doomed.

The son of Heracles pleaded silently when his eyes met those of Perseus’.

He didn’t like the pirates, but these deaths...it was really an awful way to die.

But the son of Poseidon only made a silent ‘no’.

“There is no way we can tow any warship out of the maw.”

They heard them on the radio frequencies, cursing their names.

And they could only watch and do nothing; already all ships had enough difficulties resisting the monstrous hunger of Charybdis.

The Burning Dragon disappeared into the maw forever.

“How long do you intend for it to stay?” Richard croaked. “You are going to send it back, right?”

“I am not,” the seas shook and Charybdis at last stopped devouring her warships...and more warships and monsters came out of the darkness. “You see, the Titaness has a monster in her service that can give Charybdis a fight.”

Perseus Jackson paused dramatically as his eyes narrowed in incomprehension.

“You may know her as Medusa.”

“What? You think...you think her ability to change beings of flesh into stone can affect this legendary monster?”

“My dear muscled lieutenant, the entire point of this phase of Operation Titanomachy is to find out.”

**30 December 2006, *HPMS Queen Anne’s Revenge*,** **approaches of Forge MP-42, Sea of Monsters**

“Fate was not kind to them today.”

Edward Teach, son of the War God, seized the opportunity to drink more rum.

After what Perseus Jackson had just done, Blackbeard really thought he needed it to maintain his usual cheerfulness.

There were crazy men he had worked under in the past, and there were bloodthirsty men who had commanded him too.

None of them, it must be said, had decided to try feeding an entire fleet of enemies to Charybdis.

“The rest of the enemy fleet is trying to engage the monster, Captain. We can move against-“

“No, Auger. The time has not come for us to move against him.”

“But-“

“The enemy fleet isn’t defeated, and the Goddess will make sure the storm will continue to rage, sinking the cowards and the unlucky.” The Master of the *Queen Anne’s Revenge* continued with a smirk. “And we are no cowards, aren’t we?”

“But we may be unlucky, Captain.”

The Admiral of the Blackbeard Pirates laughed raucously.

“Ha! A good point, Lafitte! Let me watch the battle, it looks like our enemies are trying to kill Charybdis.”

At that point, to be fair, it wasn’t like the fleet of the Titaness could really do something else. The entire vanguard and a good part of the central squadrons had been fed to the giant maw.

Most of the rest was dispersed, and unable to come to grips with Force S, which had resumed its long-range bombardment.

Either they attacked Charybdis, or they were going to be swallowed by the sea every time the monster decided to have another lunch.

Attacking was the natural solution, though Blackbeard wasn’t going to deny the sheer amount of courage it took.

Whether you were a sea snake or a sailor now transformed into a dolphin, it was impossible to forget you attacked a monster that was easily one hundred times the size of a galleon, if not more.

“There are some souls who have ambitions beyond mortal understanding. They are destined to shake the world. And then there are those who end up feeding the monsters. Who are you, I wonder?”

Engines of destruction that had been rebuilt in Hephaestus’ Forge fired. Greek Fire jars were hurled by catapults. Incendiary ammunition was combined with lethal spells. Missiles joined the dance. Several monsters grabbed enormous rams and charged to ram the guardian of one of the Sea of Monsters’ entrance.

It was sheer slaughter.

Tentacles the size of galleons struck the sea, killing sea snakes like they were childish toys.

Most of the ammunition wasn’t able to scratch the skin.

“How did he summon that beast in the first place, Captain?”

“Blood, of course,” the legendary pirate replied. “Blood is always the key, and in this case it is the beacon too.”

At last, there was a terrifying blast of dark grey magic from a ship in the rear-guard.

And this time, it had an effect; a small part of the world-ending maw turned grey.

“By the Gods, Captain, it did work! They have-“

“It is a race now, yes.” Blackbeard admitted.

“A race?”

“Either the Gorgon manages to save the day by changing Charybdis into stone...or the entire fleet is going to be devoured. The situation is not favourable for the fleet, evidently.”

Three more galleons and two Cruisers were swallowed in the next thirty seconds, as if the monster wanted to support his words.

The Gorgon replied with a terrifying gray ray which returned some light into the storm.

Charybdis didn’t like that at all. Oh no, the monster did hate it. It began to rise from the depths.

They had seen only the maw, the fangs, and some trace of it so far.

Now it changed.

Blackbeard had seen some hideous things, but Charybdis effortlessly crushed them in an instant by her sheer horrifying appearance.

The monster was a disgusting worm with spikes and tentacles. Its ugly shell of blue-green gave you the urge to vomit. The tentacles which decimated the ships were akin to limbs of octopi, but twisted and *wrong*.

Yes, it wasn’t the size of the monster – greater than a sea mountain – or the fangs and the maw which were the problem.

It was the wrongness. There was something which made his skin crawl, his face sweat, and his hands tighten around the solid ropes of the *Queen Anne’s Revenge*.

And it was just with mere glances.

“Did you put her at the entrance of the Sea of Monsters because it was such a huge monster, oh Gods?” Blackbeard asked out loud. “Or did you move her to that god-forsaken sea’s entrance because you felt the same?”

The battle raged, almost beyond the comprehension of mortal eyes.

Blasts of stone-changing power were cast. Ships died.

But the greyness, the unnatural stone, began to slow the hungry maw down.

The stone changed the fangs.

The awful worm’s fury abated.

It began to slow down.

It may have been a mistake for the body to emerge from the depths; the Gorgon would have had far more problems attacking what she couldn’t see.

“Still, for the strength of the Gorgon to prevail...” Blackbeard used his spyglass, and grunted in satisfaction. “Ha! I see.”

“Captain?”

“The two other Gorgon sisters are lending their strengths to the third. One for all, and all for one.” The Pirate Admiral laughed. “And now...the greater monster is defeated.”

There was an ultimate roar of defiance, and the stone-cursed Charybdis fell. It was like a giant whale crashed into the water, except this time, the monster was far bigger than any whale had ever been or would be.

And as if even the Gods and the Goddesses had enough, the winds and the waves were suddenly less dangerous and cruel.

“Of course, there are only six or seven enemy ships left...Charybdis almost wiped them out.”

The strategy of Perseus Jackson – if you could call this epic series of mad ideas that – had worked. The majority of the sea monsters were gone.

“Ha! It seems Fate has decided we will not die today, boys!”

**30 December 2006, *HPMS Inevitable Doom*, approaches of Forge MP-42**

“I think this battle is going to be a legend within a few days.”

Perseus grinned.

“I think your prediction has a good chance of ending up true, Annabeth.”

All told, the battle had lasted about two hours – yes, he had checked his watch to be sure.

Two hours.

It was all that had been necessary for Charybdis to wipe out the armada of warships and monsters assembled to protect Forge MP-42.

Now there was devastation as far as a mortal eye could see.

The *Inevitable Doom* swam on a sea of debris, and the same was true for all the other warships which had survived the cataclysm – it was way too brutal and apocalyptic to be truly designated a ‘battle’.

“Three warships of Force S gone, Lou Ellen is exhausted, but we annihilated the fleet and the monsters.”

“And Medusa and her sisters look completely exhausted from what your drones allow us to see.” The daughter of Athena answered. “By the way, were you the one to tell Kymopoleia to stop her storm?”

“No,” he confessed, “I gave no such order.”

The clouds had changed from ‘pure blackness’ to ‘dark grey’, and the height of the waves far less impressive since several minutes.

“I suppose the Titaness intervened to calm things down.”

The son of Poseidon chuckled, before shrugging.

“It is fine with me. I got what I needed from this battle.”

“The destruction of the fleet, I suppose, is critical, for without it, we can’t exactly try to storm the Forge,” the blonde-haired Demigoddess replied with her usual thoughtful tone, “but-“

“I was referring to the fact Medusa was kind enough to change temporarily Charybdis into stone.”

“*Temporarily*?” Ah yes, some members of the Suicide Squad had made the wrong assumptions.

“Yes, temporarily,” Perseus replied without irony. “Charybdis was a Goddess before being changed into a mortal, and no matter how powerful, the three Gorgons don’t have the power to overwhelm that kind of divine resistance. At a guess, I think they have expended enough of their strength to paralyse her for six or seven hours.”

“But...fine, I understand, Perseus. It isn’t like we need that many hours to deal with Medusa and sent Charybdis back to the entrance of the Sea of Monsters, right?”

Sometimes, there was no need to utter a monologue to pass a message.

“Right?”

“When I swore to Kymopoleia that I would free *her*,” the former Tyrant of Helike mused, “I was speaking about Charybdis, of course.”

“Impossible,” Ellen the Huntress declared, clearly having not understood his brilliance until this moment. “It’s...impossible!”

“I live to do impossible things,” honestly, what was the point of repeating things that had already been done? It was boredom incarnate! What a sad way to waste your life-expectancy!

“And no, it isn’t impossible. It is merely insanely difficult. The body of Charybdis is so dangerous that any attempt to approach her would be incredibly stupid to attempt in normal circumstances. But Medusa took care of that little problem for me.”

“Err...” Dakota said weakly, before opening a jug filled with wine and almost emptying it in a few seconds. “Yes, that’s...true. But how can you...how can you un-curse something so big? There are rituals belonging to my father which might purge Charybdis, but they would require you to take the madness in her stead, and anyway, they are incredibly slow. The stone curse effect will not last that long.”

“This is true. This is why I am going to use a far more direct approach.” His eyes turned towards Calypso, who had just emerged from the chambers where she had been erecting the magical shields. “Of all Domains, Night is one of the most versatile and esoteric. Can I request you to open a Veil to shroud Charybdis, my Lady?”

“**Your request is acceptable**,” the daughter of Tethys smiled back.

“Then we are going to begin immediately.” There were some hours to fulfil his oath, but it was best to not waste any time, the consequences of failure would be dire for him and for everyone else.

“And the Gorgons?” Clarisse asked. “They still have seven ships afloat.”

“Force S and the Suicide Squad will have to deal with the Gorgons.” The commanding officer of the Suicide Squad rolled his eyes. “That shouldn’t be too difficult. Their powers to change flesh into stone has been completely exhausted for most of the day, and the majority of their support is gone. Kill the acolytes and the sidekicks. Capture the three Gorgons. Bianca?”

“I think you are underestimating them.” The daughter of Hades grimaced.

Perseus raised his eyes in direction of the grey skies.

“You will have Drew and *Moby Dick*, for the love of the Gods! Sink their ships and capture them in giant nets for all I care.”

The son of Poseidon cleared his throat.

“Lady Calypso? I am ready. Hera? You’re going with me.”

**30 December 2006, into the Veil of Night, beyond the Maw and the Curse**

Hera had expected the worst, and she was not disappointed.

The moment the Night dissipated around them, there were under attack.

Except the enemy was not a horde of mini-sea monsters.

It was almost a sentient mass of blue-green algae.

Fortunately, she had been loaned a sword of Stygian Iron, and the black metal was clearly one of the weaknesses of this aquatic threat.

Once a few sword strikes burned the algae thoroughly, the things withdrawn.

“Jackson, what in the name of-“

“Later. We advance.”

Hera bit back a curse and followed him.

“**Burn**,” the son of Poseidon commanded, and in mere seconds, ancient torches were set aflame.

Needless to say, the algae masses, which seemed to be everywhere around them, withdrew in a hurry.

“Ah, better.” The leader of the Suicide Squad smirked. “You recognise the place?”

As a matter of fact, the former Queen of the Gods was surprised to see she could. There was magnificent blue and gold paint, with short marble columns and open balconies. Though ruin had mangled them, the statues of mermen and crustaceans were too easily recognisable for anything else.

“This looks like one of Poseidon’s palaces as he built them thousands of years ago.”

“Good.”

“Good?”

“This means there is something left of Charybdis’ soul. If we had been thrown into a swamp filled with maws, our mission would already be doomed from the very start.” Perseus threw an unamused glance at the blue-green algae which tried to remain as close to them as the torches and the light allowed. “Though I really don’t know what those vegetal parasites are doing here.”

“Your sisters didn’t inform you of what was waiting ahead?”

“My sisters didn’t know most of the details,” the black-haired Demigod admitted with a frown. “They were aware Chrysaor was the chief culprit behind her curse, that our father didn’t declare war in answer, and that your ex-husband was responsible for the entire mess.”

There was a grimace, and for a moment, the red-eye was almost thoughtful.

“And while I am far from a die-hard supporter of his, I’m beginning to have my doubts Zeus was truly guilty of what my sisters accused him of.”

“It doesn’t seem very much his style,” she acknowledged. “I wasn’t around during that time, I only returned when the political blame was shifted around...but Zeus has always been more willing to sleep with an attractive Goddess than to curse one to an awful fate.”

“Exactly,” Perseus nodded, “let’s advance, and be careful around the stairs, I don’t know if they can handle our passage.”

As it happened, the son of Poseidon was more pessimistic than the situation truly warranted: the stairs and the entire structure at the forefront of palace were incredibly damaged, but not that fragile, fortunately.

It was not a happy tour, it must be insisted upon. Nothing was collapsing, but the majority of the palace was ruined. Statues were broken in half, when they weren’t, they were dispersed in five or more parts, and all were headless. Priceless mosaics had been desecrated. Frescoes supposed to represent mighty galleys were blackened and covered with disgusting slime.

Worse, the further they stepped into the palace, the worse the smell was. It reeked of rotten fish and pollution. It assaulted your nose and your senses, and after a minute or two, Hera wished she had thought of bringing a bottle of perfume with her to make the experience with her more tolerable.

And with every step the claimant to the Throne of Seasons made, the worse the impression of *wrongness* increased.

It reached a peak when they entered the Throne Room.

It had clearly been built like one of these maritime-themed replicas of the Olympus Council Room which were always commissioned by Poseidon when he was angry at Zeus.

Except here, eleven thrones were in ruins.

And the scene which awaited them was one of horror.

At first, Hera thought there was an enormous mass of algae immune to the torches and the light they carried with them.

But it wasn’t the case.

The things were not blue-green algae, but blue-green *tentacles*.

Charybdis had been a beautiful daughter of Poseidon, and part of it remained now. The sea nose was still there, along with her face.

But her hair had been changed into tentacles. The upper part of her body had several eyes and mouths where none should ever be. The skin was scaly and *wrong*. And under the waist, there were thousands of blue-green tentacles, and they felt *wrong*, *wrong*, and *wrong*...

The throne, by this point, looked entirely corrupted, covered in algae filth and-

“**Reveal**,” Perseus ordered.

Reality shrieked, and in the centre of the Throne Room, a small table materialised, like it had always been here.

The sensation of wrongness became near-unbearable.

It was a *crown*? Yes, there was a crown of blue-green on the small table, but merely glancing at it hurt her eyes. The metal looked to be tentacles changed into dark metal, and the decoration was as if thorns had been shaped to be algae, the-

“Jackson! What is it?” Hera was not ashamed to admit right now that this cursed thing made her very, very afraid. And her eyes burned for looking at *it* for too long.

“I don’t know,” the son of Poseidon answered as he threw a torch forwards, revealing that the tentacles at the ‘feet’ of Charybdis were continuing until they linked with a cascade of algae pouring out of the crown. “But I can tell you two things: we have before our eyes the artefact responsible for the curse of my half-sister, and I am ninety-nine percent sure that Zeus played no part in this tragedy. At worse, he must have taken the reputation blow to ensure no one had to suffer like Charybdis here did.”

“That...that sounds like someone he would do when he is not busy siring bastards and giving hypocritical lessons to everyone. But what is this artefact?”

“I don’t know,” Perseus Jackson said for the second time. “But I think we’ve been very lucky here.”

Lucky? This wasn’t exactly the kind of word she would have been inclined to use.

“Why?”

“Because the crown isn’t upon her head.” Perseus grimaced. “Given the time Charybdis spent guarding the entrance of the Seas of Monsters, if there had been some deep compatibility, the ‘coronation’ would have taken place. It isn’t exactly like she looks able to resist the power of this abominable trinket, no?”

The aura of *wrongness* exploded in their face like a bomb.

Hera emptied her stomach in a few seconds.

“Err...Jackson? I think...I think it would...be...for the best to not insult *it*?”

“Yes, you may very well be right.” The male Demigod hadn’t retched, but he looked as pale as she probably was. “This is a problem. I don’t think I have the strength to destroy it. I already have enough difficulty just glancing at it. You?”

“I...it hurts. Mere glances already hurt.”

“Then severing the connection between Charybdis and the crown is the only solution.”

Hera thought the ‘wrongness aura’ would become unbearable, but if anything, there was an emotion of...approval?

Jackson didn’t look pleased at all. Then again, given how *wrong* the crown felt, anything that met its approval was likely not something *good*.

“And how are we supposed to do that?”

“The algae were vulnerable to fire. Maybe these tentacles of sea colour have the same weakness?”

“Maybe?”

“Dear Antigone,” Hera immediately scowled, “I don’t even know what this crown *is*. I’m stumbling in the dark, same as you are. Now that it is said...do you think you can call for Summer here?”

“I can try,” the former Queen of the Gods hesitated. “But I can’t promise I will be able to control it.”

“Understood. If you think you are ready to burn everything, stop using your power and step back.”

They each moved on a different side of the mass of tentacles which could have been the ‘legs’ of Poseidon’s daughter.

Perseus Jackson waited, perfectly immobile, orb of water in one hand and sword of Stygian Iron – certainly a gift from Hades – on the other.

Drawing power was...difficult.

It wasn’t like she had difficulty remembering how to do it. It was simply that there was so little of it!

Where before she had summoned a torrent by clicking her fingers, it took her a colossal amount of mental strength to force a few drops of answer to answer her will.

“You’re doing it, wrong, you know.”

“I know what I am doing!”

“You’re fighting your own power,” the heterochromatic-eyed Demigod snorted. “You’re so afraid of losing control that you’re trying to chain the Seasons. It isn’t going to work. The Seasons are not Marriage.”

“I don’t want your advice and-“

A blast of fire erupted from her hands, and struck the tentacles.

Immediately, the things shrieked and tried to attack her...but Jackson cut them apart before they could do her harm.

“This conversation is not over,” the son of Poseidon proclaimed with a large smile. “But this is enough power for now. **REND**!”

There was a horrible squelching sound, and dozens of tentacles were reduced into goo.

The fire spread, but the madman didn’t stop hacking.

And damn it, he was fast.

The black sword was a tornado of darkness. The blue-green things were maimed, cut, and then thrown into the bonfire, one she had stopped feeding, but which was now spreading on its own.

“**Enough**,” this was not English or any language known to her, but Hera understood the meaning. It hurt her ears to be sure.

She turned her head, and sure enough, Charybdis didn’t look like she was sleeping anymore.

Her eyes were fully opened...and while Hera couldn’t profess knowing the daughter of Poseidon well, she was certain that these red irisless eyes were not normal.

“**You have disturbed the preparations for this vessel**.” Something spoke through Charybdis’ mouth, but it was certainly not the Goddess. “**This flesh belongs to the Dreaming One. Begone, pathetic duo of planktons**.”

Dreaming One? Oh, no. No! NO! They couldn’t be that unlucky to be thrown against a Primordial! Not again!

“You’re wrong, you know.” Perseus said conversationally, though his weapon was ready to resume the hacking at any moment. “You may serve the Primordial of Water, but this Goddess is hardly a perfect vessel. Otherwise you would have completed her transformation long ago.”

“**There may have been a few setbacks**,” the thing snarled, “**but the coronation will happen! It is inevitable**!”

“What is inevitable,” and here Hera braced, for she had a clue or two something extremely insane is about to happen, “is your return to the crown. **I WISH IT**!”

Many times, Hera had to admit, she had underestimated the mad Demigod. The former Queen of the Gods had a feeling she was less and less guilty of that the longer she stayed in the Suicide Squad, though. The more disastrous events you survived, the more it took to be impressed.

But this time, she gaped as the equivalent of a giant paw of magic and darkness was summoned into existence. Claws plunged into Charybdis’ chest, and after a few seconds of struggle, a vile thing of blue-green, an awful-looking *parasite* was extracted.

“**Miserable plankton**,” the thing wheezed, “**you may deprive me of this flesh, but the power is now unstable! I was too strongly tied to it! You are now going to perish knowing true terror and**-“

The paw threw the parasite onto the crown, and the tantrum ended.

The effect remained spectacular, though.

In mere seconds, all the remaining tentacles vanished, and what stood to replace them was a beautiful-looking woman...except something immediately went wrong.

The legs merged again and tried to become a claw, then a tail, then a pincer.

Her eyes began to hurt. The power levels were rising.

Sweat formed on her skin.

The pressure of power was becoming intolerable and-

“**What is happening? NO! NO! THIS IS A NIGHTMARE! SOMEONE HELP ME**! **KILL! FLEE! DIE!**”

Charybdis screamed and Hera realised terrified that while the green eyes of Poseidon’s line had returned, the Goddess wasn’t able to perceive them.

She had lost all control and-

Suddenly, there was a black sword impaling Charybdis between her breasts.

“I’m sorry,” Perseus Jackson declared with a voice of steel. “But it looks like both your memories and your power are desynchronised.”

“**KILL THEM! KILL THEM ALL! LIVE! DEVOUR! SAVE! EAT! I WANT**-“

Power was channelled, and the daughter of the Seas went silent.

“In a way, you’re particularly lucky,” Perseus Jackson declared as the Goddess tried to strangle him, only for her strength to fail, and her eyes to close as she collapsed on top of him. “You were born a Demigoddess, before being adopted by Amphitrite. So stripping you of the corruption will give you a second life.”

Hera heard a sigh.

“*Wish* is always taking a lot of me, and I would have preferred to not have done twice in row. The things I do for family indeed...”

There was a choir of madness, the impression of wrongness intensified for a few heartbeats...and then Hera saw the crown melt away into the algae and vanish from her sight.

“But I am the Lord of the Suicide Squad!” The shadow of laughter returned, and once again the red-eyed Demigod had to make his demonic smile, though she couldn’t be sure given that he only presented his back to her. “It is **my Wish** that everyone is to return to the seas sooner or later! Do you hear me, Kymopoleia? The oath has been fulfilled, and the price paid. The Seasons are owed they due, and so am I! Let the rest of the flow return to the seas, and the beast be condemned to the roll of extinct legends! ATLANTIS!”

Power engulfed them, and her entire world became white.

And then everything *hurt*.

**30 December 2006, Forge MP-42, Sea of Monsters**

Tethys was quite happy to be alone, for it would have done nothing to her reputation if everyone saw her giggling like a vapid mortal.

Still, she continued to manifest her hilarity for long seconds.

While some part of the situation was incredibly tragic, the rest was just too funny.

“**We have the young Mistress of Violent Storms, swimming away with her past and future mortal sister, believing that somehow she is sufficiently skilled to hide from my sight. You are not, child, but I will let you get away with it this time**.”

This was going to bring more changes. Nobody would argue against that.

“**Then we have the core of the Beast guarding the Straights. It is hollow, and far away from its duties. Will something reform without the soul to feed its endless hunger, or will something else take its place**?

