Teaser Dawn of Blackmail

**Chapter 27**

**Dawn of Blackmail**

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

*Again.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*All of that had been expected.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

It began with a musical opening.

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

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

A few more seconds passed, and then a short video played out. It was clearly the Empress standing prisoner in what had to be a ship’s cabin. Lucius Vorenus and many others still breathed out in relief, nothing that according to the data on the screen, this had been filmed mere minutes ago.

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

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

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

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

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

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

But that was worse than gloating.

It was-

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

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

“Say what you have to say.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The grin ended, and the other eye opened again.

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

“Go to Hell!” a Legionnaire barked.

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

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

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

“Excuse me?”

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

“I am aware of this reality, bastard.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“And if I refuse?”

The lone eye of crimson shone malevolently.

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

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

Perseus Jackson nodded.

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

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

It took many, many minutes for it to decrease.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“**I don’t understand it at all**.”

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

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

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

Yes, that was what she thought.

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

Who would blame her?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Calypso breathed out loudly before acknowledging the inevitable.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The glasses were already filled.

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

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

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

Silence for them, at least.

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

“**What a year**,” his brother mused.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“**And yet you’re not unhappy**.”

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

Neptune groaned. That was a horrible pun.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“**I see**.”

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

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

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

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

“**Your son is a butcher**.”

The other God didn’t bother arguing back.

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

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

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

“**Enough?**”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“**Adventurous?**”

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

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

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

“**And**?”

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

“**How much**?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“**I suppose I can do that**.”

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

“**One last matter**.”

“**Yes**?”

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

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

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

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

That was bad...incredibly bad.

“**So the Sire is one of the Three**.” When you know when the First was Typhon, this may not be even enough to describe how problematic it was.

“**The other Keys**?”

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

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

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

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