**Chapter 19**

**Interlude 3**

**NOT Part of the Plan**

“*When in doubt, escalate*!” Attributed to Perseus Jackson, authenticity never confirmed.

“*You think you have a good idea of my tactics because I have dealt with this overgrown iguana? Let me disabuse you of that ridiculous idea. I am unpredictable, and I am going to prove it to you immediately*!” Attributed to Perseus Jackson, authenticity never confirmed.

**4 December 2006, Council Room, Olympus**

Hermes hadn’t the brains of his half-sister Athena, but the moment he entered the Throne Room, he could tell that was going to be one of *those* Council sessions.

You know, the ones which sounded really funny when you were thousands of kilometres away from them.

As if an omnipotent power had heard his thoughts, Dionysus appeared on his throne, and his first deed was to conjure a cascade of wine to fill far too many cups to be counted.

“**I want to raise a toast**,” the God of Wine said in a voice that wasn’t slurry or hesitant at all, “**to the craziest Demigod of this generation! To begin his Great Quest, he went to hell and back! As his second opening move, he slew a Drakon even some Gods would have hesitated to fight! All Hail Perseus Jackson! I would not be a proper God of Madness if I refuse to acknowledge his victories...and I vigorously submit a request to make him immortal as soon as possible**!”

“**Request denied**,” Zeus thundered as he appeared on his throne. “**This sea spawn must be punished, not rewarded**.”

“**Err...yes, concerning this subject**,” the God of Thieves cleared his throat. “**Your dark brother has...err...given me a letter...for your eyes only**.”

The glare was murderous, and it didn’t improve when the Master of Olympus began to read.

“**Ridiculous! Given the number of laws he has broken, this malicious boy deserves death**!”

It was perhaps for the best Poseidon had yet to enter the Council Room. Then again, Hades would likely have not sent the message without his other brother’s support.

“**Actually, he didn’t**.” Athena disagreed, earning the ire and the glares of their genitor. “**The Ancestral Drakon’s island was the target for a proper Great Quest two centuries ago. It was the last time we sent someone there, as there was no point sacrificing Demigods for no gain. But the Great Quest was never rescinded, and Perseus Jackson used the proper paperwork channels after gaining the approval of the Senate**.”

“**And the creation of this abomination Hell’s Reach Gate? There is no proper paperwork for it**!”

“**No**,” the Goddess of Wisdom conceded, “**but there is no law against it either. We never thought a Demigod would be able to create an entrance in a Zone Mortalis without our assistance; as a result there are no Divine Laws, Ancient or New, forbidding someone to do it**.”

“**New Laws will have to be promulgated, evidently**.”

No one dared saying no. That said, Hermes thought it was a bit like trying to protect the henhouse once the fox had feasted and fled. Perseus Jackson and the Suicide Squad’s opening gambit had succeeded, and there was no more need to create another entrance.

Furthermore, the son of Poseidon had proved the concept was feasible to all, meaning some enemies who didn’t care at all about the proclamations of Olympus would try to replicate the feat sooner or later.

“**If they can’t be punished for the insane strategy, they can be punished for the crimes this male committed against my Huntresses**!” Artemis snarled, her initial facade of neutrality utterly gone.

Dionysus...yawned. And Hermes braced for a devastating impact.

“**Your Huntresses received exactly what they deserved**.”

“**I dare you to repeat**-“

“**You heard me the first time**,” the God of Madness’ eyes flashed with an extremely dangerous purple light. “**I have been given prime exclusivity for some videos of the Suicide Squad the moment they were in view of the Forge of All Perils. Perseus Jackson warned your Huntresses they had to don the X-Suits and follow his orders. Except one, they did their best to disobey as often as possible. They played for stupid prizes, they died for it. To misquote a certain Demigod, it’s the Sea of Monsters, not the Sea of Tourists**!”

“**They must be punished**!”

“**Who is the ‘they’**?” Athena asked...her voice betraying for some curiosity for once. “**The first Huntress was killed by Chrysaor. Given how the Queen of the Seas handled him, I don’t exactly know what can be done to make his punishment worse than it already is. The next two girls died fighting against an army of lesser Drakonic parasites. Those were avenged rather quickly**.”