For several millennia now, mortals had believed in Charybdis and Scylla as the two coins of a deathly threat. It was going to be fascinating to see how the deeds done today would change belief on this world.

“**We have the Seasons growing in strength, yet remaining blind. You are in need of far more lessons than I believed, Hera**.”

The temper of her daughter had always been her worst flaw. In fact, all her daughters shared it, though not to the same extent.

“**We have a battle not yet completed, with more blood to be spilled**.”

Medusa and her two sisters had decided to reveal their true monstrous forms at last, and around the first ship which had tried to come to blows directly, the water was turning crimson red and surviving sea monsters had a very good meal at last.

“**And finally, we have you, Perseus Jackson. You are a Demigod who believes that the ink of the Book of Destiny can be altered to open a new Age of Heroes. But while you break the plans of the angry Crones, the true Powers of this reality remain beyond you. I am old and powerful, and you are not**-“

Something dark and nauseous assaulted her essence, and the Titaness of the Seas fought back immediately.

It didn’t take her long to recognise the threat.

And once she did, there was only one order that could be given.

“**Isthmus. I am reassembling some parts of the Forge behind the inner walls. Take all my servants and the automatons you can, and flee**.”

There was stupefaction, of course. But her commanders and her surviving armies obeyed.

And it was good, for they stood no chance against the evil which had decided to invite itself here.

“**I was relieved when the Crown of the Deeps didn’t choose Hera or Perseus Jackson**,” the Mistress of the Coral Palace spoke to herself. “**But hope is the first step on the path of disaster**.”

The two who had freed Charybdis from her incredibly long suffering had indeed been judged unworthy.

But clearly someone participating in this battle could not say the same.

There could be all sorts of alternative explanations, of course. But as she withdrew all her power from the outer walls and a majority of the Forge MP-42, Tethys felt she wouldn’t gamble any Drachmas on it.

The Forge of Hephaestus began to be twisted at a prodigious speed. Automatons were beginning to burn in blue-green light. Some walls were beginning to change, taking an oily black appearance, and their structure could be described from a mortal point of view as ‘non-euclidean’.

“**The Crown of the Deeps aspires only to one thing and one thing only, Perseus Jackson. It wants its rightful Princess to lay it on her head of her own will. And as it didn’t allow the currents to wash it on other shores, the evidence suggests it can find its Chosen here and now**.”

The stakes of the game had dramatically changed. There was only one piece of good news: Pontus remained soundly asleep in his Forbidden City, whose name must never been uttered aloud.

“**Hurry, Demigods. End this battle and muster your strength. For before you will walk into my halls and challenge me, you will have to endure trials where you will be at risk to lose everything**.”

**30 December 2006, *HPMS Jolly Roger*, approaches of the Forge**

The first part of Perseus’ improvised plan had worked. Drew and *Moby Dick* had indeed sunk the majority of the last enemy ships.

And then it had all gone to hell, as usual.

Bianca had warned the son of Poseidon it was certainly going to unravel quickly, and she had been right.

As the Mecha-Whale had been finished an ironclad, the Gorgons had used it as an improvised boarding ramp to attack the Royal Fortune, and let the lack of coordination of Force S do the rest.

Jade and Miranda had launched themselves to the rescue, but one had been thrown into the water in a colossal explosion, and the other had learned what it felt like to be on the receiving end of a mast used like a javelin.

They were both going to survive, but they were out of the fight, obviously.

And thus the daughter of Hades was alone when she stopped floating and set foot on the deck of the big wooden frigate.

The air was suffocating under the smell of carnage and death.

It was unsurprising when there was blood and human parts everywhere.

The pirates of the *Royal Fortune* had fought with all they had.

Their best hadn’t been enough.

The former Dread Empress was well aware that in her previous life, the heroes had called her a monster. She idly wondered what they would have called the Gorgons.

“*Sisters*,” a cruel hiss echoed in the cold breeze which had replaced the storm of Kymopoleia, “*another mouse with delusions of grandeur is coming*.”

“Mouse?” the daughter of Hades raised an eyebrow. “How unoriginal and simple. But then what could I expect from someone who thought it was a good idea to fornicate in the temple of her divine mother?”

There were fierce hisses of anger and hatred, and the Gorgons slithered out of the hull where they had no doubt been busy massacring everything living.

Bianca was aware there were some tales about the Gorgons being beautiful women minus the snakes replacing their hair.

She was sorry to inform them it was all a lie. Or at least it was a lie when they didn’t bother masquerading as humans.

There were no legs. The three former human bodies all sprouted gigantic tails, which varied in shade from the grey to sickly yellow.

Under where the navel should have been located, there was enormous insect thorax, and from it spikes, tentacles, and other ugly appendages were emerging.

One might have hopes that was above that wouldn’t be so bad. But it was. The hands had been replied by twisted poisoned claws, and all was it covered in mismatched scales. Oh, and the sisters all had four arms, not two.

After that, the ‘crown’ of snakes upon their respective heads almost didn’t register.

If there was anything human left on them, it was the very expensive glasses they all had hiding their eyes. Well, that and the blood and the guts they were soaked into.

The Gorgons had assuredly not fought *cleanly*, no matter what your definition of it was.

“*So the mouse has a big mouth*,” one of the Gorgons hissed. “*We’ve heard of your lamentable choices and failures, oh Lightning Thief*-“

What was it with all these monsters and monologues? Bianca was definitely going to blame Perseus Jackson for that.

“ARCHAIOS EXOUSIA!” The time for insults was over, it was time to fight.

A Gorgon took the impact of the spell directly and collapsed.

But the two others raced impossibly fast towards her, faster than monsters of that size should have.

“FOS!”

Some would have believed that with glasses, the Gorgons were going to be safe from blinding magical lights. These observers would have been wrong.

Medusa and her sister shrieked in pain and fury as the magical spell scorched their scales and tore their ocular protections apart.

Now! Now she had-

The blades and the claws stabbed her from the right, and Bianca was suddenly very glad she had bathed into the waters of the Styx.

As it was, the strength of the attack propelled her into the entrails of the ship.

And a Gorgon arrived to finish the job.

“KOLASMENES FOTIES!”

And the audacious monster was forced to flee back into the darkness as the hell fire engulfed her.

Bianca grunted in disappointment. She had summoned enough strength. The spell was not going to be the death of the Gorgon.

Which was a pity, because at this moment, the daughter of Hades didn’t care anymore about Jackson’s orders. These damn snake bitches had made a mess of her sorceress robe; for that, she was going to throw them into the Pits of Tartarus even if it was the last thing she did today!

Murmuring a levitation spell, the black-haired Demigoddess rose back until she floated above the deck.

The eldest Gorgon was waiting for her, of course.

With a notable difference.

This time, with the glasses destroyed, there was nothing which prevented her from staring directly into Medusa’s eyes. It would have been incredibly dangerous hours ago, but now? The Gorgon had indeed expended all her power dealing with Charybdis.

And as such, there was nothing hiding the truth.

For it wasn’t the grey eyes of Athena’s line she could see. Nor it was red eyes so often associated with curses.

No, Medusa’s eyes were snake-like...and shining with a malevolent golden light.

“So Jackson was right,” he was going to be insufferable, well, more insufferable than before, “you were Possessed by an Eidolon.”

To her regret, the daughter of Hades had to admit she didn’t know much about these spirits.

“*Yes*,” the hiss was long and monstrous.

And as it was a signal, the two other Gorgons slithered back, discarding what remained of their glasses, revealing near-identical golden irises and pupils.

“We can save you!”

Oh great, the daughter of Athena had followed her...

The Gorgons erupted in mocking laughter.

“*Oh look at this one, sisters*,” Medusa hissed sarcastically, “*another ‘clever’ half-sister*.”

“*Should we educate her*?”

“*Oh yes, we shall, time for her to lose her innocence before we prove to her how we value family*,” it went without saying that there was no trace of affection or friendship in these merciless golden irises.

“*We were not Possessed by mistake, foolish sibling. We called the Eidolons and we allowed them to use our bodies*.”

Obviously, Annabeth was looking horrified. Bianca, personally, felt only annoyance. That meant the worst-case scenario was very much active, and it was going to be even more of a pain dealing with them. It was a good thing she hadn’t used Charmspeak so far; ordering the Eidolons to be banished from the bodies would do nothing good as the Possession was semi-voluntary.

“*Now it is the time to die, Demigods*,” Medusa said and an impossible long tongue of purple colour was revealed. “*Once I will have finished with you, I will seek your leader and I will eat his guts. Using Charybdis like he did deserves a hellish punishment and*-“

A colossal explosion interrupted, and for a few seconds, the wreck of the *Royal Fortune* swayed like a God had struck it.

Once she was no longer in danger of being thrown overboard, Bianca looked on the starboard side, and gasped.

The stone-transformed tentacles of Charybdis were cracking and falling one by one into the Sea of Monsters.

Enormous fissures and holes were running all over the surface of this monstrous body. The changed flesh was crumbling and turning up into black dust.

“I can’t believe it...he really did it.”

Charybdis had been powered by the essence of a divine, and the size of a small island to boot.

And yet the evidence was impossible to refute.

At an incredible pace, the destruction accelerated, until even the big worm-like body and hundreds of teeth fell into the dark waters.

Roars of triumph began to be heard, as one of the most powerful and dangerous monsters sunk beneath the waves.

“*This doesn’t change anything*,” Medusa hissed as the maw of what had been Charybdis slowly vanished from view. “*I’m going to feast on your carcasses, tonight, and I will take great pleasure in it*!”

“Who is going to do what?”

Bianca was rather sure the rectangular window of pure *Night* had not been here a second ago.

And then it opened like a conventional door, in violation of most of the laws of magic she knew.

The Lightning Thief groaned, for she already knew who was going to come out.

“Sorry, I’m late, a black cat crossed my path and I remembered I had to prepare the tea for my favourite sisters!”

One day, Bianca swore, she would strangle him very slowly...

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Perseus didn’t need a report to know something had gone horribly wrong.

The *Royal Fortune* had been supposed to be a ship of Force S, not a slaughterhouse.

Yet all there was to be seen was an ungodly amount of butchery, and the architects of the massacre.

This wasn’t part of the plan at all.

And to say it had worked when it came for Charybdis...for a certain definition of ‘worked’, that is.

Some of his hypotheses had been correct. The golden eyes were there. But since Bianca di Angelo was not a fool and hadn’t bothered using her Charmspeak, the conclusions he arrived to were all bad.

“*Look at that, sisters*,” the greatest monster of the three hissed. “*Another hero. Do you think he’s going to try to save us*?”

“No one told you to open your mouth, future scaly handbag,” he retorted.

“*Excuse me*?” Medusa snarled.

“Are you deaf in addition to your awful looks?” the son of Poseidon insulted her vigorously. “I called you a future scaly handbag. And now that I think about it, your sisters will make nice pair of boots once I will have flayed you.”

Predictably, a storm of claws tried to eviscerate him.

They missed.

“Jade. You are a Champion of Ice snow, stop swimming and freeze me these Gorgons. NOW!”

At last the Chosen of Khione re-entered the fight and trapped the snake-haired monsters into large ice structures.

It wasn’t going to kill them, of course, but it visibly weakened them.

“Right. Now for the final.”

“*What are you going to do*?” Medusa hissed, her monstrous face truly a marvel of twisted humanity and cruelty. Clearly the eldest Gorgon had really faked her humanity well when she confronted the Romans some months ago. Most of what had been a High Priestess of Athena millennia ago had been burned by a lifetime of atrocities and devouring.

In many ways, she and Charybdis were not so different than the others. The big difference was that one, upon realising the magnitude of her mistake, had tried to fight against the Crown’s Curse. The other had revelled in her new monstrous status and added another Curse on top of it.

“You are going to be mortal again.” The former Tyrant declared. “Given how much I know you dislike the prospect of being vulnerable and human once more, it seems to me a fitting punishment.”

“*You don’t have that sort of power, Perseus Jackson*.”

“You’re right, I don’t.” He admitted. That was why he chose this moment to draw from one of his large pockets a medallion which provoked plenty of hateful hisses. “Oh, Goddess of Transformations done in the name of Love, I summon you. By the will of a mother’s love, a curse must be ended. Heed my call, for I have built an artefact to prove my devotion to this cause.”

“Aphrodite will not dare challenging the Master of Olympus!”

Perseus grinned.

“Who says I was calling Aphrodite?”

There was a blast of gold and purple energy, along with plenty of perfume to accompany it. On his left, the golden sarcophagus he had stored in the secret compartment of the *Inevitable Doom* materialised.

And as the smoke cleared, a rather seductive back-haired woman was standing here with only a transparent gown which didn’t hide at all her body underneath.

“Welcome, Neo Isis! I thank you deeply for answering my call.”

“**Perseus Jackson**,” the former Egyptian Queen didn’t hiss like a proper snake, but she wasn’t far from it. “**What did you do**?”

“I have summoned you.” He shrugged with a modest tone. “You proclaimed yourself Goddess of Transformations done in the name of Love, didn’t you?”

“**How in the name of Osiris do you know that**?” Cleopatra asked aghast.

“I know it because it is my duty to know as many dirty secrets as I can. One might even say it is my destiny!”

And the worst part was that he was completely honest, here.

“This affair began with love, and so it must end with love. There are several parts here. One is the formerly mortal body. There are the Snake and the Stone Curses. And there are the Eidolons. Athena is owed the mortal shells and the souls. The Eidolons must be banished, never to Possess these Demigoddesses again. And the Stone Curse will be imprisoned in the sarcophagus. But if you desire it, the Snake Curse is to be yours, as payment for your services.”

Perseus could see ‘Neo Isis’ tried to resist it, of course.

She believed he was her enemy, and to be honest, she wasn’t wrong at all to consider him as a foe.

But it wasn’t Cleopatra VII Philopator who was standing on this bridge covered in severed organs and human corpses.

It was Neo Isis.

There was no divine form, but she was close to her Apotheosis.

And he had respected the rules. He had called her using one of the Domains she had forged for herself, and proposed a fair bargain.

There was no lie when it came to his intentions.

A Demigod would have told him to go screw himself and probably tried to ally with the Gorgons.

But Neo Isis couldn’t.

Her eyes shone in purple and golden light, and her appearance changed to include a sceptre and a far more dignified golden gown of silk.

“**The bargain is accepted, Perseus Jackson**.”

The Gorgons in the next seconds uttered a lot of insults.

It was in vain.

Bianca conjured a storm of magic to activate the sarcophagus, while at the same time, he and Jade kept the ‘ice jail’ of the Gorgons as solid they honestly could.

“Close your eyes!”

It was like a thousand trumpets tolled at once, and a sea of golden light swallowed them.

When Perseus reopened them, the sarcophagus lid shut down in a thunderous clattering.

The Gorgons...the Gorgons were gone.

What had taken the place of the monsters were three women.

They were relatively young, not older than twenty or twenty-two? And they were black-haired and grey-eyed...the same piercing grey eyes which could be observed when a three metres-tall woman in hoplite armour materialised and grabbed them effortlessly, before vanishing as fast she had appeared.

And then there was the Second Caesarea of the Triumvirate...who was glaring at him like he had murdered someone dear to him.

“**I don’t know what you hope to achieve here, Perseus Jackson, but**-“

He threw her the amulet of Isis he had used for the call, and Neo Isis vanished in another flash of purple-golden light.

“*JACKSON*!”

The son of Poseidon raised his head, and gave a sardonic grin to the trembling spectres which looked like they were made of some cursed smoke.

“You should have stopped your Possession when my lieutenants asked you to!” The commanding officer of the Suicide Squad said cheerfully.

“*This is not over*!” the three spirits snarled as one.

“It never is.” The black-haired Demigod agreed. “Now remove yourselves from my Quest and my war.”

“No, you will pay for depriving us of our Gorgon partners! Do you know how difficult it is to find women of such lineage and possessing so much hatred for the Gods?”

“No,” Perseus stuck his tongue out. “And I don’t really care. **Now be good Eidolons and**-“

“*We will wait for you into the Forge, and we will deprive you of your partners, much like you ritually changed ours*!”

There was a massive gust of wind, and the Eidolons disappeared.

Perseus grimaced. Some deity had clearly helped the spirits to escape, while he would normally have been able to disintegrate them with his voice alone.

That was...not good.

“We have won the battle,” Bianca spoke, confirming his dark thoughts, “but I think we have exchanged the problems we were aware of for other threats.”

“I feel the same. But we have no choice but to advance. The God of the Forges must be freed, no matter the cost.”

**30 December 2006, *HPMS Inevitable Doom*, Sea of Monsters**

Dakota couldn’t hide his relief when the sarcophagus was teleported away. Yes, it was sent to his father as an offering, so what?

It was out of sight, and it wasn’t the Suicide Squad’s problem anymore.

The object had been almost innocent when he saw it the first time, but now that it contained part of the ‘Medusa Curse’, it had changed to something sinister and evil-looking, and a dreadful aura had been shrouding it.

It was best to get rid of it as fast as possible, in his opinion, and to his pleasant surprise, Jackson had agreed.

Of course, now that the sarcophagus was no longer a factor, there was nothing that could distract him from watching the island they were sailing towards.

The son of Bacchus wished he could say it was Forge MP-42, but it wasn’t the forge of Lord Hephaestus anymore.

Before, there had been strong and colossal walls rising over the Sea of Monsters. The drones had shown them a daunting picture of multiple layers of defences and no amount of space to make an amphibious landing. From the outskirts to its heart, Forge MP-42 had been a succession of old and modern weapon batteries, fortified to the extreme, and manned by tens of thousands of automatons and servants of the Titaness.

The island they were approaching was nothing like that.

There were some structures left of the Olympian Forge, but they were dispersed all over the island he could see.

The furnaces and the walls didn’t dominate the landscape anymore.

They were immense black structures of twisted pyramids, improbably-inclined towers, and other improbable forms of construction for that. The edifices were so vast they seemed to be imagined to assault the sky.

Dakota wished he could his eyes were playing tricks upon him. Clearly, nothing so monumental could appear so suddenly on an island, Zone Mortalis or not. These were the kind of structures which would require decades of labour, maybe hundreds of years.

And the beach of blue-green sand in front of them raised worse questions, for all its lack of indomitability. Where had the outer walls gone? Thousands of automatons had built them per the Titaness’ orders, they weren’t things you could make disappear just by wishing it very hard.

Dakota shivered, and it wasn’t because of the cold; he had donned his X-Suit exactly to prevent that.

“Jackson?”

“Yes, my drunken lieutenant?”

Naturally, their leader had somehow replaced his orange tricorn by a black straw-hat twice the size of his previous headgear.

“Is it a hallucination?”

“No, I’m afraid it isn’t.”

Let it be said it wasn’t reassuring. At all.

“How bad is it?”

“Let’s see the positive side: it isn’t going to be difficult to seize a beachhead. Whereas this would have been a massive headache if we were directly facing the Titaness.”

When Perseus Jackson told you to see the positive side, it was because the negative points were really awful and life-threatening.

“Do we have a chance?”

“I believe so, yes.” The son of Poseidon frowned as he looked at the transformed island. “The cursed artefact, which I’m willing to call the Cursed Crown, decided to reappear on this island once I broke the curse-bond which chained it to Charybdis. It is sentient somewhat. But it does not care about me or Hera.”

“Because you faced it and it let you go?” Dakota sipped some wine to calm his nerves. “Wait a minute, what if it’s after me-“

“It’s not, my drunken lieutenant.” Perseus snorted.

“How are you so sure? You more or less admitted that-“

“You are not a girl.”

“Oh,” Dakota coughed in embarrassment. “Yeah, I suppose I am not.”

“Glad to see I didn’t fail to notice something that important,” the mad Demigod snickered, making him blush.

“As I was saying,” Perseus said after a second snort, “this Cursed Crown is likely going to target women and girls of a certain lineage. This is why I feel Chrysaor was able to move it millennia ago and remain more or less sane but tainted, when a mere touch was enough to damn Charybdis.”

“That makes sense, yes.”

“It does. Unfortunately, logic dictates the Cursed Crown wouldn’t have moved to the island if the sentience inhabiting it didn’t think it had a chance of finding a new ‘Chosen One’ to touch it.”

“A new Charybdis?”

“Or something worse,” Jackson grunted to his dismay. “For all her strength, Charybdis was unable and unwilling to synchronize properly with the Crown.”

Dakota stayed silent for a few seconds.

“Are you implying that this mountain-sized monster you managed to turn up into broken stone and remove from the battlefield was an *imperfect tool* for this artefact of damnation?”

“Yes,” Perseus said quietly. “It is exactly what I implied.”

The child of the Earthshaker turned around and went to face all the rest of the members of the Suicide Squad, who had mustered close to the stern of the super-mega yacht.

Dakota didn’t miss that among them, there was one who had considerably changed. Hera – for it was difficult to call her Antigone right now – had grown a foot taller, and every time he looked at her, her hair appeared to change colours: from pure white to golden yellow, and from crimson red to shadowy ebony. A large bow was also strapped to her back, and there was a long lance in her right hand.

“I trust all of you have seen the fog rising in the distance.” Perseus did not make it a question. “It is clearly a magical phenomenon which will keep friendly and enemy reinforcements unable to find this island for as long as it is active. On the other hand, Bianca confirmed to me any party wishing to flee through it will certainly suffer a lot from several curses for the rest of his or her life. Said life-expectancy will be measured in minutes, of course.”

“Right, boss,” Rico the Penguin clapped his fins, making everyone very aware that he carried more explosive ammunition than all Demigods next to him. “Give us the bad news, I want to give our enemies a taste of Kaboom.”

“The bad news,” Jackson obliged his maniacal penguin, “is that there is a Cursed Crown on this island, and it appears to be able to change the island to its whims, and inflict potent curses wherever it exerts its corrupting influence. For the love of the Gods, don’t touch it, and stay away from it as far as possible. If you disobey, I think you will have the rest of eternity to regret it.”

“I suppose we aren’t going to complain about a shortage of enemies either,” Richard Grant crossed his muscular arms in front of him.

“Not really, my muscular lieutenant. The cursed artefact changed the structure of the island, it didn’t remove the existing opposition. There are already at least thirty thousand automatons spread over this island, and all are equipped with dangerous weapons. That’s why for the first time, I insist you equip yourselves with armour over your X-Suits. And take shields with you, magical and technological. They aren’t likely going to endure for long, but every projectile they intercept is one that won’t make you bleed to death.”

“The goal?” Kimiko the Huntress asked, recognisable for the long blue tail she tried to hide unsuccessfully.

“The goal hasn’t changed.” Perseus assured her. “While the influence of the Titaness has withdrawn towards the heart of the island, she is still there, observing us, waiting for our party to come and free her illustrious prisoner. Therefore I see no need to be subtle. We will move as a single, overwhelming force and crush everything that stands in our way.”

“Why not send the other Legionnaires and the pirates in different groups?” Miranda asked peevishly, her hair looking like they were sand incarnate, which was certainly not far from the truth.

“Because there are three Eidolons on this island, and their only weakness is Charmspeak.” The red eye of Perseus, on this grey day, looked tired and grim. “If we divide our forces, you can bet these spirits are going to pounce and Possess the most vulnerable members of a group, before convincing the gullible souls to wage war against each other. I suspect certain pirates and Legionnaires wouldn’t need a lot of encouragement to begin the massacre.”

“And the ships?” Ethan voiced. “If you don’t trust them to not stab us in the back-“

“I don’t trust them to not try to steal the *Inevitable Doom*, no.” Perseus acknowledged. “But my magnificent Super-Mega Yacht has several esoteric protections provided by Cyclopes and other loyal associates. And Asterius is going to stay here to watch on Lou Ellen. She hasn’t yet fully recovered from the spatial-distortion spell which was used to bring Charybdis here.”

A spell, Dakota mused internally, which had probably been taught to her by Circe.

No wonder Perseus wanted to attack C.C’s Spa at all costs before coming here....

“Now go prepare yourselves. There are only a few hours of daylight left, and there are harsh battles ahead.”

**30 December 2006, the Beach of the Forge of the Ancients**

Operation Titanomachy, from the very start, had been planned with the principle they were going to take crippling losses.

The sheer danger represented by the fleet assembled by the Titaness, the walls and the batteries of Forge MP-42, and many other things like sea snakes and first-class monsters was a very long list of reasons why.

Ethan knew it, because he had been involved in said planning.

Per the most optimistic scenarios, they would have lost ten or eleven ships into the attempt.

Thus the son of Nemesis was honest enough to say that no, they had never expected to lose so few ships in the first phase of the battle.

By all rights, they should have been decimated.

The fact that they weren’t could be explained by good luck.

Or things were about to go to hell quickly in a few minutes. Again.

They had lost five ships with all hands so far. The *Etna* had detonated courtesy of a missile salvo. The *Light of the Orient* had been annihilated by torpedoes or missiles, he wasn’t sure which. The *Ranger* had disappeared into the storm, probably due to less-than-adequate navigation or a sea snake. The *Burning Dragon* was swallowed by Charybdis. And the crew of the *Royal Fortune* had been butchered to the last man by the Gorgons.

At first sight, the point they had not taken insanely crippling casualties could be considered a good thing.

And it would be, if for a single second Ethan Nakamura thought the majority of the survivors were to be trusted to honour their oaths.

Here they were, mustered on this dark beach of blue-green sands, ready for war.

Two hundred and twelve Legionnaires. One thousand and one hundred six Pirates. And the Suicide Squad to lead them.

The two larger groups couldn’t have been more different if they had tried.

The last Demigods and Legacies of the Cohorts sent to the Sea Monsters had, for all their internal problems, deployed with impeccable discipline, and their formation was three lines-deep. Their anti-cold cloaks were crimson and all standardised, like the rest of their equipment.

By contrast, the Pirates, far more numerous, looked like a mob. There were certainly a colourful bunch; each man who had flocked to serve under Blackbeard’s black flag had his own style and his own preferences when it came to muskets, pistols, sabres, and other weapons. Plenty had donned furs to protect themselves from the cold, giving to some a Viking-like appearance.

But there was no order, no coherent formation, and evidently, there was no discipline.

When they broke, and Ethan was sadly sure it was a *when*, not an *if*, it was going to be a nightmare to salvage something from the disaster.

Assuming they wanted to salvage something, that is.

Blackbeard could smile all he wanted, Ethan trusted the son of Ares as far he could throw him, and it was not very far.

Of course, both Legionnaires and Pirates had a point in common: they were preparing their treacheries under pleasant masks. Half of the Legionnaires may be reliable, and those were the troops of Tribune Erica Keller...maybe. The rest? Octavian MacArthur had without doubt been seduced by promises of Olympus or other inimical parties. They would betray. And then as a son of Nemesis, Ethan would punish them for it.

It should have already begun, honestly. The Suicide Squad was too small to really control them and really behave like the sort of power which guaranteed that no rebellion could succeed. Hey didn’t have slave collars to control the pirates, or enchantments to transform the Legionnaires.

That there existed some semblance of order so far was near-miraculous by all rights.

And the Demigod smiling maniacally to his audience was the architect of this miracle.

“My friends, I have good news! Lend me your ears!”

It went without saying that many Pirates didn’t stop their conversations. And several Legionnaires chuckled and whispered very interesting things when they believed no one could try to listen to them.

The poor fools.

“**SILENCE, OR I WILL CRUCIFY TEN OF YOU TO WARM UP THIS BEACH**!”

It was like the sound button had been switched off instantly.

The expression the pirates had the ‘pleasure’ to ‘enjoy’ was one of utter madness. The green eye had been closed, and the red eye was shining like a ruby of damnation.

“Thank you, my friends,” the Lord of the Suicide Squad grinned largely, “now fortunately for you, I am willing to temporarily forget your rudeness. I have good news, you see. Thanks to my sorceress lieutenant conducting a small blood ritual, we have confirmed the location of the captive God we must free. And lo and behold, the path to take is going to lead us in the middle of plenty of weapon-production facilities, smith sanctuaries, and other great arsenals! The possibilities of using this bounty against the enemies we will face today are truly endless!”

There were plenty of excited whispers from every direction.

“However,” Perseus Jackson coldly smiled with the pleasantness one could expect from a shark going to bite his dinner, “I find myself dissatisfied. Many of your friends thought it a good idea to remain on their ships, thinking I wouldn’t notice it.”

The black-haired Demigod bared his teeth.

“I noticed. And if you think staying on an unprotected ship far away from any major military support is a good idea, I *generously* advise you to reconsider. Captain Ramius and his men will protect the *Red October* and the *Inevitable Doom* while we’re ashore; the rest of the ships will be intact when we will return...but I can’t promise the same thing for the living inside.”

There were plenty of hesitating and unsubtle looks of Legionnaires and Pirates towards their figures of authority.

But after a couple of minutes, it was clear no one aboard the ships would charge to join the expedition.

“Let it not be said that I hadn’t warned you, my friends. Very well! Ethan, we move in Formation Delta-One! The Suicide Squad takes the vanguard! The rest of you follow in a tight formation! And for the love of the Gods, don’t try to go your own way in this maze! United we stand strong, divided we fall!”

It would have been a more reassuring speech, Ethan knew, if he didn’t feel like standing in front of a very cold and dark hungry maw ready to swallow them all.

Charybdis was gone, but the artefact which had created her was very much alive.

And it was waiting for them.

“Why are we supposed to believe you still have the favour of the Gods?” The shout had come from the ranks of the pirates, generating plenty of inquisitive murmurs.

Perseus didn’t even blink.

“**Oh Father, hear my prayers. They doubt I am your favourite Demigod**.”

The earth shook violently.

The Sea of Monsters growled.

And then an enormous wave washed ashore, pouring water over many, many pirates.

And when the water withdrew, the son of Poseidon had the equivalent of a golden standard similar to the ones used by the *aquilifer* of the Roman Legions.

Except there was no golden aquila, the legendary eagle of Imperial Rome, on top of this standard.

Instead, there was a silver dolphin.

“Has someone other unreasonable questions before I begin to lose my patience?” Jackson grinned.

**30 December 2006, the Forge of the Ancients**

Any other time, walking away from this unnatural beach would have been the problem Erica would focus all her attention upon.

This island felt *wrong*, after all.

Setting aside the colossal stupidity of letting a sizeable force land on a beach without any opposition whatsoever, there were no sounds of birds or any other animals that Force S’s members hadn’t brought with them.

A silence of death reigned here, and the black towers and other structures waited, colossal, towering over them and releasing a sensation of sheer oppression.

There were no enemies in sight, but everyone with a small amount of common sense knew they were not far.

Unfortunately, all of that was rather taking second place in her order of priorities, *because of the infernal cacophony Perseus Jackson was making playing with a trumpet*!

“Beloved Jupiter,” the daughter of Sol heard Michael Kahale moan behind her, “please make him stop!”

“Seriously, it’s like someone is torturing a Siren!”

“This is the musical equivalent of skunk smell!”

“How is it possible to be so untalented with an instrument?”

The noise...the horrible sounds...Erica really struggled to find the adequate words. It may be that strangling one giant eagle and adding a series of disharmonious violins and pianos would do the trick.

Maybe.

No, even that couldn’t be truly compared to the nightmare and the sheer sonorous assault violating their ears.

“ENOUGH!”

She screamed and she wasn’t the only one.

A few seconds later, the female Tribune sighed in relief as the musical torture stopped. Three more seconds, and she acknowledged the cacophony was stopped because Leo-something, son of Hephaestus, had melted the trumpet using by half-melting it...somehow.

“Amigo, that wasn’t very nice!” the worst musician of the Seven Seas complained. “I have no spare trumpet!”

“And thank the Gods for that,” Erica whispered.

“You wouldn’t have dared doing that here if Lou Ellen was present,” the Lightning Thief remarked with an evil grin.

“Everyone is a critic these days,” the son of Poseidon shook his head in a picture of offended nobility that gave you the urge to strangle him with your bare hands. “Anyway. Now that this musical interlude is over-“

“This torture, you mean,” Elvis Knight grumbled.

“This *musical interlude*,” the mad Demigod insisted while baring his teeth, “we are finally on the doorstep of the enemy.”

This was assuredly true, not that it was an enormous surprise.

All Legionnaires and the other participants had seen the gigantic black gate the moment they had left their ships.

It wasn’t like they could miss unless they were blind.

It was a door of black metal, but one which must have been conceived for Titans and Gods, for it was about twelve or thirteen metres-tall.

And if the walls next to it were any indication, the dark gate would be several metres thick. It *felt* so solid that even a salvo of missiles would struggle to seriously damage it.

“Grant, with me. Miranda, you are in support. Prepare yourself.”

Erica at first didn’t understand.

What were these two going to do?

They couldn’t plant explosives they had brought with them. Dynamite or any kind of explosives in their stores would never be enough to create a breach.

She heard Octavian MacArthur speaking.

“No...no, they can’t think that *pushing* is going to open the Gates?”

But before thousands of eyes, the son of Hercules and the son of Poseidon did prove that not only they thought it had a good chance of working, they were going to put it into practise.

It should have felt comical.

Two tiny Demigods were touching the dark and indomitable Gate. They were insignificant by size and valour. Just behind them, sand swirled as a Demigoddess guarded their back.

For several seconds, nothing happened.

And then Jackson and Grant went into action.

They really began to *push*, each on one side of the Dark Gate.

For a few seconds, nothing happened.

And then there was a grinding sound.

A cold wind blew, which made all the Legionnaires shiver.

Impossibly, centimetre after centimetre, the Dark Gate began to open.

There was an opening in front of them, and it grew wider by the second.

It wasn’t skill at all. It wasn’t the fame engineering prowess of the Legions.

It was just a colossal amount of strength, done at the proper place and time.

Of course, as the opening became larger enough to let a man pass, Erica saw what was waiting behind.

They waited for them immobile, in neat and tightly-packed ranks.

There were thousands of them.

They were the hoplite automatons of the Forge, built for war.

There were a mass of bronze and something darker, and they had a stupendous amount of weapons; it was easily several phalanxes-type formations assembled on this relatively small battlefield.

“Miranda,” she heard the son of Poseidon grunt. “Focus on the head and heart mechanisms.”

As soon as his words faded, cascades of sand were unleashed.

Unlike the grains of the beach, this one was not blue-green, but shades of gold and onyx mixed together.

But it felt like an entire dune was striking at once.

By the time their vanguard reached Jackson, the battlefield became clearer.

Not a single automaton remained standing.

All of the hoplite artificial soldiers had been disabled.

All of them. Not a single one had been able to fire effectively.

“Good work,” she heard the black-haired Demigod compliment his lieutenant. Then he drew a sword of Celestial Bronze from its scabbard. “Now it’s time to begin the really fun part of our mission.”

**30 December 2006, Tau Assembly Line, once part of Forge MP-42, Forge of the Ancients**

Leo was feeling really conflicted right now. Yeah, the hall they had entered was a paradise of machinery and tinkering. There was a big line of production of automatons, and every part to build them you could dream of! There were tanks and wonderful things! There were guns and anvils! There were rifles and horseshoes! The young Demigod was sure he could build a Mecha-Whale or a Mecha-Dragon here!

And the pirates were busy looting it, disrespecting the efforts of his father.

It made him *extremely* uncomfortable.

Leo wasn’t a thief, and he wasn’t a raider or a pirate.

Taking all the weapons and the precious mechanical parts marked them definitely as *robbers*.

“Jackson?”

“Yes, Amigo?” The son of Poseidon was inspecting the Greek scripts carved into the walls.

“Err...aren’t we going to have problems?”

“The influence of the Cursed Crown in this atelier is incredibly low, I assure you. And the parts aren’t cursed.”

“I was rather more asking if my father wasn’t going to be very angry the pirates and everyone are looting.”

“I think he will close his eyes on the matter, don’t worry.” Perseus smirked before breathing out. “This is a Tau-type Assembly Line, Leo. The stuff here is above the technological level most Demigods can enjoy, but it remains sub-par for Olympus and the immortal armies of the Gods. I’m almost certain your father has over a thousand places like those all over the world.”

“Oh...” Leo looked around with an uncertain expression. “So the ‘multi-toll gloves’ Luke is testing?”

“I know the Amazons are proposing more advanced models on their website.” Perseus answered with a chuckle. “The same is true for the Ghost Armour, of course.”

“The big hammer Ethan took?”

“The Hammer of Retribution? I think there were several Cyclopes who tried to propose to me better alternatives before I embarked on the first Great Quest. This is a rather fascinating piece of technology, by the way. It is a weapon you can’t use to deal a first blow against an enemy, but if your opponent tries to kill you, it will bolster your arm and deal twice the amount of damage you could have done with a more conventional weapon. Oh, and it uses some dark magical effect. The drawback is, it needs blood to repair itself when it is damaged.”

There was a lot of explosions, and in the distance, some automatons which had rushed in were disintegrated by-

“Is it a giant walker?” Leo asked bewildered.

“Giant might be a bit of an exaggeration,” the other Demigod corrected. “It is a hybrid machine that can transform between a walking robot and an aircraft. Users have taken to call it the Viking, for a reason I ignore. I see Elvis Knight has found one to his taste...and now my devilish penguin lieutenants are trying to take one for themselves, of course.”

“Can’t you try to stop them?” Rico and Skipper were already dangerous enough when they only had small explosives and guns, now that they would drive *that*, their potential of destruction was really going to be worrying.

“Everyone deserves to have its fun,” Jackson slammed the wall...and a large hidden door opened, making Leo jump in surprise. “Follow me.”

The hirsute-haired Demigod obeyed, and instantly he felt far better. While the entire island registered as cold and wet, with every step here, Leo felt better and better.

He stayed prudent, though. Perseus was deactivating traps right and left like it was no big deal, but there were enormous saws, blades and sharp-ended tools.

The large flames raging in the room at the end of the tunnel still brought him a large smile.

And at the centre of it, above a large fire, there was a-

“Is it a heart?”

“A mechanical one, yes,” Perseus spoke neutrally, with no grin on his face. “Note the magnificent work; your father is truly a genius. If it wasn’t here, I think we could be fooled into thinking it is a real human heart which is somehow still beating. I believe that some of your brothers who had the pleasure to use one called theirs ‘Heart of the Forge’.”

“Oh,” Leo nodded several times before realising he had to look very stupid doing so. “And what does it do?”

“When a son of Hephaestus uses one, it increases the capacity of the Demigod to handle his or her pyrokinesist abilities. The Heart of the Forge regulates both your flames and your ‘internal fire’, so to speak. You will avoid all overheating, and slowly but surely, you will be able to unleash warmer and warmer flames, until you can become a human torch while remaining completely safe.”

“Awesome!” Leo exclaimed. “How does one use it? It doesn’t look like there is anything to strap it to my chest-“

“Leo.” Jackson looked at him like he was a moron.

“Or I am supposed to use it as a backpack?”

The sigh told him it was the wrong answer.

“At least you didn’t propose to eat it, let us thank Vulcan for small favours,” the Master of the *Inevitable Doom* snorted. “When I said it was a heart, Leo, this wasn’t a joke.”

The words felt like a slap. Perseus Jackson was joking, right?

He wasn’t laughing or joking.

This was bad.

Leo took several steps back.

“I have to *replace my heart*?”

“If you don’t want to end up very roasted by your own flames or come near death and water jets at every adventure, yes.”

“I am not going to let you open my chest!” the young Demigod screamed.

“Stop being so dramatic, Amigo,” Jackson opened a small bronze container, which immediately expanded by several times, and revealed extremely fine machinery. The ‘Heart of the Forge’ was placed delicately inside a few seconds later. “I am not a Healer, and I am completely unqualified for surgery. This requires the work of a professional, and certainly divine assistance as well. The only being on this island who can probably do it safely is your father. If he doesn’t do it, we will certainly need to return to New Byzantium before having this conversation again. Seriously, Amigo. I am crazy, but I am not going to carve up your chest and play up with your internal organs for fun.”

“I... I apologise.”

“You’re forgiven, Amigo! Now, reprogram me these two Colchisian Bulls, they will make superb auxiliaries for the next battles we have to come! I have-“

The smirking Demigod suddenly didn’t smirk at all as the ground disappeared under his feet, and only an impressive jump prevented him from falling into the growing hole.

“Cool! You found another secret compartment.”

Leo threw a sparkle of fire below, and damn, there were large stairs, and what was-

This looked like an enormous armoured door of gold and fire.

“No, Leo, I think I found a Vault. Please go find Luke, I may have need of his services again.”

**30 December 2006, the Vault Eta-Beta-Four, once part of Forge MP-42**

Luke Castellan couldn’t help but be disappointed that it took only a fake key and three metal spindles to open this hyper-sophisticated Vault.

“Jackson, you told me to expect a challenge, but most of the protections were already unlocked!” The son of Hermes loudly complained.

“Castellan, be serious for once.”

“I am serious.”

The blonde Demigod turned to face the leader of the Suicide Squad. And immediately, he stopped smiling, because Perseus’ face harbouring a genuine frown.

“Maybe the Smith God didn’t have time to properly lock it when the Titaness came around and imprisoned him?”

“Luke, I had to deactivate all the traps leading to the Heart of the Forge to begin with.”

“Ah,” the son of Hermes grimaced. “I really don’t know where it is going. Do you happen to know what could be hidden inside?”

“I don’t,” the green-and-red-eyed Demigod replied. “But since something like a Heart of the Forge for children of Hephaestus was used to camouflage its existence, I think that it was really important for our imprisoned host.”

“Great,” Luke muttered. “Shall I?”

“By all means.”

Luke pressed the button marked with an ‘Eta’ glyph.

To his relief, no lethal trap was activated, and the Vault door opened with not a sound, which was an impressive piece of magic by itself, as the tons of metal had to weigh more than an elephant.

The heroic thief was expecting something dramatic, but it seemed the vault was mostly empty, and had always been that way. There was only a sort of jewellery display and-

“Wait,” Perseus’ voice stopped him. “Do you sense that?”

Luke focused and indeed there was a sensation which troubled him. It was as if there was something whispering, something which felt his heart faster, and yet at the same time he knew this was a darkness which would do harm to him given the chance.

“Yes.”

“Nocturna was here.” The leader of the Suicide Squad muttered.

“What? How do you recognise it?”

“Believe me when you’ve tasted the magic of her transformation ritual, it is difficult to forget.” The son of Poseidon drew a little packet from his right pocket and dispersed the entirety of powder it contained. Immediately, the Vault room was saturated with what looked like black dust. “Yes, Nocturna definitely came here, all right. And for me to notice it and the powder to have that kind of effect, she was here between forty-eight and seventy-two hours ago.”

“She knew we were coming,” Luke shook his head in disbelief. “But how?”

“My dear heroic lieutenant, we weren’t exactly discreet.”

“You weren’t discreet you mean,” Luke corrected with a smile.

“I am the very definition of subtlety and sneaky tactics, my heroic lieutenant.” The younger Demigod proclaimed grandiosely. “And jokes aside, even if the Sire of Drakons didn’t have any divine precognition ability, figuring out we would come here sooner or later does not require much foresight. The moment I went to Ogygia, the Sire would have realised the assault on Forge MP-42 was imminent.”

“Okay, I can understand that. But why Nocturna? And for which goal?”

“For the first question, I presume because she is very good hiding in the shadows...not to mention incredibly fast. The Titaness may not have noticed her presence. As for the second question...” the black-haired Demigod advanced until he reached the jewellery display. “There is an empty slot here between the jewels. Based on the contour it made on the support, I think it was a key.”

Luke quickly joined him, and yes, Perseus was right. There had been a key there.

“The jewels are miniature bombs,” the thief said after a couple of seconds. “There were supposed to detonate if you tried to move the Key.”

“And clearly, it didn’t work.”

“No, it didn’t.” Luke admitted. “Any idea what kind of key a treacherous Demigoddess turned batwoman, to use one of your charming expressions, would be interested in?”

“I haven’t the faintest idea, Luke.” This time, the son of Hermes really believed him.

Perseus sighed.

“I am going to help Leo move the two Colchisian Bulls, they can serve as an effective destructive scouting party. The Pirates and the Legionnaires should have finished looting everything now, and it’s not like we can afford to stay several hours here in the hope we will be able to decipher why the hell Nocturna took the risk of coming here.”

“I have no objection. But I also know deep in my guts that whatever our winged traitor did, we are not going to like the consequences at the end of the road.”

It was a prediction that, unfortunately, would be absolutely verified. And ‘like’ was an understatement. Plenty of beings, from the Olympians to the Suicide Squad would hate the chaos it was about to generate.

**30 December 2006, the Endless Stairs, Forge of the Ancients**

The moment they left the Tau Assembly Line behind them, they were in the thick of the fighting again, and it never ended.

The Suicide Squad and its auxiliaries – though Perseus knew the Pirates and the Legionnaires would hate the term, of course – had looted considerable quantities of ammunition in the last hour.

It was put for good use now.

From pilums exploding with the violence of artillery shells to giant walkers armed with flamethrowers, the destruction was really splendid.

Waves after waves of automatons, be they in the forms of hoplites or miniature dragons, were annihilated for negligible losses in return.

And yes, by negligible losses, it really meant ‘very low’. Since they had landed on this island, the Pirates had been the only one to suffer true casualties, and it was limited to one dead and four serious wounded.

Any other time, the former Tyrant would have been happy.

Unfortunately, there were three problems with this situation.

The first was that, while the sheer amount of firepower bolstered morale and made sure they could disintegrate thousands of automatons with every minute, the supply of ammunition wasn’t infinite.

Machine guns, special sniping rifles, grenade launchers and more engines of destruction all required the appropriate bullets and other types of projectiles. They weren’t arrows or rocks.

The second problem was that the bolstering of morale, as welcome as it had been, had given unpleasant ideas to the ‘auxiliaries’. Perseus understood their reasoning, he truly did. Really, if they could fight their way through these waves of enemies, why did they need the Suicide Squad at all?