“**I speak**,” Artemis hissed, hatred devouring everything, “**of this parvenu of a Goddess! She slew my lieutenant**!”

“**Not so parvenu anymore**,” Dionysus replied with a smirk that was sure to make things worse, not better, “**I note that you didn’t rush to the Forge of All Perils to challenge her for this offense**.”

“**Now, now, Dionysus**,” Aphrodite smiled innocently, “**it isn’t like it’s something notable**.” Then the dagger was really pushed into the metaphorical wound. “**After all, she didn’t answer the prayers of a desperate Huntress in the first place. It was so bad that this poor girl decided to accept the Goddess of Ice and Snow’s blessings**.”

“**What have you said, you *whore***?”

“**You heard me the first time, *virgin***.” Aphrodite bared her perfect teeth. “**One of your divine prerogatives is to hunt monsters. Unlike the majority of us, you could have intervened any time you wanted to slay this Ancestral Drakon. Why didn’t you**?”

“**She didn’t intervene because I ordered her not to**,” Zeus thundered, saving his precious daughter’s honour. “**I made it clear that no divine help was to be provided**.”

That was...that was somewhat the truth, yet it wasn’t the *complete truth*. For example, Zeus had been busy fornicating and doing other pleasurable things when the last battle raged; there was no way he could have given the order to Artemis.

No, there was something else. But good luck trying to guess exactly what, given how Artemis now gave them an expression that the stones would likely envy.

“**I want her to be punished**.” Artemis said stubbornly. “**She slew my lieutenant. Who does she think she is**?”

“**She thinks she is the Goddess who was granted an opportunity to break the chains that made her a lesser deity**,” Dionysus replied in a far more conciliatory tone. “**While it is possible Hades will not make her his Queen, after absorbing the power she did, the daughter of Boreas is a new force to be reckoned with. If I were you, I wouldn’t insult her. Her new domain will include Ice Drakons, and in the future, she will bend the knee before Hades. It would be prudent to be...polite**.”

Artemis’ flashed in hated, but she didn’t say a word.

“**Sister**,” Apollo intervened, “**this is not so different that what happened every day on the Trojan battlefields. One of us empowered a Champion too much, and the God supporting his adversary intervened directly. If Ares was here today, he would likely remind each and every one of us of that**.”

“**No punishment will incite others to go for treachery and defiance**!”

“**Then go to the Underworld and tell Hades you want justice**,” Aphrodite suggested innocently. “**I’m sure it will be well-received**.”

If Artemis could have killed the Goddess of Love just by glaring at her, it would have happened in a heartbeat. As every member of the Council present knew very well, Hades was never going to accept that...and that was assuming he gave Artemis the permission to plead her cause in person, which wasn’t bloody likely, in Hermes’ opinion.

“**It is outrageous my brother didn’t ask for my permission before letting the Goddess of Snow fall under his sovereignty**,” Zeus rumbled. None of his children decided to comment upon the hypocrisy of doing so. Olympus had certainly never asked for the permission of Atlantis or the Underworld. “**Are there any reliable Demigods who survived**?”

Athena nodded.

“**Richard Grant, son of Hercules, is likely now the most reliable Demigod we have in the Suicide Squad. The reports of the Huntresses bear so little resemblance with reality I am only using them very sparingly**.” The Protector of Athens superbly ignored Artemis’ dark expression. “**The son of Liber could be relied upon to provide reports in exchange of various rewards, but he’s a penguin now. I don’t think I will receive a lot of information from that direction any longer**.”

Dionysus cackled demonically, only stopped by the silent order of the Master of Olympus.

“**As far as the strategic situation is properly analysed**,” the Goddess of Wisdom continued, “**it is obvious that the Questers fell into an extremely elaborate trap. Without incredible bravery and Khione’s intervention, it is very likely all of them would have perished before a tactical withdrawal could be attempted**.”

“**You make it sound so *noble***,” Artemis childishly remarked.