And the third problem was the corruption shown by the automatons. Before, ‘normal’ automatons had shown relatively little corruption. Now? The Hephaestus-made robots were looking distinctively *wrong*. Many had begun to grow scales. Some looked like they had been bathed in blue-green oil. A few he had carved apart had begun to manifest flesh over their metallic carcasses.

It was three problems in one, and something was going to have to give sooner or later.

The stairs were forcing them to climb up over and over, and there was no sign any part of Forge MP-42 industrial production was going to be raided soon.

But the most frightening thing was how much their surroundings tried to shatter their sense of navigation. His magical compass, tied to the blood of Leo and Drew for point of references, was perfectly stable.

The progression of the Suicide Squad in this maze of cold and enemies-filled stairs was not.

Sometimes it appeared as they were hundreds of metres below the seas, while at others they were at altitudes such that they shouldn’t have any oxygen to breathe.

One might argue it was madness, but it was arguably worse.

The Cursed Crown, clearly, was capable of creating a pocket dimension where the rules of reality regularly stayed far away from.

The explosion of the Viking-class walker manned by the penguins was the signal the odious treachery he had spent so much time waiting for had at last come.

That the other Viking manned by Elvis Knight detonated, struck from behind, was another of those ‘coincidences’ no one intelligent would believe.

“Betrayal,” the former Tyrant of Helike said cheerfully, making a large reverence which made sure that Blackbeard’s strike missed largely his head. “Shocking, totally anticipated BETRAYAL!”

And he stabbed the son of Ares with his blade of Stygian Iron.

The ‘Pirate Admiral’ grunted in pain as the black blade emerged from his leg with a new crimson colour.

In mere seconds, what little discipline existed fell into chaos, as Demigods, Legacies, and other humans began to fight each other like madmen.

“Time to die, Jackson!” Octavian MacArthur, backstabber and treacherous lieutenant extraordinary, pointed an enormous flamethrower in his direction.

“You know what would have been intelligent to do, oh Legacy of the Sun?” the son of Poseidon asked with a smirk.

“Make me your second-in-command?”

“I would rather name a goat,” Perseus told truthfully, and he enjoyed very much the expression of hatred of the chief traitor. “No, I wanted to say that if you wanted to achieve something with your dastardly ambush, it would have been clever not organise it when there’s a large reservoir of water just above your heads.”

Perseus summoned all his Hydrokinesis strength, and he called for the water. This part of the Forge was solid, but there were thousands of tons of water.

The ceiling crashed, though by some divine providence, the pieces missed Octavian. The backstabber had really impressive luck! His lieutenants, not so much, though.

“Now where was I?” the leader of the Suicide grinned as water washed up the clothes he wore over his X-Suit, and soon more or less every fighter was seeing the water rise up to their knees. “Ah yes, I remember. Death to the traitors!”

In an aquatic environment, he was almost unbeatable. How sad...for the traitors.

In a minute, he had already killed ten Legionnaires and fifteen Pirates. Unfortunately, Blackbeard was nowhere to be seen.

“Tribune?”

“I am with you, Jackson,” the daughter of Sol grunted, plunging her gladius into the back of an officer of the Jolly Roger’s crew.

“Good,” out of the two hundred-plus Legionnaires, that meant about one hundred were willing to follow the voice of sanity – and yes, it was deeply ironic it was *his* side which could be considered sane here. “Unsurprisingly, it seems the pirates have near-entirely gone over to the traitors.”

The ambush had begun with the Suicide Squad in the vanguard, when they had been about to descend some stairs, but at the edge of some very large hall, for once.

As such, it gave the ‘Betrayer Force’ the space to assemble in overwhelming strength. There were close to one hundred Legionnaires and nine hundred Pirates there.

And clearly, they had looted an impressive number of machines, that so far they had kept in their rear-guard in an attempt to keep it a surprise. There were three large tanks, plenty of dangerous bikes and quads with tripod-mounted weapons.

It was a significant amount of firepower.

But as he proved easily by raising a wall of water to stop bullets and other things, it was utterly insufficient to deal with someone like him.

“Now I am a generous and pacifist leader,” if it wasn’t time to make a good speech, when would it be? “But I think all this oath-breaking deserves serious punishment. Bianca?”

Hellfire struck, and several pirates died screaming as an inferno of black flames consumed them.

“Can we crucify a few of them?”

“You are going to lack wood for *that*, you realise?”

“I will adapt.”

Perseus snickered.

“Well, far from me the idea to prevent my lieutenants to innovate-“

His hilarity stopped immediately, for in the distance, there was a powerful manipulation of Hydrokinesis, and *it wasn’t him doing it*!

“Forget that,” the son of Poseidon commanded. “Run.”

“What?” Rico protested, busy playing with a large pile of explosives. “Boss, we can take them!”

Something blasted the wall on their right, and multiple jets of water sprayed Pirates and Legionnaires alike.

“Jackson, if it is your idea-“

“I am not the one doing this! RUN!”

The wall exploded, and unfortunately, it was not water which crawled out of the holes.

Perseus had to react fast and severed a blue-green-purple tentacle bigger than him which would have struck Ethan.

“By my mother’s whip, what-“

“Run! Stop freezing like frightened deer and run!”

All the members of the Legionnaires and the Suicide Squad he could see at last obeyed, though a second and a third tentacle appearing may have something to do with it too.

The things were bloody enormous, and they made an octopi look positively friendly given the spikes, the poisoned suction cups, and the maws which could be seen.

And of course the sensation of overwhelming wrongness was back.

“RUN!” And he took his own advice. It was not time to play the hero...or the villain, really.

“What is this thing?” Dakota managed to scream as they scampered.

“I think it’s a Shoggoth,” Perseus admitted as he used some of the water to destroy more automatons attempting to prevent their escape. “I think-“

There were horrible screams from behind them. Alas, it seemed some of the traitors had not been clever enough to realise that fleeing was the correct course of action.

“A Shoggoth? But that’s not part of the Roman-Greek Pantheon?”

“It is part of the *Primordial Pantheon*, Grant. Ask Hera if you don’t believe me!”

The former Goddess of Marriages nodded briskly, not that he really needed his support. This was not the kind of monster you went in front of to declare it was in violation of the Treaty of Jerusalem.

Perseus checked the compass, and fortunately, they had chosen the right path.

“We must accelerate! Everyone run faster!”

The agony screams in the distance made sure no one asked why he felt it was necessary.

**30 December 2006, Armoury Alpha-Four, once part of Forge MP-42, Forge of the Ancients**

Annabeth didn’t say anything as Perseus knocked Michael Kahale unconscious. Any Legionnaire who thought that rallying Octavian MacArthur – despite knowing the backstabber’s legendary incompetence at that – really deserved everything about to happen to him.

The only question was why Jackson had bothered taking him prisoner. Many Legionnaires they had confronted in the last hour had been killed instantly before they could even attempt to surrender.

“Good. Grant will you transport him.” The son of Poseidon ordered in a voice which didn’t invited discussion. “Now, it has been over one hour, by my best opinion, since the majority of our auxiliaries went rogue. Who is missing?”

“For the Suicide Squad,” Annabeth cleared her throat, “we still have Elvis Knight and Michael Yew missing. They were both piloting walkers, and they fell from the stairs into this large cascade. We have been unable to locate them magically or by more conventional manners. And of course, Alexia and Kimiko of the Huntresses were unable to fight their way through the pirate army, and had to take an alternative path. We don’t know-“

“I don’t believe in coincidences, Annabeth.”

“Coincidences? What would be the point? They are Huntresses!”

“They are the two Huntresses who have been cursed in the Forge of All Perils.” The leader of the Suicide Squad reminded her frostily.

“They are still protected by Lady Artemis, Jackson,” Ellen the Huntress countered.

“But they can’t access the same level of protections and blessings you and Jenna do.” Perseus replied without missing a beat. “No matter. It isn’t like we can do anything save leaving clues behind us that will allow them to catch up with us. If we had found functional automatons, the entire affair would have been far easier.”

This, alas, was absolutely true.

The new Armoury Hall they had entered minutes ago was simply extraordinary.

Clearly, this was one of the locations where Lord Hephaestus built the Destroyers and other game-changing automatons.

There was only a slight issue.

The Destroyers were incomplete.

There were three of them. All towered over them. And each had at least one arm and a leg missing, in addition to their main source of energy being absent.

Leo was a skilled son of Hephaestus, and they had some mechanical experts among the one hundred Legionnaires who had sided with them, but the Destroyers were way too far from final completion to be useful.

And unfortunately, the same was true of nearly everything in this Armoury.

“What are your orders, Jackson?” Erica Keller asked. “Octavian and the others are no doubt going to try to return to the ships and sail away with the Golden Fleece.”

“They can try,” Perseus declared unconcerned. “Asterius and Lou Ellen are there, and they would need to bypass the protections of the *Inevitable Doom* in the first place. I am more worried by the monsters which are crawling out of every hole.”

Plenty of Demigods and Demigoddesses grimaced. The first tentacle monster they had seen over an hour ago had not been alas the only member of its species to try to eat them.

“What is the plan?” Ethan was the one to voice the words for everyone.

“The plan...” Perseus opened his compass and grimaced. “The plan has two parts, and unfortunately, I need to keep this traitor son of Venus alive for the first one.”

This brought a chuckle from Drew, who had kept her right arm in the form of an enormous Claymore.

“I am a daughter of Aphrodite, Jackson.”

“I am aware of your lineage, oh Champion of Persephone.” The red-eyed Demigod’s familiar sense of sarcasm made its return. “But I need a specific Demigod to use some objects from a Vault in what was Forge MP-42. Believe me, if I could do it myself, I would. And if securing your unconditional assistance was necessary, I would already have bribed you.”

Miranda Gardiner laughed, and she was not the only one.

“Yes, that looks like the Jackson I know. More super-weapons made into a human form?”

“Not really, no,” the son of Poseidon explained in a neutral tone, “they are more what I could call ‘legacy artefacts’. In this case, I thing the best proverb is ‘knowledge is power’. I could try something without them, but it’s incredibly likely I would screw something up.”

Perseus shook his head.

“Once that is done, the second part is simple in principle, and complicated in its execution. The Titaness and her august prisoner are on the Plateau, several hundreds of metres above our heads. We fight everything that stands in our way, and we do our utmost to free the God of Smiths and Fire.”

“This is going to be incredibly difficult,” Annabeth decided it might as well be her to speak the obvious. “Force S has disintegrated by virtue of multiple betrayals. I know quantity wasn’t synonymous with quality this time, but there would have been some sort of safety in numbers.”

“I know,” Perseus acknowledged, “but in my opinion, it is unlikely that those poor souls are going to realise the magnitude of their mistakes and pledge their eternal friendship! I would be flattered if they did, you understand-“

Annabeth glared.

Perseus Jackson shut up for a couple of seconds.

But when he did speak again, all joviality disappeared.

“The monsters have found us again! Run!”

**30 December 2006, Hall of Forbidden Pools, Forge of the Ancients**

“Where is this bastard of Octavian?” Centurion Scipio Johnson felt like he had asked this very question a thousand times today.

“I don’t know!” Decurion Noah snapped back. “I swear he was next to me during the last monster assault and-“

“Come on,” Decurion Peter Jack rolled his eyes. “We all know this arrogant cuckoo was a coward. The moment it turned out the Suicide Squad couldn’t be beaten, he ran away. Though I’m sure he will tell us he *bravely* ran away and will do his utmost to do some kind of nonsensical politician speech.”

“He may do worse than that,” Scipio replied darkly. “The ships are almost defenceless near this island’s shore.”

“Oh, come on,” Noah replied unconvinced. “I realise we’re not exactly speaking about a mental giant, but there’s no way even *Octavian* would believe that he can brave the dangers of the Sea of Monsters with twenty or so Legionnaires by his side. Assuming he has that much, I think Gregory and Victor died by Jackson’s blade.”

There was a moment of pause, and every Legionnaire and Pirate present – though there were only three of the latter here – looked at each other with varying degrees of concern.

Yes, only a complete moron would think there was a chance of going back to New Constantinople with a skeleton crew.

On the other hand, it was *Octavian* they were speaking about.

“I don’t like it, but we have to be sure.” Scipio said. “We have to return to the ships.”

“If we do that,” Peter grimaced, “we better pray the Gods will not incinerate us when we call them. I know there is a big reward for the Golden Fleece, but the Goddess overseeing this operation is the *Greek* Goddess of Strategy.”

And Athena, as every Legionnaire knew, was not a fan, to put it mildly, of the Romans.

She may very well execute them all for gross cowardice and mutiny in presence of the enemy.

“This is a bridge we will cross in due time.” It was all that he could say, really. Jackson was more likely going to use them as cannon-fodder to punish them – what he had done to his ‘Gallowborne’ was just sadism made flesh. And Scipio may be a traitor, but he didn’t want to die. “On the subject of the good news, this hall clearly has several maps of the Forge we’re currently trying to navigate.”

“True. It seems Goddess Fortuna is smiling upon us for once.” One of the many one-eyed pirates of Blackbeard agreed. “I didn’t bring parchment and ink with me to copy it.”

“Then we will have to do it from memory.” They weren’t that lucky, it seemed. Scipio stepped forwards to read the Forge’s map, but it seemed suddenly the words and the drawings were dribbling. The Centurion touched the object, and sure enough, the thing was completely wet! “Come on, somehow, water is falling upon the maps! “Poena, Goddess of Vengeance, I beseech you to-“

An enormous torrent of water struck him into the face and Scipio was thrown into the air with an undignified yell crossing his lips.

And when he landed again, it hurt...but it could have been worse if he had not crashed into a pool of water.

Wait, what?

The entire room didn’t have-

As he rose unsteadily, the Centurion saw that from everywhere, there was the equivalent of entire rivers in fury surging out from the spaces where maps had awaited them.

“The doors! The doors! They are closing! Prevent them from-“

CLANG!

“Mercy!” A pirate shouted. “I don’t know how to swim, I-“

An enormous maw revealed itself and grabbed him underwater.

It was a maw that most Legionnaires could recognise in a heartbeat.

“Sea snakes! This place is bringing young sea snakes here!”

Then something bit into his right leg.

And Scipio Johnson didn’t feel anything in his limb anymore.

He looked down, and saw only crimson.

“The poison of the sea snakes,” he managed to grit out. “You lose all sensations where you’ve been bitten, and then, it spreads all over your body!”

There were screams, and there was a lot of blood everywhere.

Another snake jumped to bite him into the arm and drag him into its depths.

Scipio swallowed a lot of water, and everything hurt.

A second later, he looked down into the depths.

Scipio Johnson never stopped screaming for the last minute of his life.

**30 December 2006, Vault Omega-One, once-part of Forge MP-42, Forge of the Ancients**

According to one Perseus Jackson, the God Hephaestus – better known as Vulcan by every proud Roman – was a ‘very nice guy’.

Well, Reyna was sorry to say it, but in her honest and humble opinion, the God of the Forges was a paranoid and insanely dangerous deity!

Seriously, who had the idea to build an army of turtle automatons shooting lasers with their eyes to defend his vaults?

Who dreamed of conceiving entire avenues where the statues shot laser arrows and where unmanned chariots could crush you under spiked laser wheels?

Who would have the mental deviancy to even think about imprisoning you into cages before precipitating you in a pit filled with lasers?

And in case you had missed it, yeah, Hephaestus-Vulcan had a thing for lasers!

“Clearly our good friend thought lasers were the answer to everything.” The mad son of Poseidon chuckled next to her, because of course this infernal Demigod would find the entire lethal theme amusing.

“Nothing that chalk and a good dose of dexterity can’t solve,” the blonde son of Hermes answered. “May I?”

“Go ahead,” Perseus Jackson grinned. “I’ve not sacrificed a considerable amount of time to return empty-handed.”

Several big keyholes were manually unlocked, and the heavy red-gold gate in front of them at last opened.

After meeting empty rooms after empty rooms, and half-completed automatons coexisting with murderous ones, Reyna fully expected the spectacle to be disappointing.

She was wrong.

The sight her eyes gave her was one of absolute wealth, superb painting, and in general extraordinarily artworks. And all of that was magically presented above several tons of bullion and precious metals.

“Ha! HA! HA!” A Legionnaire laughed hysterically. “RICH! WE ARE RICH!”

“Yes, speaking of that,” Perseus Jackson began with an ironic tone Hylla and she had learned to recognise incredibly fast. “There are anti-organic bombs spread over this vault. And if you will notice the skeletons, you might acknowledge we’re not the first to reach this treasure.”

“Come on, Jackson,” her big sister spoke for the entire Suicide Squad for once, “I don’t believe you made us solve all these lethal enigmas and deactivate all these countless traps just to admire the treasures here. Look at that! I think it is an original of Leonardo Da Vinci-“

“Yes, and he painted the Goddess Aphrodite, I’m not blind.” The young black-haired Demigod snorted loudly. “I could loot this vault, don’t get me wrong. But there is no time to safely remove all the anti-organic bombs. The sands of time are pouring into the lower part of the hourglass, and they’re pouring fast. Rico!”

“Boss! Kaboom?”

“Not this time,” was the answer, to the relief of hundreds of souls, and the displeasure of one penguin. “I need the special fishing rod.”

“Err...yes? Yes, right away, Boss!”

In the next seconds, while a penguin searched through a seemingly bottomless backpack, it fell to the daughter of Athena to ask the disturbing questions.

“How many objects are you after here?”

“Oh, three,” the son of Poseidon replied like it was no big deal.

“Only three?”

“Only three, she says,” the scion of the Seas chuckled. “It can’t be more, I have only three vials of Cyclops’ blood.”

“And why are three vials of those necessary?” the blonde daughter of Wisdom was evidently as confused as they were.

“For the simple reason, oh Annabeth, that these objects can’t be manipulated by magic or by any methods for as long as we haven’t broken the protections on every object. We have to use Cyclops’ blood first – diluted of course, to not damage the artworks and every priceless item.”

“What happens otherwise?”

“You die,” the daughter of Hades said cheerfully. “The divine curse here is particularly nasty. The metal in fusion will be directly teleported in your stomach. Wow, Hephaestus was feeling vindictive when he prepared everything here.”

“Fishing rod ready, Boss! What are the targets?”

Reyna had expected some logic.

She should have known better.

The three artefacts had nothing in common. The first was, of all things, a long braid of brilliant golden hair. The second was an enormous scroll; it looked very ancient and it looked like many sheep had lost their lives for this one to be created.

And the third...the third was a golden anvil, the symbol of the Forge by excellence.

The daughter of Bellona hadn’t the faintest idea why Jackson wanted an anvil in the first place, however, even if this one was certainly made of Orichalcum.

Credit where credit was due, the penguin wielded his fishing rod like an expert, and soon all three vials were poured onto the true targets. There was a lot of red smoke over each object, as the protections dissipated.

“Excellent! Now I just have to go and grab them.”

“And how are you going to avoid an ironic death?” the Lightning Thief wondered aloud. “You set a foot here, the anti-organic bombs will flay you in mere seconds.”

“That’s the problem with people like you,” Jackson grinned. “You are so confident in what you know that you don’t realise the obvious solutions until they smack you in their face.”

“The obvious?”

“Yes, the obvious.” Perseus Jackson jumped.

Several people gasped.

The son of Poseidon landed on his hands, and began to progress into the vault in this acrobatic position, legs upwards, like a clown making his performance in front of a public.

The daughter of Hades facepalmed.

She was far from the only one.

“The *feet* of mortals and flesh beings are to be cursed,” Reyna heard her mutter. “The *feet*.”

And since Jackson used only his hands to come into contact with the ground, well, by definition it didn’t count.

This was crazy. This was brilliant. It was just looking ridiculous.

And it worked.

One by one, Jackson got to the artefacts he had marked by Cyclops’ blood, and then threw them outside the vault – the anvil was without surprise the most complicated proposal.

Many people applauded without reserve when the son of Poseidon returned, unscratched and out of breath.

“Do we need to get away in a hurry?”

“No, the lasers shouldn’t reinitialise before two or three hours.” Perseus answered Annabeth Chase, who wasn’t hiding her admiring expression for the leader of the Suicide Squad.

Without any more ceremony, the grinning Demigod unsealed the scroll.

“Clarisse, you will carry the anvil. Bianca will enchant it to make it lighter.” One green eye and one red eye began with avidity. “What? That can’t be right!”

“Something problematic?”

“Yes,” the eyes of Perseus Jackson must be able to read at tremendous speed, because in what could only be called lightning-speed, he had studied a document which had to be written with thousands of Greek glyphs. “APHRODITE!”

Many Legionnaires and other Demigods jumped.

But that was the only result earned by the shout.

“I know you can hear my call,” the son of Poseidon began, “the Cursed Crown does not have the power to block you. You were prompt to blame the Master of Olympus and your husband, but I see the majority of the blame can be found far closer to the Temple of Love! APHRODITE!”

There was only silence...well, silence and the snickering of two Huntresses.

“That’s why we never trust Love, Jackson,” Jenna told him with a cheerful expression.

“Don’t worry,” Ellen added. “I’m sure it will-“

“**This**,” and for the first time, Reyna shivered in fear, for the face of the mad Demigod was truly mad, “**is not going to be tolerated. Who does she think she is**?”

A Goddess, the answer was, but at this very moment, survival instincts kicked in.

“Very well,” a disturbing sound passed his lips, one she would not have described as ‘laughter’, “Plan Omega-Omega-Titanomachy it is. Tribune!”

“Yes, Lord Jackson?” Erica Keller saluted.

“Bring me the traitor.”

It took three seconds for Michael Kahale to be thrown in chains at his feet.

“My treacherous lieutenant,” the grimace-smile was honestly terrifying. “I thank you in advance for the great favour I will owe you in the fullness of time.”

The gag was removed.

“You’re crazy, Jackson! The Gods will-“

There was a kick...and a small quantity of water was thrown in his face.

Everything happened too fast, the only thing Reyna was able to see was the end: Michael Kahale, suddenly opening his eyes and watching as his open palm held the golden braid of hair recovered from the vault.

“I DENY YOU AND-“

Michael Kahale began to burn in pink flames immediately.

Everyone brusquely moved away from him, but the flames didn’t spread.

They ‘merely’ assaulted the treacherous son of Venus, and transformed him into a human torch.

The stranger parts? The golden braid in his hand was clearly not burning. And there were no screams as the traitor transformed into pink smoke.

Perseus Jackson made a sound of approval. Then he began to search in his pockets for...handkerchiefs?

“Oh woe is me!” The voice sounded like it was made for comedy. “Who could have predicted my treacherous lieutenant was going to be judged as unworthy by this marvellous braid of the Goddess Ishtar? Who could have thought he would dare challenging my orders in order to gain power at my expense?”

He...he wasn’t serious, right? Reyna was not sure of many things, but that pushed bad puns onto new frontiers, here.

“Truly this is the darkest day of this Quest! Oh Gods! Oh God! My frail strength fails in me in my hour of need! I am absolutely devastated! Oh, I am mourning the terrible death of my treacherous lieutenant!”

Then though the expression was, yes, mournful, the eyes were truly implacable.

“And so I call you in my hour of need, you the Mournful One, you who will keep my sorrow at bay until the final duel and the end of my Quest! ISIS!”

No, he couldn’t-

There was an enormous flash of golden-purple light, and the Caesarea of the Traitor Triumvirate materialised.

At least this time, Reyna noted humbly, she wore a humble linen robe.

“**You again**,” the anger in the black eyes was impossible to miss. “**I don’t know how you did it**-“

“The braid of Ishtar has been activated, fulfil your office, Isis!”

There was a brilliant white light.

When her temporary blindness faded away, the daughter of Bellona gaped.

Cleopatra, when she had arrived, had clearly black hair which didn’t go past her neck.

There had been no braid, and the only decoration upon her head had been the Uraeus diadem.

But now it was no longer the case.

There was a long black braid tying her hair, and it was so long it almost reached her backside.

“Don’t take it personally,” Perseus Jackson grinned. “The plan is ongoing.”

And with a pure explosion of water coming out of a jug leaning against the back wall, the mad Demigod banished her.

This time, the alarms shrieked, and lasers began to reinitialise.

“Oh, oh,” Luke Castellan spoke. “I really don’t like that at all...”

A heartbeat later, it became worse, as a fog of bad omen began manifesting in every direction.

“I have not violated any Ancient Law, cursed artefact of the Deeps!” the most insane Demigod in existence proclaimed to everyone who had the senses to hear. “And if you try to stop me, remember the Rule of Three!”

**30 December 2006, the Sunken Temple, the Deeps**

Michael Yew very much regretted the loss of his Viking-class walker.

In it, he had been powerful, strong, and able to slay hundreds of automatons and monsters.

Outside it, the son of Apollo felt extremely vulnerable.

“I was telling you we should have chosen the right tunnel!”

“Shut up, bard!” the Huntress with the blue tail snapped back.

The blonde-haired Demigod grimaced. He was definitely blaming Jackson for all the ‘bard’ jokes and insults, all right.

“I don’t recognise this place,” Elvis Knight spoke, trying to not sound out of breath, and miserably failing. “This is looking like less and less the Forge we entered.”

“You’re right.” The red-horned Huntress admitted reluctantly. “We aren’t in the halls of the Forge, twisted or not. I think this is a Temple. Kimiko?”

“A ruined one,” the other Huntress shook her head. “I think we shouldn’t progress further, Alexia.”

“Well, progression is going to be extremely difficult,” Michael voiced his opinion, though he knew it wasn’t going to be desired. “We often have water up to our knees and-“

“This isn’t that,” the red-cursed Huntress rudely interrupted him. “The cold, the magic of the place, and the monsters...it is different, yet strangely similar to what we saw inside the Forge of All Perils.”

“We have donned our X-Suits this time.”

“But this time, we haven’t Jackson with us.”

The son of Apollo gaped for a brief moment. Was it a hallucination, or were the Huntresses seriously admitting they *needed* the son of Poseidon?

“I think we need to turn back.”

“Unfortunately,” Elvis Knight had definitely the impression of a Centurion about to deliver his superiors the bad news, “the reasons why we chose to flee here haven’t diminished. I don’t know why the Pirates invested such determination into hunting us, but they did. And-“

There was a ruckus which echoed into the tunnels they had used minutes ago.

“They found us,” the black-haired Huntress cursed. “Again.”

“They must have a tracker,” the other servant of Artemis nodded. “If we only had Jackson here...with all this water, he would destroy them in a few seconds.”

“This is very true, but Jackson isn’t here,” immediately, saying the blunt truth earned him dark glares. “Do we fight?”

“No,” the Huntress answering to Alexia stared at him like he was a moron, “there are more of them than we have arrows. We hide...and quickly, they are going to be here at any moment.”

It went without saying, Michael Yew mused, that it was easier said than done. As previously remarked, the temple was filled with water so it went up to their knees. They had to progress slowly before reaching a small mountain of debris which wasn’t immerged. After that, it got easier...somewhat. The water wasn’t hindering their moves, but the sensation of wrongness assaulted them.

“Definitely like these damned items the others should never have picked from the Drakon’s hoard,” the blonde Demigod thought he heard one of the Huntresses whisper.

Then they went silent, for a small army of Pirates began to appear.

Michael was no strategist, but he knew how to count. There were at least seventy pirates, and all of them were adults, heavier and taller than any member of their four-strong group.

And as if it wasn’t bad enough, more came.

And one of them was easily recognisable.

“Captain, with all the respect I have for you, we should return to the ships. Forget these Demigods-“

“Lafitte, you are a good second,” Blackbeard, son of Ares, growled, “but you understand nothing to the situation. Some of our accomplices are fools, but I am not. The son of Poseidon wouldn’t have left the ships with so little protection unless he was extremely confident the enchantments imbued in the *Inevitable Doom* were able to neutralise us all.”

The legendary pirate had several wounds on his arms and as he raised his legs, it looked like someone, likely Jackson, had managed to pierce his legs. Alas, Blackbeard looked like he had access to some potent healing magic or good doctors, or both.

“Thus I need a few members of the Suicide Squad to deactivate said protections. They are keyed in, and we are not. *And I know they can listen to me*.”

This time, the reason Michael shivered had nothing to do with the water or the sinister aura of the half-submerged temple.

“Last chance, boys and girls. Do you think hiding behind these crumbling statues was enough to trick my abilities? The first to come out will have a place of honour at my table. The others-“

Something shrieked in the air.

A second later, the pirate in front of Blackbeard looked very stupid as he received a silver arrow between his eyes.

“The hard way it is,” the human-looking monster laughed. “Remember, I want them alive!”

Michael prepared his guitar – which I definitely seen better days – as the pirate battle-cries filled the temples.

The outlaws advanced, despite the Huntresses ‘welcoming them’ with additional silvery projectiles.

There was an angry whisper.

And then a pirate plunged his sword in the neck of one of his ‘comrades’.

“DAMNATION!”

“WHAT ARE YOU PLAYING-“

“*The Dreaming One will have his due*.”

The eyes of the treacherous pirate burned gold.

“EIDOLON!”

“DON’T LET THEM-“

The water exploded, and an abomination rose from the deeps.

Blue-green tentacles struck, and several pirates screamed for the last time as the suction cups claimed them and transformed them into desiccated cups.

Muskets and other gunpowder weapons unleashed their anger.

And this was nothing compared to what Blackbeard did.

Thousands of blades were conjured, and a storm of metal and death was hurled at the monster.

Black ichor poured into the cold waters of the Temple.

Michael winced, before deciding that since the only exit was blocked, it was fight their way out now or something else.

“I AM ON THE HIGH WAY TO HELL!” The son of Apollo began to play and attack the betrayers with sonic attacks. “AND I BLAME JACKSON! AND HERA! AND OLYMPUS!”

But for each enemy who fell, there were three or four to replace them. Suddenly, the idea to ‘recruit’ them didn’t look so good anymore, and it hadn’t been great to begin with. Moreover, the blue-green horror had enough of letting its octopi-like tentacles get hacked and it decided to surface.

It was-

Reality suddenly stopped making sense.

Michael screamed and for a moment, he had no doubt he truly became mad.

Fortunately, it didn’t last long...but when he came back to his senses, he realised his eyes were bleeding.

“No,” the son of the Sun God spat blood. “I...no...”

He turned his head, and the blue-tailed Huntress came into view...with eyes of pure gold.

“**Get away from her**!” Michael ordered, accompanying it with a powerful tune.

To his complete surprise, it worked.

A dark cloud of evil was expelled from the eyes and the mouth of the girl.

“*Of all times for a bastard like you to awaken an incomplete version of Charmspeak*,” the Eidolon spoke hatefully, “*but you’re untrained. And we have already what we wanted*.”

The Possessing spirit plunged into another pirate, and plunged into the chaotic melee before he had the time to replicate his exploit.

Not that it was bloody likely.

Michael felt as if his voice was completely on fire, and no, no it wasn’t a pleasant sensation.

“We have to go,” Elvis Knight helped the no-longer-Possessed Huntress to stand, “and please don’t look at the monster.” Blood had come out of the Centurion’s eyes, his face was livid and tormented, and the son of Apollo had no doubt he certainly looked as bad, if not worse.

“Do I-“

“No, the other Eidolon took Alexia! We have to-“

Reality unravelled.

More waves struck.

And the pillars and the entire structure of the Temple shook.

Michael thought he heard a melody...something that was not destined for mortal ears.

Impossibly, the broken statues which had been discarded in every aisle of this dark temple began to rebuild themselves.

The decorations on the reformed arches were magically returning to a pristine state, and it wasn’t a good thing at all, for each carving, each fresco was proclaiming the glory of the Primordials!

Battle escalated again, as more pirates arrived, and a second horror rose to match their numbers.

“COME ON BOYS! WHO WANTS SOME SUSHI TONIGHT?”

Yeah, Blackbeard was insane, no surprise. That might be why Jackson and him went along so well before they betrayed each other.

“Knight! I don’t see her!”

More waves of water were hurled at them, and Michael blasted two pirates away.

And then something worse came.

The Sun in him felt like the abyss had opened up.

The debris had disappeared, and now from his observation point, Michael could see the entirety of the temple avenue.

A horrible black altar was now revealed.

And above it, there was a crown.

The very crown Jackson had warned them to not go anywhere near.

The warning was unnecessary, though.

Just a mere glance was enough for him to give him the urge to scurry away.

“ALEXIA! FIGHT IT!”

At last, Michael saw the Possessed Huntress.

She was crouching near a nearby statue and-

Wait a minute, why was she removing all the clothes she wore over her X-Suit?

\*\*\*\*

Alexia knew she was Possessed.

It wasn’t painful, really.

And she was able to see everything as if she was in control.

The Huntress just couldn’t do anything about it.

There was some mental component to the Possession which suppressed her emotions too.

Otherwise, she was pretty sure she would have felt a lot of anger at the Eidolon revealing her body. X-Suits might protect against plenty of ice-based Curses, but they were tight and extremely revealing.

Yet there was no shame, and no anger.

“If you want to please us, lovely-“

The disgusting male received her last arrow in his throat.

That, at least, was very much an action she didn’t disapprove of.

The same couldn’t be said about the next.

The Eidolon forced her body to sprint deeper into the temple, her silver knives in hand.

Towards the dark altar and the blue-green temple.

Instantly, Alexia wished she could close her eyes.

The sight was one of madness. No wonder the son of Poseidon had warned them. Even by the standards of insanity this Great Quest had been used to, it was far too much.

“*This artefact is going to be my revenge*,” the Eidolon used her mouth to declare arrogantly. “*With it, Perseus Jackson will pay for what he did. Rejoice, Huntress, for you will become a far better vessel than Medusa ever was*-”

“Not so fast!” the spirit Possessing her had to throw her body into the water to avoid three blades.

“*Blackbeard*,” the Eidolon hissed angrily. “*Your men are dying against the Sho*-“

Shadows swirled, and a blade missed her throat by the thinnest of margins.

“**You are not wanted here. Stop this Possession at once**!” Power washed over them, but it was weak. Too weak.

The shout of the son of Apollo a few minutes ago had been powerful but short-lived.

This one lasted far longer but missed something important.

“*Charmspeak doesn’t work like that, Blackbeard*,” the spirit laughed, striking him in an impeccable choreography of blades which forced the monstrous male to take a step back, then two...and then a gigantic tentacle grabbed it, and the Pirate Admiral had more interesting things to worry about than her.

Alexia found herself feeling something in her chest...it passed, and her body turned away.

She tried to fight it.

But the long-lived Huntress was a spectator inside her own body.

There was no button, no mechanism to stop the Possession.

Only true Charmspeak or the variant command-voice Perseus Jackson was using had been working on the Eidolons, and those who could use that were not here.

Her body reached the altar.

“*Now let’s begin*,” the Eidolon said smugly, “*I abjure Artemis, and renounce all her blessings*.”

There was no emotion, but Alexia thought it was a relief that her silver bracelets – the only artefacts the spirit had not been able to remove – didn’t disappear.

“*No matter*,” the Eidolon declared. But its frustration was evident.

She saw herself climbing on the black altar.

“*Oh, Dreaming One, I pledge myself to the Abyss. I swear eternal loyalty to Water and the Dream, for all days and nights, until you rise to claim your rightful due*.”

Her fingers touched the crown-

***NO***.

It was like a thousand blades pierced her soul and her flesh at once.

Someone screamed.

After a heartbeat, Alexia realised it was the Eidolon.

And suddenly, the Possession was over.

The spirit was expelled as a cloud of smoke...and despite a desperate begging, was immediately swallowed by the crown.

There was some sound of snapping, and suddenly, the Huntress was sure the Eidolon was deader than dead.

She felt instantly some joy...and it disappeared as abruptly, because her hands didn’t obey! She was in control of her body, but her hands were tied to the Crown of the Deeps *by a mass of blue-green tentacles*!

***AT LAST WE MEET, IPHIGENIA***.

“You...” no one was aware of her birth name, save Lady Artemis and Zoë Nightshade, “You know who I am?”

***THE DEEP KNOWS ITS CHILDREN. I RECOGNISE THE ACHE IN YOUR SOUL***.

“I...I am loyal to Lady Artemis.”

***AND YET THE WYLD WAS ABLE TO CHANGE YOU. THE MOON CAN’T HIDE YOU***.

The ground shook. And before her astonished eyes, the red talons she had been cursed with since the first journey into the Forge of All Perils melted away, and her feet were back.

There was some pressure on her forehead, and while she couldn’t touch to verify, Alexia was sure the red horns had disappeared too.

But it did not stop here.

The X-Suit over skin changed, and took the appearance of scales of blue-green colour.

And for the first time, Alexia shivered, for there was a part of her which wished for *more*.

The fog clouded everything, and the female warrior saw a figure which looked like her. But this time, the blue-green scales were no suit; they were truly part of her. There might be gills and webbed hands, but-

***YOU ARE NOT READY***.

“No...Lord...” Fortunately, something stopped her from uttering ‘Pontus’.

***TIME IS A LIE IN THE DREAM. YOU WILL RETURN.***

Alexia – no, no she was Iphigenia once more – felt the tentacles free her hands. The Crown of the Deeps was placed back on the black altar.

There was a terrible explosion.

She rose her head fast enough to see a large pillar collapse on a group of pirates.

The dark waters began to rise once again.

Alexia didn’t know how, but she began to run.

\*\*\*\*

They fled.

No one had given the order.

Or at least if someone had shouted it, Elvis Knight had not listened to him or her.

It was something that brought of a desperate chuckle out of him for a second.

Then his lungs burned and he tried to take even more air in his lungs.

Everything could help when you had to run faster.

Everything was better than remaining here.

Pillars crumbled all around them.

Tunnels disappeared.

The water was tearing apart everything.

It was swallowing the island, and if they didn’t run fast enough, they were going to be devoured with it.

The Roman Centurion didn’t turn his head back.

Not even once.

Maybe the others were following, or they were not.

He couldn’t do anything for them.

And he didn’t want to turn his head back at the things which were no doubt behind them.

Once had already been too much.

They had seen what no mortal was meant to watch.

Gods! It was now incredibly clear why these kinds of Quests and Expeditions were never spoken of.

No Quester or Legionnaire ever came back.

Thrice or four times, he stumbled, almost fell into the water face-first.

Every time, by a supreme effort of strength and will, Elvis managed to stay on his legs. It was good because every time he saw someone fall nearby, they were sucked up by the watery torrents, dragged towards the monsters which waited to be fed.

And so they fled.

Be they Pirate, Legionnaire, Quester or something else was irrelevant: they all had to get out of this nightmare.

Elvis, to his relief, saw that Michael was running on his right.

And was that one of the Huntresses ahead?

There were no more tunnels as they rushed with all the strength left in their bodies.

The fog began to clear.

The air felt better. The air didn’t feel *wrong* for the first time in hours.

The ground changed.

The surroundings grew more familiar. There were furnaces ahead.

There were massive things of iron and steel, and hundreds of automatons.

And they were fleeing too.

Elvis risked a glance behind him.

For the first time, he saw the devastation.

This part of the island was now linked to the Sea of Monsters, and in the centre of where the Sunken Temple must have been, there was now a giant whirlpool.

This was assuredly no normal phenomenon...and as if nothing reassuring good could come today, there was a warship sailing to its doom, the vortex about to devour it like it had eaten a lot of things before that.

Elvis turned his head and focused on his immediate survival.

He ran, right as this entire place was feeling more and more unstable under his feet.

It was as if they were at the edge of a giant crater, except there were no meteors, and the water was the judge of death.

His last reserves were mostly gone. His legs were a succession of muscles burning in pain.

Everything was falling-

Elvis jumped, but he missed, he was too tired, too-

And suddenly, he wasn’t falling anymore.

“See, Skipper? I told you this fishing rod could be used for something else! You will pay me ten Denarii!”

“Dakota! Come and help us! We have a big catch, courtesy of Rico!”

Okay, now he was hallucinating.

It was a hallucination, right? There was no way he could have been ‘fished’ out by this mad penguin. First all, no normal fishing rod would handle his weight!

Elvis felt thirsty and delirious.

He was suspended above a gigantic crater, and water was filling the void. This part of the island was gone.

There was a warship sinking, along with scores of Pirates.

There was a sound of rocks cracking.

He saw Blackbeard.

The Pirate Admiral had lost his large black cloak and most of his extravagant attire of feathered hat and other self-appointed decorations.

The adult Demigod was holding for dear life one or two metres short of the top of the cliff. By the looks of it, he had used his blade as claws to ‘stab’ the rocks and find some support where there was no one to find.

Then the grinning face appeared.

“You.”

“Me.” There was a pause. “Did you see it?”

“I did.” Blackbeard grunted. “We were puppets in a game far too big for our imagination.”

“Yes. But that’s why I cursed your incredible betrayal, after all.”

The smile missed some teeth, but was still filled with determination and malice.

“One day, I will be the King of Pirates, Perseus Jackson.”

A Trident of bronze blasted the rock Blackbeard had used to hold on for dear life.

“Long live the King!”

**31 December 2006, the Plateau, the edge of the Devastation, the ruins of Forge MP-42**

Of course, traditions were to be observed.

As Blackbeard made an enormous splash as he collided with the water, the former Tyrant put a cheerful smile on his face.

“I assure you, my dear lieutenants, that it is the last time we’ve seen of my eternal friend Admiral Blackbeard.”

“Jackson, even I know that’s taunting-“ Bianca began.

“Ssshh!” The son of Poseidon wasn’t going to have his fun ruined, Dread Empress or not. “Did you see the height of that drop? Obviously, he’s dead.”

He wasn’t, of course.

Demigods were not as resilient to certain Named, but Blackbeard wasn’t an average Demigod.

The son of Ares had not survived for so long in the Sea of Monsters by sheer luck.

“Lady Calypso?”

“**I can’t feel the influence of the Crown of the Deeps anymore**,” the Titaness reported. “**Though it left its mark on one of the survivors, it must be said**.”

There was no need to ask the question of ‘who?’

There had been four survivors of the Suicide Squad involved in this mess, but only one had truly been more than superficially tainted.

The skin colour of her face and her feet – the only parts visible outside the transformed X-Suit – were so pale they were unnaturally pale white, almost to the colour of ivory. Her hair had abandoned the brown-blonde to show long blue-green hair, roots included. The nose was stronger, and reminded him some statues of Greek temples he had visited in the pasts.

And yeah, the X-Suit had been changed. It was now akin to look at blue-green scales, and at a guess, it may very well be impossible to remove. It was quite a feat, because Khione’s influence had been relatively powerful in that piece of cloth. But what was the power of a Queen of Hell against a Primordial’s will?

One must also note that the red horns and the red talons had disappeared, the curses broken. That wasn’t supposed to be possible, not unless the Sire of the Drakons was involved, and he wasn’t.

As for the eyes...Perseus merely glanced at them.

He wasn’t mad enough to do more than that.

“I congratulate you for not a gibbering wreck, Alexia,” then again, she had been chosen. Pontus’ artefact had made sure she couldn’t get too mad.

“Not Alexia,” the former Huntress closed her eyes and shivered, “not anymore. I am taking back my old name. I am *Iphigenia*.”

Perseus winced internally. Oh great. The only Iphigenia he was very much familiar with was the daughter of Agamemnon who had been sacrificed to appease the wrath of Artemis. That had been one of the many disasters preceding the bloodbath that was called the Trojan War.

“Are you going to kill me?”

Perseus laughed.

“You have been blessed by the Dreaming One, Iphigenia. Any God, Goddess, or Demigod stupid enough to raise his weapon against you will wish death will claim him or her by the time the Dreaming One will have finished to punish him or her.”

There was a Divine Contract now between Pontus and her. Making an assassination attempt on her was just a fancy way to be tortured for several thousand years.

In the distance, many pirates began to shout in languages known to no men.

“Ethan?”

“Perseus?”

“Many Pirates seem to have lost whatever sanity they had left in this Temple of the Deeps. Give them the only mercy we can. My Uncle’s enforcers will have to convince them to drink the Lethe’s waters.”

“I will do it,” the son of Nemesis said grimly. “Michael Yew, Elvis Knight, and Kimiko are in a better state, but they have hallucinations and clearly suffered from this madness too. They aren’t in a good mental state, Jackson.”

“I know. But as I said, the only real thing for some peace of mind in that situation is to drink the Lethe’s waters. Otherwise, you just accept you are insane, and move on.”

The former Tyrant had done it himself, but the majority of humans couldn’t replicate the feat.

“The Eidolons,” Iphigenia spoke after a long silence. “It was the Eidolons who almost killed us. They wanted to claim the Crown to kill you.”

“Spirits have never been noted for their intelligence, but these ones have really given a new meaning to the word stupidity.”

Honestly, the idea of Possessing a Huntress of the correct lineage, as clever as it sounded at first, was idiocy incarnate.

The Primordials wanted real believers in their cause.

And an Eidolon may control someone’s body, but the spirit had no control over the spirit or the soul.

“I suppose one at least was devoured by the Crown?”

Iphigenia nodded.

“Let’s hope they got everything they deserved.” These were rare spirits, fortunately. “They already did a considerable amount of damage.”

Close to one-fifth of the entire island had been swallowed under the waves.

And if he wasn’t mistaken, the warship *Jolly Roger* had gone down with it, dragged by the power of the Crown as a blood tribute to satiate its monstrous hunger.

“What are we going to do?”

Perseus clicked his fingers and looked east.

A massive fortress of water, steam, and fire awaited his eyes as the fingers of dawn touched the Sea of Monsters.

There was a large gate, guarded by a sizeable army of dolphins and other sea creatures.

At last, their goal was in sight.

“The Huntresses are going to bring back our indisposed members to the *Inevitable Doom*.” The black-haired Demigod commanded. “We, meanwhile, are going to storm this Citadel, and prove our invincibility one more time.”

**31 December 2006, the beach in front of the HPMS *Inevitable Doom***

Octavian laughed in relief as they escaped the broken forge-complex and reached the beach.

And it was a very much changed beach.

The sands he remembered had been blue-green and put everyone ill-at-ease.

This new beach, however, had only black and red sand, and somehow, it felt like natural.

“We survived. Now we have to seize the yacht.”

“Err... First Centurion? Not that I doubt your abilities, but assuming we succeed, what the hell we are going to do next?”

“I think it was evident,” Octavian hid his annoyance, though the simpleton frustrated him the moment he opened his voice. “We will offer the Golden Fleece to Lord Jupiter and once blessed by His Radiance, we will return *home*. This, I promise you as Augury of the Twelfth Legion.”

“I don’t doubt your word, Centurion. But there are only thirteen of us left. It’s too few to properly crew the *Ave Caesar*-“

“This is why we’re going to take control of this super-mega yacht and take it as our new flagship. That way, we’re killing two birds with one stone: the *Golden Fleece* will be ours, and we will have our escape route ready to leave.”

Octavian had expected enthusiasm.

Instead, he got much grumbling and fearful expressions.

“Are you sure it’s a good idea, First Centurion?” One of his subordinates dared asking him.

“This ship has been capable of surviving the Sea of Monsters, and the monsters have not even been able to scratch its paint!”

“Err...yes, but First Centurion, we weren’t worried about the ship’s capabilities. We were more worried about the fact Perseus Jackson has lived for months aboard it, and he’s no doubt prepared infernal surprises in every compartment!”

Octavian seethed. Perseus Jackson. It always was Perseus Jackson. The son of Poseidon stole his fame, his victories, and never had the good grace to die when it was convenient for him.

“Ignore Perseus Jackson. You should be more worried about not failing Lord Jupiter and myself!”

The debate was over, and Octavian began to run.

The boats were here, and it wouldn’t be difficult to reach the ships, though there were far fewer of them than he remembered.

There may have been problems while they were away, but this was a minor matter. Both the *Inevitable Doom* and the *Ave Caesar* were there – he had not abandoned the idea to force all the surviving Legionnaires to swear themselves to him – and that was the most vital thing in his eyes.

Three Legionnaires of his were lagging badly behind, their injuries slowing them down to an infuriating slug pace.

It was-

Many bonfires on the beach began to burn.

And a girl Octavian had no difficulty to name walked out.

Of course, the daughter of Hecate had already recovered from her exhaustion.

“Lady Blackstone,” the blonde-haired Legacy of Apollo showed her his most courteous smile, “I am pleased to-“

“Shut up, *worm*.”

“Hey!” One of his Legionnaires protested. “You don’t have the right-“

“Cowards, oath-breakers, worms, scum of the seas, professional backstabbers,” the sorceress continued, looking at them like they were excrements on her black boots. “Yes, I believe this describes very well what you are.”

A vicious smirk appeared on her lips. Octavian found it a strong similarity to those of Jackson’s, and it was not something he liked at all.

“That you were going to betray was not even a question, cowards.” Flames danced upon her hands. “The real dilemma was to know whether or not you would survive long enough to return to the ships.”

Octavian snorted.

“Big words, but there are thirteen of them, and you’re alone. I don’t think-“

Something gigantic flew in the air. There was a horrible sound of metal meeting flesh. And as he turned his head to his right, one of his Legionnaires suddenly had an enormous axe imbedded into his head.

The true Legionnaire collapsed like a bag of potatoes, dead in one blow.

“Ah yes, you’ve kind of forgotten a detail: I’m not alone. Thank you, Asterius.”

“Killing the enemies of the short one is always interesting,” the Minotaur exploded out of the sands where it had been hidden.

“Okay, there are two of you,” Octavian tried to stay his voice calm as the monster summoned back his huge axe. “Don’t think it is going to save you!“

“I have bathed in the Styx, you idiot,” the blonde sorceress stared at him like he was beneath her, and this fuelled his hatred. “I am perfectly able to deal with twelve morons like you, but Jackson insisted Asterius had to stay, in case Blackbeard came back with you. The son of Ares is far more dangerous than you ever will be.”

“Excuse me?” He shouted.

“You heard me, correctly,” the sorceress looked at her nails. “You’re a pathetic backstabber, in addition to being a False Augury. The only reason my boyfriend put you back in command is that he wanted to test the surviving Legionnaires like Keller. Those who stayed loyal were going to be trusted with far greater things. Judging by how few lackeys you have gathered, it seems it was at least a partial success.”

“KILL HER! KILL HER NOW!”

But none of his men advanced.

And when he tried to race forwards, Octavian was shocked. He couldn’t move.

What was happening with his feet?

His feet were....painted in gold?

No! NO! It was not paint, it was true gold!

“My sister taught me another magical spell besides the divine translocation.” The bitch had the gall to mock him! “I think she intended for me to use it on my boyfriend if he gets too annoying, but I think you are more appropriate targets. I think you already know its proper name.”

“Midas’ Curse,” the First Centurion grated out as paralysis seized his limbs, and every part of his legs and arms turned into a golden colour.

“Yes, Midas’ Curse.”

“That does mean we have only to be plunged into running water,” Octavian drew his Gladius with all his will. “The tides will free us.”

“No, I don’t think so. My sister tweaked the spell. There’s still a manner to counter the Curse, but it is not something as evident as running water. Now shut up and take a nice pose. I want to tell him I have twelve nice golden statues ready for delivery.”

Octavian tried to scream his hatred, but the gold swallowed him.

There was only gold...and then nothing.

**31 December 2006, the Island’s Plateau, the remnants of Forge MP-42**

Clarisse was extremely amused when every Legionnaire of the Third disagreed with Jackson and refused to return to the ships.

Well, the ones not wounded disagreed. The wounded Demigods and Demigoddesses didn’t protest when they were told they had to escort Michael Yew, Elvis Knight, Kimiko, and Iphigenia.

The latest was able to fight, but evidently, no one was really eager to let her fight without checking first what kind of disaster would strike. There was something extremely strange about her, though not as *wrong* as other things had been.

Anyway, the seventy-one Legionnaires were all volunteers to continue.

It wasn’t much, when you considered that close one thousand and five hundred Legionnaires, plus support auxiliaries, had left New Byzantium months ago.

It was even worse when you considered that the seventy-one soldiers were all from the Third Legion, which had sent ‘only’ a simple cohort of five hundred Legionnaires.

They might be some pockets of survivors of the Twelfth across this island and elsewhere in the Sea of Monsters, but on blunt terms, the Fist Cohort of the Twelfth had been wiped out.

But there were volunteers. They were courageous and worthy of respect.

Others? Not so much.

Despite the madness, for all the challenges and trials, the tens of thousands of automatons they had to fight, for all the extreme and bloody attrition, there were around one hundred and forty Pirates remaining alive.

And they didn’t want to volunteer, clearly.

“Your Majesty,” one which must have been a silver-tongued flattered, “for you are indeed your Majesty, King of Pirates! Surely you will not shed our blood when there are better alternatives! We are eager to return to the ships, transporting the loot, we will give you your double part, for it is your privilege-“

“Congratulations,” Perseus Jackson grinned, “you have just volunteered to promoted for the rank of lieutenant.”

The daughter of Ares knew that grin. It wasn’t good news for the pirate.

“Thank you, your Majesty!”

“Lieutenant of the Second Gallowborne Division,” the son of Poseidon clarified, baring his teeth.

“WHAT?”

Judging by the scared expressions, yes, they had heard of what had happened to the ‘First Gallowborne Division’.

“You can’t do that!”

“We refuse!”

“**Kneel**.”

The earth shook once again, and as much as they struggled, the pirates kneeled slowly but ineluctably. Well, some were outright prostrated on the ground, their limbs convulsing.

“You seem,” the leader of the Suicide Squad mused, “under a bit of misapprehension. If I used the term ‘King’ in all my proclamations, it is because it is what people understand these days. But in ancient times, the correct word would have been Turannos.”

The word felt heavy and terrible. And there was no need to ask for a translation of it.

Everyone on the plateau knew very well what it meant.

Absolute power gained by might, and only kept by the force.

*Tyrant*.

“I am not your friend, Gallowborne.” The most dangerous Demigod of this generation spoke, never stopping his grin. “I am your commander, your master, and if you betray me again, your executioner. You will obey my commands, or as the Gods are my witness, I will order Bianca to crucify each and everyone you here, emulating Crassus and his legions at the end of the Spartacus’ rebellion.”

Silence ruled.

No one among the pirates was stupid to shout in denial anymore.

“You are going to be the first to enter the last battle. You will take considerable casualties. But if you manage to survive it, I will let you leave the Sea of Monsters with a ship or two as rewards, along with your ill-gotten loot. GALLOWBORNE! TO WAR!”

**31 December 2006, God of the Forges’ Fortress-Prison, the remnants of Forge MP-42**

No doubt many Olympians had not bet a single Drachma about them managing to survive for so long.

But they were here.

The thought made Annabeth giddy for a couple of seconds.

Unfortunately, it didn’t last.

The pragmatic outlook this time had a lot to do with the final step.

Yes, they trusted Jackson, or rather, they had stopped wondering how much madness fuelled him.

The son of Poseidon was mad, and now it was too late to turn back.

Since they were doomed anyway by virtue of being his accomplices, they may as well enjoy the ride.

But the final step remained.

The step that many Gods didn’t have a solution for.

Somewhere in the citadel they were facing, there was a Titaness.

And they had no one powerful enough to face her.

There was hope in some quarters, the daughter of Athena knew, that Hera and Calypso could together beat Tethys. She didn’t share this optimism. The two were fighting as far from each other as they could. And if they did fight in perfect coordination, you could feel from here the power of Oceanus’ wife.

It was like staring at a slumbering leviathan.

For the moment, it was calm.

It wasn’t going to last.

And before that, of course, there was the citadel to storm.

Blue walls. Ten metres-high. Towers of twelve metres that had an impressive quantity of machine guns and lethal weaponry taken from several forges.

One couldn’t forget that the last two hundred metres before the walls were completely barren.

The ruins of several production lines and arsenals had been completely razed so that there was nothing to hide the progression of an army.

And of course, the Titaness’ army was manning the walls. There were quantities of jets so that the dolphins and other sea creatures stayed adequately wet. The blessings of Tethys ensured said water would not be used against them.

“What do you think?” Perseus asked after lowering his orange-coloured spyglass.

“I think we should have brought more siege engines.” The grey-eyed Demigoddess replied dryly. “Which isn’t difficult, for we have none.”

“Technically, we have human siege-breakers,” the son of the Seas noted with obvious amusement.

“Yes, sure. They are going to take a beating, your siege-breakers. Give the signal, we need something like ten or twenty missiles to destroy this wall.”

“We haven’t any missiles left, unfortunately. Well, not of the conventional variety. Alas, using the unconventional models here would lead to...regrettable diplomatic consequences.”

“Please tell me you are joking.”

“I’m not. But have no fear, missiles are outdated anyway.”

“Oh great,” a son of Bacchus nearby moaned. “Here comes the craziness again...”

“It is not craziness!” Perseus said with a touch of exasperation in his voice. “It is a perfectly rational plan I saw in a movie.”

Dakota threw a Drachma to one of the daughters of Bellona. It was from the only gold coin to change hands.

“First, however, the proper forms of courtesy have to be respected.” Drew Tanaka arrived and threw him a...a megaphone?

“COMMANDER ISTHMUS!” If there was someone who failed to hear the Tyrant’s voice on the island, they were assuredly dead. “WE HAVE BEEN LONG-LASTING FRIENDS YOU AND I! IN LIGHT OF THIS DEEP AND VIGOROUS FRIENDSHIP, I ADVISE YOU TO RAISE YOUR FINS IN SURRENDER AND OPEN YOUR GATES!”

It said quite something that Annabeth wasn’t in the least surprised that Perseus knew the identity of Tethys’ field commander.

It took quite a few seconds for the enemy to answer. And certainly for the big black dolphins on the rampart to find a megaphone for their leader.

“WE KNOW YOUR PERFIDY, BIPEDAL MAMMAL! WE WILL FIGHT TO THE LAST!”

“This is better than a movie,” Leo Valdez noted with a chuckle.

“I HAVE FED ROTTEN ALGAE TO YOUR SEA SNAKES, AQUARIUM DIVA!” Perseus was grinning, yes, you didn’t even need to look at him to know that. “AND I HAVE NOT UNLEASHED MY GREATEST WEAPON! SURRENDER WHILE THERE IS STILL TIME!”

“YOU HAVE NO MORE WAR-WINNING WEAPONS, UPJUMPED MONKEY!” Isthmus the Black Dolphin retorted. “YOU SHALL NOT PASS!

Perseus lowered his megaphone in a frown and turned his head to face her.

“Am I dreaming, or did this arrogant tourist attraction forbid me to go somewhere?”

“No, you’re not dreaming.”

“How ridiculous,” the mad Demigod grumbled. “I shall go where I want, when I want. I am a villain. Obstacles are just one more incentive to not stop.”

The megaphone was raised again.

“THEN MY UNFORTUNATE FRIEND, YOU LEAVE ME NO CHOICE!”

“WE WILL NOT OPEN OUR GATES!” His enemy squeaked angrily. “YOU ARE BLUFFING!”

“RICO! KABOOM!”

It was at that time that Annabeth realised she had not seen the penguins for the last thirty or forty minutes.

KAAAAAAABOOOOOOM!

The explosion deafened them all, for all that they had been told to wear earmuffs.

By reflex, they all took cover in the ruins – and the reason they had not advanced further was now cleared to all.

It was-

It was-

It was devastation. Someone – and Annabeth had a good idea of the guilty party – had placed a gigantic quantity of explosives under the wall, profiting no doubt from the fact that the island had more holes than a French cheese.

Then it had been set to detonate here and now.

Colossal amounts of rock were thrown into the sky. Flames spread, and consumed the war machinery.

It was a growing, never-ending crescendo of explosions and shockwaves.

It was death for all the dolphins and other sea creatures which had manned the walls.

And when the island stopped trembling from all the explosions, when the smoke cleared, the one hundred metres-wide hole into the walls was there, proof nothing could resist the madness of some penguins commanded by Jackson.

“I wasn’t bluffing.” Perseus gave back the megaphone to Drew, and for the life of her, Annabeth was truly *aroused* by his dangerous expression.

“You weren’t,” she agreed. “Orders?”

“The orders are simple. GALLOBORNE! ATTACK! SUICIDE SQUAD FOLLOW THEM INTO THE BREACH!”

**31 December 2006, the Throne Room of the Last Prison, ruins of Forge MP-42**

There was no doubt that in a few years, there were going to be many books written about the phenomenal battle which raged for several hours.

There would be songs spread of how the Gallowborne pirates held the breach for thirty minutes, losing half their numbers, but allowing the Suicide Squad to destroy all the enemies trying to encircle them from the flanks and the rear.

There would be tales of legend and horror retold of Bianca di Angelo crucifying the few cowards. How the daughter of Hades had then charged and walked upon the ashes of her enemies would never be forgotten by the terrified dolphins who surrendered.

There would be a lot of rumours, wrong and true.

But in many ways, the outcome of the battle had been decided when the walls were blasted apart.

The defensive position had been breached, and a large number of defenders died with it.

That the following slaughter had lasted for so long had more to do with the general exhaustion of everyone involved.

By now, it was more than twenty-six hours since Kymopoleia had been called, and though they had taken many, many rests between different skirmishes, everyone had been brought to his or her very limits.

They were in no shape to fight another battle.

But they did continue. The entire Sea of Monsters must have heard of the battle by now.

Enemy troops must be on the way to reinforce the enemy. They had to finish this.

They wouldn’t be given a second chance.

Hera knew all of that and far more things.

She couldn’t help but hesitate before the large doors of Water and Fire standing in her way.

It was only an instant of hesitation.

There were several Demigods mere metres behind her, destroying the last guardian automatons – Minotaur-sized and shaped, these mechanical creations. She couldn’t afford to be seen as hesitant.

She was-

She didn’t know who she was anymore.

The claimant Goddess opened the doors.

A warm wind blew in her face.

As she advanced, it rapidly grew worse.

There were pools everywhere, and naturally they were at a temperature one would only find in hot baths.

Yeah, the ‘training’ of Perseus in the Forge of All Perils suddenly made a lot more sense.

There was steam and a near-infernal atmosphere.

There was water and fire.

Hera knew the Suicide Squad was following her. She listened to their exclamations of surprise, and while she did take them into account, she kept her head focused onwards.

The pools grew rarer after several metres, and the final part of the throne room was revealed.

And yes, it was a throne room, for there was a throne.

It was also a prison seat, for the mechanical bronze at its hottest temperatures couldn’t burn the algae-looking chains of blue spreading like a vast spider web on both sides.

The fallen Queen of the Gods stopped five metres away from the throne. She wouldn’t go further; she could acknowledge a massive trap when she saw one, thank you very much.

“Hephaestus,” *my son* burned the tongue, but she didn’t dare voicing it. She had done too many things, most of them horrible, to earn the right to speak the words. And besides, it was hardly a private reunion.

“**Hera**,” the God of the Forges nodded emotionlessly, “**and the Suicide Squad. I’m going to be honest: I didn’t think you would reach me alive**.”

“It wasn’t exactly simple.” The ground trembled as a dune worth of sand flew somewhere in the distance, crushing what had been a bastion of the defenders. This island was really going to be thoroughly destroyed by the end of the day.

“We had to be very, very creative.” A familiar voice intervened, and less than five seconds later, Perseus Jackson glided on a wave before landing next to her. “Lord Hephaestus.”

“**Perseus Jackson**.” The God of Smiths didn’t sound displeased or enthusiast; he merely returned the gesture of good courtesy. “**I have watched your latest exploits with great interest**.”

“I’m sure.” The son of Poseidon smirked. “Well, Lord Hephaestus, you’re safe and sound. That’s what matters. I now presume we can begin the process of-“

There was a fresher air current, and vast doors on the right which had been sealed opened on the fly, a feat most mortals would have been unable to accomplish.

“**The Titaness Tethys**,” Hephaestus announced.

New weapons were unsheathed.

Muscles shook.

Sweat which had nothing to do with tiredness or the steam floating into the air covered many hands and foreheads.

“**Truly I had not expected so many visitors to reach my humble above**.”

Hera instinctively grimaced hearing *that* voice.

It was exactly the same sea song as in her memories.

“**Your weapons, gentlemen and gentlewomen. Surely you are not going to offer a disastrous spectacle in front of an Olympian**?”

An arrow of pure Night struck without warning.

A cascade of water parried it effortlessly, before drowning the attack into a pool.

“**Calypso**,” and as the steam diminished, the Titaness of the Seas was revealed, in grand pirate attire.

At least, Hera supposed it was the look Tethys had gone for. The rather large hat, the yellow parrot, and all the green attire straight from the Golden Age of Piracy were quite noticeable, after all. The long extravagant green boots looked like some huge reptiles had been killed to make them too.

“**Nothing to say, mother**?”

Eyebrows rose.

“**You deserve very much a spanking for attacking me before the courtesies were observed**,” the Mistress of the Seas replied bluntly. “**Clearly, I spoiled you too much when you were a child**.”

“**Spoiled**?” Clearly, whatever the future Third Queen of Hell had expected to hear, it wasn’t it. “**SPOILED**?”

Tethys was unimpressed by the voice rising.

“**You were capricious, violent, and every time I didn’t fulfil your wishes quickly, you ran to the Underworld to see your father, hoping he would satisfy your caprices. A situation that doesn’t lack of irony, given your new status**.”

Hera heard Perseus chuckle.

“Oh, that’s pure gold!”

“**You didn’t know Atlas was the Titan of the Underworld and Death before the Titanomachy**?”

“I had my suspicions,” the son of Poseidon admitted. “But I had not the confirmation. Many of my best sources weren’t alive then, and those who were didn’t want to speak about it. And I hadn’t the opportunity to check the matter with my Lord Uncle recently.”

“**Hmm**...”

“**That doesn’t excuse your inaction, mother**!” Calypso wasn’t willing to restrain herself in words, no matter how public the debate. “**You stood by when I was imprisoned. You stood by when Othrys was destroyed! You stood by and-“**

“**And I would do it again, for Kronos’ rule had long stopped being anything but cruel when he ate his first daughter**,” Tethys sharply spoke.

That, at least, cut completely the voice of the former Titaness of Drakons.

“**You...what**?”

“**I stayed neutral because, frankly, neither my husband nor myself believed in Kronos anymore. He was drowning in rancour, feckless jealously, baseless paranoia, and delivered insults to everyone just because he could. He was my brother; I wasn’t about to raise my weapons against him. But I certainly wasn’t going to help him when he suffered exactly the consequences I warned him about long ago. And I certainly didn’t mourn him when the Olympians carved him apart and threw the pieces into the Pit. He really deserved it**.”

“**You**-“

“**As for why I didn’t help you escape your prison**,” Tethys continued in an implacable tone, “**it was because, while the lack of respect the Olympians had for their own word was awful, you also deserved a punishment fitting for your crimes, daughter**.”

“**Excuse me**?”

“**Shall we speak of the missing continent, daughter? Or how Crete was once four times the size it is currently today? Should we speak of what happened when you fed mortals to your Drakons**?”

Calypso violently blushed.

“**I...that doesn’t excuse everything. I surrendered in good faith, mother**!”

“**So you did**,” the Titaness of the Seas smiled benevolently. “**You are not the only one to deserve a spanking for your horrible behaviour. Isn’t that right, Hera**?”

“I made some mistakes.” She admitted.

“**Mistakes? Daughter, I taught you everything you needed to know about your great potential. I told you that you had not the patience or the temper to claim the Throne of Marriage. I warned you that your youngest blood brother were like cats and dogs, and your personalities were incompatible outside of the moments were you had hate-sex**.”

Hera wished at that moment the earth swallowed her to spare her from the humiliation. She knew she was blushing, everyone could see she was blushing! Please someone stop that conversation!

“That didn’t give you the right to imprison my son.”

“**I am a Titaness, daughter**,” the eyes of the Sea pierced her very soul, “**if I don’t try to right your wrongs, who will? You both deserve a spanking**-“

Six enormous maws looking like those of the Hydra attacked.

There was an explosion of water, and the offensive failed, without managing to even throw dust on Tethys’ clothes.

“**Don’t listen to her**!” the daughter of Atlas growled. “**We can beat her**!”

The effect would have been better if the next instant, she hadn’t been smacked around by an enormous wave.

“**You think you can beat me? Daughter, your arrogance needs to be kicked down in a significant manner**.”

The air suffocated with power. Many Demigods shouted in pain.

“**I am Tethys, Titaness of the Ancient Seas and Freshwater, Mistress of the Coral Palace. I helped my brother kill the Sky! Let me show how vast the difference of power is between you and me**.”

\*\*\*\*

It was a Clash of Titans.

Unfortunately, it was a spanking too.

It began with Miranda crashing down part of the ceiling and arriving in a tornado of sand.

The execution was perfect.

It didn’t prevent her from receiving six well-aimed water spears directly in her chest. If she hadn’t had the essence of a Drakon in her body, the daughter of Demeter would be very, very dead. As it was, she was knocked out of the fight.

The others didn’t fare better.

Calypso’s first attack was absorbed with a desultory facility, and the retaliation sent her crashing into a wall. Jade was sent colliding with the island some distance away by a shark construct.

Then the Titaness decided to become serious.

A terrible shockwave of raw power was hurled at them, and most of the Suicide Squad was brought low in a couple of heartbeats.

The former Tyrant had to anchor himself with his Trident to avoid the same fate.

“Clarisse! Give the anvil to Leo! He will able to-“

He had to interrupt himself, for parrying the multitude of dangerous daggers hurled at him took priority.

“Now that wasn’t so nice. Hera. Winter power and freeze them. And for the love of treachery-“

This was the moment Tethys chose to collapse most of the ceiling upon their heads.

It took a considerable application of Hydrokinesis to not be reduced to a bloody pulp.

“Absolutely not nice,” Perseus commented. “Now where were we?”

Calypso attacked again, this time from underneath.

The attack this time was far more powerful, and tried to combine Night with boiling water and certainly lava.

It was banished back into her face.

“Leo! Use your flames! Password is-“

He had to admit, he didn’t even see the next attack coming.

And yes, it hurt.

Minor good news: he fell into a pool and thus began to regenerate very quickly.

Very bad news: the water was also trying to strangle him.

“**Cease**,” the son of Poseidon spoke. “**Obey my will. Expel**!”

The attack was bloody terrifying in his humble opinion. It may have seriously wounded a creature like Alcyoneus, should the Elder Giant not be on his ‘home territory’. It would have killed some of the greatest monsters in existence.

Tethys had merely to use her little finger to stop it.

“**Disappointing.**”

Hera was sent flying like a doll in the middle of a storm, her attempt to create a blizzard shattered in a second.

If anything, it was Bianca who created the most threatening attack.

A phenomenal quantity of Hellfire was unleashed, and this time, their enemy took several steps back, while she had remained completely immobile in the first stages.

Then it felt as the entire Sea of Monsters poured into the throne room, and hope died with it.

“Annabeth. Eta-Eta-Omega-Omega.”

“That’s your password?” The daughter of Athena said in a voice filled with exhaustion and pain. “You didn’t go for originality!”

“I was pressed for time, okay!” Perseus protested as a good part of his X-Suit was shredded by the attacks of the Titaness. “The Huntresses are to cover the retreat! We can’t-“

Richard Grant was thrown like an arrow at Ellen and Jenna, and damn, that must have hurt...one could always hope he had not been punctured by their enchanted projectiles.

The Titaness unleashed her powers, and everything *drowned*.

\*\*\*\*

Leo was deathly afraid.

There had been many conversations about the power of a certain Titaness when they were aboard the Inevitable Doom. Some of them had been quite pessimistic.

They hadn’t been pessimistic. The Suicide Squad was in the process of taking a beating. No, it was worse than that.

Leo was sweating. No, it was-

Okay, he was panicking.

There was no one for...and what he was supposed to do with an anvil of all things? Forging a weapon? The Titaness was going to kill him before he had the chance!

“Eta-Eta-Omega-Omega?” the black-haired Demigod tried. The golden anvil shone brightly for a second, and then...nothing. It was still an anvil.

“Perseus, it isn’t-“

Leo grimaced as he saw the son of Poseidon be hurled again from one end of the throne room to another.

“**You have to use your flames**.” The sounds of battle suddenly dimmed.

“Dad?”

The God of the Forges sighed loudly.

“**The anvil is not important per se, my son. It is the Orichalcum which is critical**.”

“I don’t understand,” Leo admitted.

The world around them seemed to slow down. The battle seemed to go on slow motion now.

“**Your friend is smart. He understood before this battle began that you don’t have the power to break my chains. The former Titaness of Drakons had it once, but no more. You would need the King of Olympus to be present in person for that. Since you don’t have someone powerful enough to do the job, melting the Orichalcum and pouring it upon my chains is your best hope**.”

Leo focused and unleashed his flames...and while the anvil began to warm, there was no sign it was anywhere near its melting point.

“This...this isn’t supposed to take hours, right?”

“**If you use your fire like you do? Try centuries**.” The face his father showed him was sadness infinite. “**Orichalcum is a special type of Gold extracted from the moons of Saturn, and then mixed with our very ichor, my son. Mortals are not capable of wielding flames with the power to melt it once it is solidified**.”

“The flames of life, right?” Annabeth intervened, making Leo almost jump in surprise.

“Indeed.”

Leo cleared his throat.

“Yeah, err...and without the metaphors?”

“**It isn’t a metaphor, my son**.” His father’s expression of pity suddenly took all its meaning. “**You have to burn your very life to have a chance of success**.”

“But, without-“

Annabeth revealed a chest Leo was intimately familiar with.

“Oh. He gave you the Heart of the Forge.”

“**It may give you a chance. Though from the few of my children who went successfully through the operation, I can tell you it will be akin to be tortured and having your insides turned into molten metal**.”

“You’re...you’re horrible at reassuring people,” Leo answered. And he couldn’t help but release everything he had on his heart. “You never came home for mom’s funeral. You never told us anything.”

For a moment, red eyes burned...then the fires died down, and something he couldn’t decipher passed upon his father’s face.

“**I am not good with people**,” Hephaestus apologised. “**I don’t know how to behave with them. The machines? I can program them easily to answer my commands. My family? I don’t know what they want. Some want perfect families, like my mother. But this is a very specific definition of perfection. Others want me to say the truth at all times, but don’t like the results when I am honest. I prefer to stay in my Forges when I have the choice. It is...less painful for everyone**.”

Some of the words woke up feelings Leo had thought of several times. Others, however, he disagreed with.

For all his inexperience in some matters, the young Demigod couldn’t help but think that sometimes, immortality really didn’t sound like a good thing. Oh yeah, he was going to blame Hera again for a lot of the problems of his father and some stuff.

“Okay...” he swallowed. “It is going to hurt. What am I supposed to do?”

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Tethys had to admit, it had been a long time since she didn’t have such fun.

“**Your technique has gotten very sloppy, daughter**,” the Titaness said as she plunged her sabre into Calypso’s arm.

“**I am done listening to your lessons, you old**-“

The Mistress of the Ancient Seas really didn’t feel guilty at all throwing a bar of soap in her daughter’s mouth.

“**If you had indeed learned said lessons**,” Tethys pointed out with amusement as Calypso spat bubbles, “**it would be your right and your privilege. As it is, it only underlines your immaturity. I’m going to have to have to pass accords with your husband. Oh, and Hera, sneaking upon me like that. It won’t work**.”

Though she supposed using spring as an illusion like that earned some points for originality.

Tethys raised a finger, and the former Queen of Olympus went to take a bath the hard way.

One wave and ten spears, and she got rid of the daughter of Hades.

With plenty of the Demigods and Demigoddesses fleeing this fight they had not a chance to survive, the number of opponents had significantly decreased.

So why was she feeling that-

Ah.

Illusion.

Tethys compressed her power, before expelling a fraction of her divine aura into a distorted chorus.

Predictably, some part of the battlefield grew hazy before vanishing entirely.

Before she could click her fingers, the steam vanished.

And to her surprise, Hephaestus was already almost freed from her chains.

“**Oh, dear**,” she said as the tiny mortal that had to be a son of the Forge collapsed, skin fuming in what had to be excruciating agony. But the damage had been done. A river of molten Orichalcum was corroding the restraints, and until that very moment, magic had hidden that the damage took place. “**That was a good strategy, but I am afraid it must end**-“

This time the attack was one she had to take seriously.

“**WISH**!”

There was no time to evade it, and Tethys had only a second to prepare.

To her anger, the blade of Celestial Bronze severed a good part of her hat, and cut out a few hair.

“**I liked that hat**.” She glared as the sword failed to do more than leave a scratch upon her so-far unblemished skin.

“I liked my Trident and you broke it in half,” yes, this Demigod was a son of the Seas, that much couldn’t be denied.

“**It’s time I stop playing, then**.”

Hephaestus’ chains were breaking one by one, and with Calypso still able to last for a while, Tethys knew it wasn’t going to be an easy battle.

It might be a bit insulting for her opponents, but she *had* truly been holding back.

No longer.

The earth of the island crumbled, and the Sea came with her.

Vast metallic columns fell into the depths.

Statues were broken.

Automatons which had survived this terrible battle at last stopped functioning.

Her servants swam away, for they knew what was coming.

Tethys attacked, and she did it mercilessly.

Hephaestus changed his freed arm into an enormous magma cannon, but he was too late.

With a punch, she threw the Lightning Thief a kilometre away – the girl had somehow managed to resist the previous assaults, and this time Tethys wanted to be sure her hell flames were no longer a factor.

Using the speed she had refused to use until mere seconds ago, her cloak drenched the sand-powered girl and imprisoned her into a bubble filled to the brink with water. Instantly, the sand turned out to be the greatest weakness of the Demigoddess.

Parrying the magma spat by the divine cannon, unfortunately, was not as simple. The element was rather weak; Hephaestus was dispassionate about such things but-

Tethys grabbed Perseus Jackson by the throat before he could stab her in the back.

“**One does not attack a Lady when she has her back turned, ruffian. I see my daughters are not the only ones to deserve a spanking**.”

“I...apologise...then,” the tone was not apologetic at all, “my...Lady.”

“**You are not**-“ Tethys saw his grinning. What had he done this time? She released slightly her hold on his throat.

“I apologise for what I am about to do. You committed a mistake, oh Mistress of the Ancient Seas.”

It was a trap. Of course, it was a trap. But since she didn’t see anything that could save him, Tethys felt she had to ask.

“**What was my mistake**?”

“I have a second penguin.”

A second later, the magma exploded under the very throne room where she was battling.

Water evaporated.

And this time, her magnificent hat was reduced to cinders.

*Someone* was going to pay for that.

**31 December 2006, the Core of Forge MP-42**

Perseus would have cackled, if it didn’t hurt so much.

“May the Gods bless explosive-loving penguins,” the son of Poseidon managed to utter, before spitting.

A second later, he realised it was blood that had left his mouth.

And then he needed Dakota to stand on his legs again.

“I’m surprised you didn’t run like many others.”

“I emptied a full bottle of rum, Jackson. Right now, I am completely drunk,” the son of Bacchus replied seriously. “And it is seriously a good thing, because unless it’s the rum giving me hallucinations, I think I am watching a gigantic castle of magma atop the caldera of a volcano.”

“Ahem.” Perseus cleared his throat. “You’re not hallucinating, my drunken lieutenant. We’ve been teleported under the island, where the God of the Forges rule as Lord and Master. What you’re seeing is the source of his power in this region. Welcome to the Forge of the Seas of Monsters.”

Needless to say, if Hephaestus wasn’t protecting them, the majority of his companions would have been transformed into well-roasted meat in mere seconds.

There was an enormous lake of lava everywhere he looked. The industrial platform where they were standing was pretty much the only place not in fire and protected by anti-heat shields.

There were automatons extracting ore from the molten rocks. There was industry beyond your wildest dreams and nightmares here. It was both a testimony to the fury of the Earth and the prowess of technology in lethal conditions.

And they were here, at the end of the road.

Most Demigods and participants hadn’t been teleported with him. Of those who were left, there was Drew, living weapon of black diamonds, probably one of the rare beings who could survive here without help. There was Calypso, losing bit by bit her human appearance, as her skin covered in black scales, and her eyes burned with the power of the Night. There was Hera, who looked as exhausted, if not more, as he was. And there was Annabeth, who somehow remained sane, for a certain definition of it.

The volcano rumbled, and a hideous black giant emerged from the lava caldera. He was nearly ten-metres tall, and his expression was terrible. It took several seconds, the time for him to conjure an enormous hammer, for the former Tyrant to realise it was truly Hephaestus, God of the Forges, in his primal element.

“**The Titaness is coming**,” the Smith God announced as his size diminished to a more ‘modest’ three metres and his appearance was restored to one of a hunchback artisan. “**I’m doing my best to keep her away, but it is a fight I can’t win**.”

“Why didn’t you flee, then?” Hera asked. Unlike us, you can spread your Avatars and lead us on a crazy pursuit in the depths of the planet. She will never be able to catch you.”

“He’s not fleeing,” the leader of the Suicide Squad guessed, “because one of his Avatars is busy replacing his son’s heart nearby. Am I right?”

“**You are**,” Hephaestus confirmed, though the fact of being right gave him no positive feelings this time. “**He burned for me; I will burn for him in turn. Great work deserves great rewards**.”

If only Zeus believed in the same philosophy...but then, he wouldn’t be Zeus.

Hephaestus grimaced towards something they couldn’t see, but Perseus presumed it was likely Tethys smashing her way through fire and magma.

“**We don’t have much time. If you have a plan, now would be a good time to start it**.”

“I have a good plan,” Perseus began truthfully. “You are not going to like it.”

He threw the parchment he had taken in the vault what felt an eternity ago, but in all likelihood wasn’t longer than a couple of hours.

“**You acquired one of the copies of my contract of marriage**?” Immortal eyes looked at him with interest. “**I suppose it makes sense that you were able to find one next to my Orichalcum anvil, yes. But what is the point**?”

“Article Twelve,” Perseus replied in all simplicity.

Hephaestus frowned. It was really like a mountain trying to remember how to look human. The poor Olympian must not have a lot of friends, these days.

“**It won’t work**,” the God of Forges replied in a far more hesitant voice. “**Only Hera can give you that sort of authority, and she is far too weak to do so. You need a powerful deity to serve as Binder**.”

“Let’s assume I have a Binder for the great purpose.” He wasn’t going to grin, not when everything was going to be decided in a matter of life and death in the next seconds. “Are you willing to participate? Otherwise this entire affair isn’t worth debating over, and it is better we’re all sent away before the Titaness comes calling.”

“**Yes**,” Hephaestus said after long seconds. So long they were an eternity in several aspects. “**I am willing to try. This situation must be resolved, one way or another**.”

“In that case,” Perseus respectfully nodded. “There is only one actor left which must give her agreement. Hera?”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

“A last Season, and the price is Marriage.”

There was no great oration, no scream of defiance.

Maybe the Primordial of Fate was listening to them? Maybe higher powers had decided it was the moment to act? Or maybe it was simply Hera collapsing of exhaustion?

It had been a long series of clashes, after all.

In the end, it didn’t matter.

The former Queen of the Gods fell to her knees.

And a small orb of golden light erupted from her chest.

“I stand here in the Domain of Fire,” Perseus said with no humour in his voice, “as the Champion of Love. I call you in this desperate hour. Twice you have answered my call, and now with the third time the hour of Apotheosis is here. Marriage can’t stand as the foundation of Divorce, and what has been broken must be repaired. Hear my prayer, and descends on golden wings. ISIS!”

He closed his eyes right on time, for the flash was truly extremely powerful. Fortunately, everyone else had correctly interpreted his silent warning, and no one had been incinerated.

Evidently, Cleopatra was here. Or what was left of Cleopatra. She was now mostly Isis. What she wore was strangely similar to the X-Suits they had donned several times, except the attire was gold, with an enormous cleavage, and looked far more proper for sunbathing than go monster-hunting.

Her jewellery, be it diadem, earrings, or the typical Egyptian collar-thing around her throat were all radiant gold. And her hair were a long and perfect mane of onyx colour.

Before anyone could say anything or act in any circumstance, the small orb of Marriage plunged between her breasts and was absorbed.

“**The call is answered**,” Isis said, and though she was at least twenty metres away, Perseus felt her burn with divine power. Their two previous interactions had brought her incredibly close to true Godhood now. “**Speak, Perseus Jackson**.”

“I stand you, Goddess of Loving Marriages, to report a grave injustice. I have, after a long investigation and multiple interrogations of prime witnesses, concluded that the marriage of Lord Hephaestus here is a sham!”

Hephaestus a second later made sure the copy of the marriage contract returned into his hands.

“**Therefore Lady Aphrodite leaves me no choice, as her fierce and devoted Champion, to proclaim myself Adjudicator for the Contract and demand your intervention! Article Twelve must be invoked**!”

There was a flash, and the contract disappeared from his hands, to reappear into the Goddess’ hands, who read it in the blink of an eye.

“**It is within your rights as Champion of Love and Adjudicator, yes**.” Isis turned her head towards Hephaestus. “**Is one of the parties willing to pay the price**?”

“**I will**,” Hephaestus grunted. “**I swear it on the Styx, the Earth Mother, and the Fallen Sky**.”

This time, the volcano was on the receiving end of an earthquake of at least a magnitude of at least seven.

Dakota had to catch Annabeth and Hera.

The fire increased around them.

“**And the price**?”

“Autumn as penalty for the guilty party,” Perseus had known from the start Aphrodite would never relinquish it voluntarily; this time she would not be given the opportunity to utter a pathetic excuse. “Once the change of nature is harmonised, take everything which is left.”

Evidently, Isis was going to have her full Apotheosis with that.

And on this, it began to rain. Tethys was coming, and the barriers of the Forge Core were breaking.

“**The terms are acceptable**.” Isis accepted, and just like that, Perseus heard something loud and heavy snap into the fabric of reality, as something that could have been was forever altered beyond recognition.

The Fates must be utterly furious now...and it brought a smile on his face.

Drew cut slightly her finger, and one drop of blood fell.

“**Answer, oh Unfaithful Wife. You have forgotten your own pacts, but the oaths are binding! You can’t deny your true nature! Answer or forfeit everything you are! APHRODITE**!”

This time, the pink blast was accompanied by a powerful smell of flowers and perfume. Rose plus two other things?

Bah, it was just some musings of his.

What really mattered is that Aphrodite had arrived as per the plan...

Though her being gloriously naked and having her body covered in olive oil among other things hadn’t been something he foresaw.

If he blushed, no one would blame him right?

“**JACKSON**!”

If the Goddess of Love could have killed him with her eyes alone, he would have been on his way to Hades’ realm in the blink of an eye. Fortunately, she had not that kind of power.

Fortunately, for the blue eyes were filled with rage. Her face was twisted in an expression of pure loathing.

And would it kill her to summon some clothes? Nakedness like that was indecency itself!

Armbands materialised on Isis’ arms and on Aphrodite’s, and chains of Orichalcum followed.

Just the time to breathe out, and Perseus felt new golden armbands be summoned on his arms too.

Soon they were chained together...but nobody would have believed it to be an equal relationship.

And Aphrodite certainly wasn’t fooled.

“**I am going to rip your head from your shoulders, treacherous bastard!”** the Olympian Goddess of Love declared with all the venom of a snake colony. In the mean time, most of the Suicide Squad members present were busy blushing like tomatoes for the state of nakedness didn’t change, and with all this oil and the light of flames, it was extremely *distracting*. “**I know I shouldn’t have trusted you**-“

As amusing as it would have been to listen to an angry monologue, he hadn’t the time. It was raining in the volcano, and the sound of the Seas was a bad sign. Tethys was going to be here soon, and she was far more redoubtable than Aphrodite.

“Article Twelve has been invoked. The Price is Autumn.”

Unlike Khione and Persephone, who certainly had had enough time to prepare what they wanted to discard, Aphrodite certainly couldn’t boast the same thing. The orb of power extracted was twice the size of what Hera had ceded with Marriage.

It might not seem a lot – an Olympian was easily a hurricane-sized mountain of power – but no God or Goddess of Olympus would have wanted to give away so much power to *Hera*.

Alas, she had not the choice.

The last of the four Seasons slammed into the former Queen of the Gods, and Hera’s hair instantly became brown-red. Her eyes begun to burn with the orange-reddish colour of autumn leaves. Her near-destroyed X-Suit was repaired and became white, green-gold, light green, and red-orange.

Obviously, Hera was still very far from being a proper Goddess – by his best estimate, she must be as strong as him right now – but compared to the useless cannon-fodder which had begun this Great Quest, it was like looking at night and day.

“**You will pay for that**,” clearly, Aphrodite didn’t like being in a position of vulnerability. Good. Perseus hadn’t liked either when she refused to honour her part of their bargain. “**I hope you will enjoy men and women lusting and hating you at the same time, Perseus Jackson! I will make your life a living hell the moment I am out of this**-“

“Lord Hephaestus?”

“**I consent**,” two golden armbands appeared on his arms, and more magical chains were summoned into existence.

“**Let Fire and Passion merge**,” Isis sang. “**Let Lust and Dedication find joy at last. The promises sworn will be upheld. The oaths will be mended. Let them find harmony into the pyres of their Domains**.”

Two objects came out of the lava lake.

They were immense and dark, and from where he looked, they could be easily mistaken as something between an iron maiden and a sarcophagus.

And you couldn’t exactly miss the chains and the tubes that indicated the objects communicated each other.

“**NO! NO I REFUSE! I DID NOT AGREE TO THIS**!”

“**But I did**.” Hephaestus declared solemnly. “**So what will it be, Aphrodite? Do we go ahead? Or do you renounce, and accept the consequences of a divorce**?”

Naturally, the latter would be tantamount to give Isis full blessings for a total usurpation. One that had almost one hundred percent chance of working.

Aphrodite lowered her head, though her long blonde hair shivered with her rage.

“**I...I consent. But I will not forget this**!”

Had he been not so tired, Perseus would have shrugged. Threats like this one, he dealt with ten of them every morning commanding the Suicide Squad.

Hephaestus and Aphrodite disappeared for a second, before reappearing respectively into the open ‘iron maiden-sarcophagus’ that they were destined for.

The black objects closed into a sinister grinding sound, before descending into the lava.

For several seconds, everyone stayed silent and watched the now-untroubled surface of the caldera. Well, not untroubled: there were geysers of fire and other disastrous phenomena playing out everywhere.

But the ritual wasn’t responsible for that.

And then there was a small sound behind him.

The sound of hands clapping.

Perseus grimaced.

“**That was certainly an intriguing ritual**,” Tethys spoke. “**But if we returned to the little disagreement we were so busy fighting for a few minutes ago**?”

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They were dead.

They were *so* dead.

Dakota was drunk, but even being drunk wasn’t enough to find any kind of optimism in his chest.

The Titaness was here.

Tethys was standing here, in her usual attire, sabre in hand, minus the hat.

And they had just sent two Olympians away, who were now unable to intervene.

“Nothing to say, Perseus Jackson?”

When the leader of the Suicide Squad spoke, the Mistress of the Ancient Seas wasn’t the recipient of his command.

“Calypso.”

“**Yes**?”

“Take Hera and Drew with you, and run.”

“**Are you sure**?” there was no arrogance left in the daughter of Atlas’ voice. Then again, she was covered in a multitude of cuts, her nose was broken, and most of her regeneration powers weren’t able to heal her anymore.

“I am. Go!”

There was a flash of Night, and the three disappeared. At that very moment, the son of Bacchus wished very much he had been included among that number of ‘people leaving the party’.

Tethys chuckled but didn’t try to block their escape.

“**I can find them, you know. Especially as they didn’t really go far. You are depriving yourself of a great deal of firepower for a questionable strategy, Perseus Jackson**.”

A new sword of Celestial Bronze came out of its scabbard. For a second, Dakota wondered how many the son of Poseidon had in his possession, for he had broken at least ten weapons in this Titanomachy fight alone.

Perseus Jackson laughed, and the sound echoed, far stronger than his scorched voice had been seconds ago.

“Why would I need their firepower?” Mad laughter followed the question. “I am the Adjudicator of Love! Tremble Titaness! For during the short amount of time this ritual is taking place, and only within the boundaries of this place of power, I am unbeatable!”

There should have been retorts that he was mad.

For this was madness incarnate.

But as Dakota turned his head, he saw the being who had been a Queen of Egypt lose her mortal shell. Mortal flesh was disappearing, and radiance came.

This was-

Dakota ran to place himself behind Perseus, and he saw Annabeth Chase doing the same.

And at the same time, the son of Poseidon was tied to this soon-to-be Goddess.

His wounds were healing at a speed that shouldn’t be possible.

“It was a mistake to come here, Tethys.”

“**Innovative**,” the Titaness conceded. “**But not sufficient**.”

A million spears were conjured, and Dakota threw himself away, not that it was necessary; somehow, all the attacks missed Annabeth and him.

Perseus Jackson was projected into the lava.

“No way-“

There was a blast of light.

And Perseus Jackson was propelled out of the caldera, surfing on a wave of magma and molten rock.

“As I was saying second ago,” the maniacal smile returned. “I am unbeatable!”

Suddenly, the Titaness looked far less confident.

“**The ritual is making you immune to all the Domains of the God and Goddesses involved**.”

And among them was Hephaestus, meaning nothing in this volcano was lethal for him anymore.

It was-

It was pure genius, Dakota acknowledged.

“Now,” Perseus smirked and he revealed a bottle of rum in his hand. “You should feel honoured. In general, I avoid drinking alcohol. Lord Dionysus, you know I have served you loyally, I swear it on the depths of madness of this Great Mad Quest!”

The bottle touched his lips, and right at that time, Dakota understood why he had not been evacuated.

There was a bottle of Eleutherian Wine in his hand.

He groaned.

“And I can’t even blame Hera for this one.” The son of Bacchus mourned. “Fine. This entire Quest is just madness, after all. If we have to die, let it all be a party I won’t remember!”

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Annabeth wanted to say the last act of this battle was going to be a masterful application of proper tactics combined with flawless timing.

It was anything but that.

Dakota and Perseus charged the Titaness, and the two were shrouded in purple energy reeking of madness.

It had all the subtlety of Ares’ children, or more accurately, the total lack of it.

And it was with Annabeth holding an artefact which allowed the two boys to keep some shreds of their original control.

It didn’t mean much.

But it was enough for them to hurl themselves at the Titaness like wine-coloured meteors.

Predictably, Tethys counter-attacked.

The power of the Seas struck, overwhelming and terrible, and the volcano was rocked by colossal explosions.

But for all her murderous attacks, the Titaness was just able to throw the two Demigods about a kilometre away.

Perseus and Dakota charged a second time.

Tethys tried to smack them again.

Her mark was true.

But this time, the power repelled them by only half the distance.

Cascades flowed, and a million weapons of sharp water came into existence.

It only gave her a few seconds of respite.

Jackson had not lied. As long as this ritual went on, he indeed *could not be beaten*.

Matters were iffier when it came to Dakota, but given how fast and resistant the son of Bacchus was, you didn’t have to wonder why other Gods had felt Dionysus was a worthy contender for a Throne among the Council.

Tethys didn’t relent.

The two black-haired boys were drowned. They were impaled by thousands of water spears.

But they ever got closer.

And fatally, something had to give.

The sword of Celestial Bronze came at an improbable angle, and the Titaness had to parry it with her bare hands.

Time seemed to stop.

For despite the sheer toughness of a Titan, a drop of golden ichor fell.

And when it touched the ground, it was if the world was ending.

Mountains of fire erupted into existence, and nearby – Annabeth took great care to not look at her – the traitor Empress of the Triumvirate was irradiating the mountain into golden light.

“**I suppose it is my defeat**,” Tethys acknowledged, making a simple swipe, forcing the two Demigods to back off. Their purple shroud immediately began to decline. “**Maybe you have what is needed to survive the coming Age**.”

Annabeth breathed out. This was...err...good news, right?

“**However, I advise you to not rely on the same strategy to challenge my fellow Titans. It won’t work with them...they are not as nice as I am**.” Tethys smiled in amusement, as Perseus and Dakota fell to their knees, their bodies signalling them that these two minutes of rampage had a price. “**Now, farewell. I am going to have to speak with Calypso before she leaves**.”

The Sea engulfed a part of their platform, and when it receded, the Titaness was gone.

Annabeth released her hold on the artefact – a huge chalice of wine – and shivered.

Perseus had told her there was no chance of vanquishing someone like Tethys, but-

The Titaness had indeed given them a harsh lesson.

Light and fire returned her soon to reality.

Something was happening.

No, not something.

*Apotheosis*.

The world went gold, red, and white.

\*\*\*\*

In many ways, reading the copy of the marriage contract of Aphrodite and Hephaestus had been a relief.

It had reassured him that the Master of Olympus was not a complete imbecile, and had indeed tried to avoid the kind of disaster a union between a nymphomaniac Goddess and a lone God starved of affection and human connections represented.

Yes, Zeus had seen that it couldn’t work.

Article 12 – though the name must have varied since Antiquity to adapt to the more modern sensibilities – was supposed to be the answer to that.

Of course, there had been problems. One half of the marriage had to assent to it, and a God or a Goddess had to be willing to Bind them.

As long as Hera had been the Goddess of Marriages, it had never been an option for the latter.

As long as the circumstances were extraordinary, the former was not going to happen.

Perseus was very smug, to be honest, he had been able to engineer it.

“**Calypso**,” he called out. “**Get Annabeth and Dakota out of the way**.”

The portals of Night couldn’t come out fast enough. He was going to miss them. They were quite useful as tactical means to escape.

A pity that-

The world became fire and light.

Perseus closed his eyes as the whole volcano became a cauldron of divine energy.

As much as he wanted to look, it wasn’t possible.

He was the Adjudicator.

He couldn’t die there.

But he assuredly could become blind. And that was a fate he wanted to avoid at all costs.

It was already bad enough that he felt like he was bathed into the lava lake.

The Drakonic protection covering his skin helped keeping him alive.

It didn’t help with the pain.

It didn’t help with-

No, he had to focus.

Remain sane...though as Hades and every God in existence knew, he wasn’t very sane to begin with, and the last couple of years had been no help in that regard.

Finally, it ended.

Or was it more correct to tell it all began anew?

Perseus opened his eyes.

For a second, he thought he didn’t understand what he was seeing.

“Uh, I was not expecting that,” the former Tyrant said truthfully.

Article 12, once invoked, had demanded that Hephaestus and Aphrodite would mingle part of their divine essences. The details were awfully complicated, but as far as he had been able to understand, it was something like the God getting five percent of Aphrodite’s essence mixing with his, and five percent of Fire and everything belonging to the Smith mixing with ninety-five percent of Love and Lust.

It wasn’t an instantaneous process. In fact, the whole time he had been keeping Tethys at bay – for that what was this battle was about, really – the ritual had been forging the ‘shells’ the asocial husband and the unfaithful wife would stay into for a specific period of time.

A period of one year, one month, and one day, to be precise.

But there had been little detail on the ‘shell’ containing the divine essences, and even fewer clues on what else would happen the later.

A lot of the fun, really, had been to find out.

But now that it was revealed-

The ‘container’ chosen for Hephaestus was in many ways akin to a three metres-tall statue of obsidian and bronze.

Though the son of Poseidon didn’t know if there was a mortal artist capable to sculpt or forge a metal statue like that.

And it was-

It was *hot*.

Hephaestus’ new appearance was *hot*.

There was really no other word for it.

One had to admit it, the myriad of Aspects and Avatars Hephaestus were all tremendously ugly.

But this one-

Perseus was pretty sure he had never felt anything carnal for the male sex.

But this creation of-

The eight-packed abs were perfection. The arms and the legs were not grossly exaggerated, they were the perfect combination of strength, elegance, and lethality.

The black-bronze skin was masculinity itself.

He wasn’t going to mention what he had between his legs, save that it was...ahem...a formidable tool.

This form was, and it was no pun, a true Titan of Fire and Metallurgy.

“**I**...” said Titan rumbled, “**I feel *reborn***.”

There was a flash, and suddenly a smaller figure – about half a metre smaller than him – materialised.

This time Perseus was pretty sure he was blushing.

The shell of Hephaestus was manliness and hotness incarnate. The second shell which had been created for Aphrodite seemed to be temptation itself. The Goddess of Love was sexually and female desire in metal.

It looked like someone had tried to create a perfect statue of a silver Goddess...and succeeded.

Everything, from her long silver hair, to her delicate feet, was *perfect*.

Okay-

Aphrodite moved and a single second later, she had her hands on her husband’s shoulders. Automatically, Hephaestus’ hands grabbed her hips.

Their lips met, and it wasn’t a chaste kiss.

Oh no, it wasn’t chaste kiss at all. Let’s see the good side: yeah, he had confirmed the shells had tongues and everything fully functional and-

Okay, the wave of Lust now was a bit over the top-

Eventually, the kiss stopped.

And red eyes the colour of very powerful flames turned towards him.

Right as many golden chains turned into golden dust. And there were no armbands anymore anywhere on Hephaestus and his wife.

“**Perseus Jackson**?” Aphrodite growled.

“My Lady?”

“**Rejoice, for I have decided to not kill you immediately**.”

“I thank your generosity, my Lady.”

“**That doesn’t mean you won’t feel the full power of my blessings and curses soon**,” the Goddess bared perfect teeth of silvery colour. “**You wanted my attention? You will have it. Three and thirteen. Only then I will shift my attention elsewhere...maybe**.”

That didn’t sound too good. But as long as he was alive, there were loopholes to exploit.

What was the saying? Where there was life, there was hope.

“**I will speak on your behalf on Olympus**,” Hephaestus was far more appreciative of his efforts, fortunately. “**And I will richly reward you by the time this Great Quest will end. You can also take what you will in the ruins of Forge MP-42...though I’m afraid it is not much**.”

That was far sweeter music for his ears, yes.

And he blushed again, because Aphrodite’s position suddenly shifted to become quite...carnal and suggestive in her husbands’ arms.

“**Enough of this for today**,” Aphrodite purred. “**Isis? I am going to properly fuck my husband for the first time. You and the son of Poseidon are unwanted audience. Get out, and don’t return**.”

There was a flash of golden light.

And just like that, the Battle which would in the future be called the Clash of Titans ended.

**31 December 2006, the devastation of the island once called Forge MP-42**

If he was forced to pay a Drachma for every island whose destruction he had been somewhat involved, Perseus would have to pay at least two of the gold coins.

Which wasn’t a lot, but it said quite something of the sheer collateral damage a Great Quest could make.

Half of the island was now nothing but a gigantic inferno. It was good luck that said half was the one the furthest away from the ships and where the survivors of Force S were mustering.

Otherwise there would have been far more deaths.

Unlike what had happened after the death of Alcyoneus, the volcano hadn’t disappeared.

The fury of the elements wasn’t abating. With Tethys no longer able to keep the element opposite to hers in check, fire was getting out of control.

The explosions were easily worth tens of thousands of tons of explosives, and they projected phenomenal quantities of rock, lava, and other things into the sea...and onto the thoroughly ruined island, of course. Perseus preferred to think not too much about the fact it was the natural consequences of the God of Fire banging his wife.

The black-haired Demigod watched the spectacle for long seconds, trying to see if there were some structures that might be worth a few minutes of looting. He found none. None that wasn’t already being busy devoured by a magma river or encircled by the tides of fire.

At some point, there were gains which weren’t worth the risks, and those definitely fell in that category.

“Right,” the former Tyrant sighed. It was not a big loss, and there were other options. A second later, the golden armbands began to shine brighter. “They say that you learn with every defeat. I prefer to learn with every victory, no matter how painful it is.”

“**You went near death more times in a single hour than even Gods can properly count**.”

“That’s completely true.”

“**For the sake of my curiosity, did you have a plan in the first place? Or was it only a series of improvisations as the battle unravelled disastrously**?”

“Yes,” Perseus answered cheekily.

There was a long moment of silence.

“**I presume you are not going to release me now**.”

“I went to great lengths to become your Adjudicator, Lady Isis.” Perseus allowed himself a thin smile and didn’t bother turning his head. “And you are not stupid. I think you have figured out by now how I intend to break this gambit of the Triumvirate.”

“**Yes. Why would you waste your time attacking our well-fortified base? It would be an enormous risk, as your forces have been severely diminished by this slaughterhouse here**.” The newly-born Goddess made a sound quite close to a hiss. “**It was always your intention to provoke my husband into sallying out unwisely, away from the enchantments made by Circe and the walls which would have stopped the Suicide Squad dead in mere minutes**.”

“Yes.” At this point, there was no reason to deny it anymore. “And though Mark Antony’s official military career is a succession of reckless offensives, it was two thousand years ago. I’m sure he learned from his mistakes. There was only one being I was absolutely sure he would never abandon, no matter the personal cost to his ambitions. His wife.”

Before his eyes, the island was ravaged by fire and explosions. There would soon be nothing left of the battlefield. The corpses which had not been abandoned now were undoubtedly going to be incinerated in short order.

“**I can make your life very unpleasant**.”

“So can I, as your Adjudicator,” Perseus turned for the first time, and was amused to see that Isis had transformed into a divine Avatar very similar to Aphrodite. The big difference was that instead of magnificent silver, everything with her was radiant gold. Well, that and there was a distant Egyptian theme with a crown of gold and a real-than-life snake representation for the royal ornamentation. “Must we play that game?”

“**My peer**,” Isis commented idly, inspecting her extremely long nails, “**has marked you in ways you may find uncomfortable in the short and long-term. I can easily help her**.”

Perseus gave her a pitying look.

“**But I suppose increasing the chaos around you might be a very risky proposal**,” Isis acknowledged the point. “**I will not try to curse you as long as you behave**.”

“Good.” He could handle a Goddess or two, but the next days were going to be ‘interesting’. Watching his back from everything the former Queen could do while fending off other attacks could prove troublesome.

“**A last question, if I may. You took the power of Adjudicator. How were you certain that it would work**?”

“I am hardly the first, Lady Isis.” He answered honestly. “Of course, I don’t know if they called it an Adjudicator before, but the names and the function must have been similar.”

“**Really**?”

“Really,” Perseus nodded. “You may have heard of one of my predecessors. His name was Paris. Paris of Troy.”

“**The Golden Apple Affair which began the Trojan War**,” the golden Goddess murmured. “**Yes, it explains so much**.”

Perseus drew parchment, ink, and feathers from his pocket. What? He was a traditional at heart.

“Now,” the son of Poseidon smiled, “I believe it is in our best interest to sign a contract, in order for it to not be any misunderstanding for the days to come.”

**31 December 2006, a beach which temporarily escaped the devastation, evacuation zone to the ships of Force S**

Ethan had believed the bad surprises and the heart attacks would end after the Titaness manifested in the middle of their improvised camp and sort of kidnapped her daughter Calypso.

Unfortunately, it was the Sea of Monsters, not the Sea of Pleasant Surprises.

The island was now rocked by explosions with every minute.

And the volcanic eruptions were getting more and more devastating.

To be honest, Ethan rather doubted that by next dawn, there would be anything mortal left alive on this island.

The only solace was that their ships had been spared for now, so they could at least flee the fiery Armageddon unleashed on these shores.

“Jade! How is Leo?”

“Rather fine for someone who has now a mechanical furnace instead of a heart,” the former Huntress grimaced. “I placed plenty of ice cubes on his forehead, and he was burning so hot they melted in mere minutes. Once I return to the ship, I will likely have to make him an ice cocoon so he doesn’t transform into a human torch.”

“At least he’s still alive,” and he couldn’t help but remark he was the optimist one, this time.

“Yeah,” the Champion of Khione rolled her eyes, “though I would have loved some additional explanation before a paper ‘oh, by the way, stop him from self-combusting for the next twenty-four hours’.”

“The Gods are...” Ethan remembered on time that some Olympians were in all likelihood able to listen to the words, “the Gods. Rico! Load me these pallets of ammunition! And no, I don’t want to hear where you found them! Skipper, you help him! Clarisse! How did the meeting with the Gallowborne go?”

“Pretty well, all things considered,” the daughter of Ares grunted, who had lost almost all her hair in the last battles, and looked more exhausted than he’d ever seen her. Then again, they were all dead tired. Once they left this island, they were likely going to have to sleep twenty-four hours in one go to recover. “They don’t want to work for us anymore, but I don’t think anyone will be surprised to hear that. I told them to take the *Black Pearl*. It’s the only pirate ship left, since we don’t exactly know when the *Queen Anne’s Revenge* disappeared. They were about to nominate one incapable with dreadlocks as their new Captain.”

“Nobody is an incapable today, Clarisse,” Ethan answered with a sigh. “They all managed to survive this hell of an island, to begin with.”

“If you say so, Ethan,” the warrior Demigoddess’ tone indicated she clearly disagreed. “His main claim to fame is to have recovered some copy of Jackson’s magical compass. But you know what? I don’t care! I want to take a shower, and then go sleeping for an entire week.”

“I understand your wish,” the son of Nemesis said sincerely. “We are almost done with our duties anyway. Everyone has returned save Jackson and Calypso, and I’m pretty sure the future Queen of Hell-Night will not join us again.”

“And the golden statues?” Luke asked as he threw swords and first-class weapons which had been stolen by the Blackbeard Pirates and then ‘requisitioned’ by the Suicide Squad.

“Ah yes, the grand backstabber Octavian MacArthur and his clique of lackeys.” Ethan snorted.

So far, this Second Great Quest had seen some truly ridiculous things.

But Lou Ellen this time had raised the bar very high in terms of comical relief.

Imagine twelve statues of living Legionnaires, and one statue of a deceased one. They were all made of pure gold, and from a distance, they looked extremely realistic.

Then as you approached, you were forced to say they were *too* realistic.

And then you laughed, because some of the Legionnaire figures were frozen in quite ridiculous positions, or trying to adopt martial postures that were looking like wildly impractical poses for a real battle.

Obviously, there weren’t statues.

They were Octavian McArthur’s last followers, along with the poseur himself.

And they looked totally, completely, utterly ridiculous here on this beach.

“Well,” the son of Hermes said thoughtfully, “I suppose we could always use the gold-“

The ground shook violently.

One more eruption...and one far closer than the previous ones. The pyre which was lit about a kilometre away sounded like *extremely* bad news.

“Forget the statues,” Ethan said at last. “We need-“

“ALL WILL REMEMBER THE UNBEATABLE! FROM THE WEST HE CAME, AND FROM THE DEPTHS OF THE WORLD TO THE SUMMIT OF THE VOLCANO, HE CONQUERRED! HE IS UNBEATABLE!”

The massive orange chariot crash-landed on the beach in a noise of furious ocean and offended gargoyles.

Holding the reins of the chariot, was of course Perseus, clad in a ridiculous orange toga, and giving them his trademark grin of madness.

Why wasn’t he surprised?

Ethan sighed. He sighed and suddenly, he gaped in stupefaction.

Perseus hadn’t been alone on the chariot. There was-

No, he couldn’t have done it.

No.

Ethan wasn’t a historian or any specialist of Ancient Egypt, but there was only woman right now in the Sea of Monsters who would think to dress like an Egyptian Queen.

And this woman was an enemy; she wouldn’t be caught alive holding a crown of laurels for Perseus, or for anyone else but an Emperor of the Triumvirate.

But here she was, with golden chains dancing around her limbs, right after Perseus had dramatically summoned her three times, according to Annabeth’s first after-action report.

“Ethan! Why aren’t these statues aboard the *Inevitable Doom*? I want to offer them to Lord Dionysus! I want to make sure there is a commemorative monument to the Greatest Backstabbing Imbeciles of New Constantinople!”

The son of Nemesis facepalmed. Well, at least he was sure this Perseus wasn’t an impostor.

“We had not reached a decision, but-“

The end of the sentence was not necessary, for the son of Poseidon was distracted by something else.

Namely a slap coming from an angry daughter of Hecate.

“Would it have bothered you to send a message?” Lou Ellen Blackstone snarled. “I had to rely on all the others to be informed of what you were doing!”

“Come on, Lou, I was busy-“

The blonde-haired sorceress grabbed him by the neck of his orange-clothed toga and kissed him ferociously.

Plenty of Demigods snickered. Ethan freely admitted he was among them.

“You can continue ‘apologising’ in your cabin, Jackson. And tell us what the queenly wife of one of our greatest opponents is doing as your prisoner?”

“Oh, that’s simple,” Perseus replied, relatively unembarrassed by the situation he was into. “She is now the Goddess Isis, and I am her Adjudicator. Don’t worry, the next part of my glorious plan mostly consists of blackmailing her husband into releasing Ares in my custody! And I bet none of you saw it coming!”

“WHAT?”

**Author’s note**:

Here the Battle of the Clash of the Titans ends. It was quite fun to escalate for many, many pages (insert evil grin).

Every certainty Olympus, the Triumvirate and most big players held before this cataclysmic onslaught have now been destroyed.

And where now the Suicide Squad was definitely seen as underdogs and their chances of success as minimal, the odds of success have suddenly skyrocketed.

The Second Great Quest, whose goals were supposed to be impossible, is looking quite different now as a new year is about to begin.

We’re close to the endgame. And neither the Seas of Monsters nor Olympus will be the same again.

**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*

*Michael Kahale and hundreds of Legionnaires of the Twelfth Legion, along with over nine hundred pirates*

**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 renounced Marriage and is a claimant to the title of Goddess of Seasons now.

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

Leo Valdez – holds the fame of being the first member of the Suicide Squad with a mechanical heart

Iphigenia – once known as Alexia, now marked by the Dreaming One, Primordial of Water

Octavian McArthur – currently changed into a golden statue along with his lackeys, courtesy of a variant of Midas’ Curse

Edward Teach – better known as Blackbeard, Admiral of the Blackbeard Pirates; disappeared into the waters of the Sea of Monsters; his fate is now uncertain

**Gallowborne ‘Divisions’**:

The first ‘Division’ was 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.

The Second Division fare better. At least fifty pirates survived the merciless clash in the ruins of Isthmus’ defences, and were given an amnesty. Please don’t ask the percentage of casualties it represents from the original complement.

**Ships of Force S lost**:

*Etna* – modified Kilauea-class Ammunition Ship, *HPMS Burning Dragon* – 74-guns ship of the line, *HPMS Jolly Roger* – 48-cannons galleon, *HPMS Royal Fortune* – 40-cannons frigate, *HPMS Ranger* – 12-cannons brigantine, *HPMS Light of the Orient* – 8-cannons junk

The Suicide Squad and its Tyrant are once again victorious! Praise the Madness!

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