“**I’m doing nothing of the sort. I’m telling you that if we had sent a Legion inside the Forge, right at this hour, we would be watching a mountain of Roman Demigods’ corpses**.”

“**And what of the one who made this trap possible?**” the God of Trade and Thieves preferred to intervene before they began a shouting match...again. “**The Demigoddess...Bella Medina, is it**?”

Yet as he uttered the name, there was a feeling of wrongness. Like there was nothing left of the girl...which was a very unpleasant sensation, and not just because of its implications.

“**Scotus has faded away**,” Athena bluntly told them. “**I don’t know how much of him returned to the Primordial Darkness or how long ago it happened, but there is nothing left of him. It’s highly likely his last significant deed on this world was to sire his daughter...which raises very interesting questions about her existence, and why she volunteered for the Suicide Squad**.”

It was true. And it wasn’t the only concerning thing. Unlike the rest of the affair, they had absolutely no video of the transformation the daughter of Scotus had undergone after her betrayal was revealed. All they had right now consisted of Richard Grant’s report, for no other survivor had chosen to share what he or she saw. Granted, it might be a bit much to expect Perseus Jackson to share what he knew, as Zeus tried to regularly kill him...

“**This creature, this...*Nocturna* will be found and eliminated**.” Zeus commanded. “**I am formally placing a Kill Order upon her head. Artemis, you will take care of the bounty**.”

“**With great pleasure, father**.” The Goddess of the Hunt bared fangs of a predator.

“**That doesn’t tell us the identity of this mysterious enemy, however**.” Athena noted. “**The title is significant, but no one ever used it openly before**.”

“**It is a deity, at least in terms of power**,” Demeter chose to speak for the first time, “**this ‘Sire’ could cloud our sight, tame the Ancestral Drakon, transform someone into a hybrid of a woman and an animal, turn a powerful curse into a penguin transformation, and it wasn’t present in person to begin with**.”

“**The Titaness? She is in the Sea of Monsters**.”

“**No. It’s definitely not her style**.”

“**And the Ancestral Drakons? There are two others**!”

“**About that...**” Hermes really, really hated being the bearer of bad news. “**They are gone. The islands they were using as their lairs in the Sea of Monsters are empty. The Drakons are nowhere to be found; I don’t know where they are, but it’s not in this Zone Mortalis anymore**.”

“**More treasons**,” the God of Lightning was *very* unhappy.

“**And more evidence the trap was prepared weeks before it was unleashed against the Questers**.” Athena commented, unsurprised. “**It raises the question however how powerful those two Drakons have become while we weren’t paying attention. Fimbulvetr was far too powerful; clearly this mysterious ‘Sire’ had a part in that. If the two others are worse than the Ice Drakon**-“

“**They must be eliminated at once**.” Zeus finished in conclusion. “**Apollo! Artemis! One of your duties from this day onwards is to track and slay these overgrown reptiles! Find wherever they hide, and kill them with extreme prejudice**!”

“**Yes, father**.”

“**As you command**.”

“**And I will make it clear once more: none of the Gods and Goddesses that are loyal to Olympus are to help this group of Questers that call themselves the Suicide Squad! I don’t care how many promises and bribes the sea spawn gives you, you are utterly forbidden to help him! Or you will be on the receiving of my Master Bolt, and Hera’s punishment will seem a merciful kindness to you**!”

Aphrodite pouted; Dionysus emptied more cups of wine. Hermes had a feeling that the King of the Gods had just pushed them to continue their support in a covert manner...

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

One of the greatest advantages about being a Telekhine was undoubtedly the shapeshifting ability.

Yes, nature had not blessed them at first, with these large and ugly dog heads, but who cared?

They could *change*.

And *change* they had.

When you could become elegance and lethality in a single body, why would you stay in a body which make sure everyone noticed your ugly mutt?

Oh, there were a few traditionalists out there who refused to alter their appearance, but they were few and far between.

Seriously, who would be caught looking like a horrid hybrid of sea lion, twisted dog, and mutated human when you could embrace the noble form of the Great White Shark?

Well, a modified body of Great White Shark, to say the truth.

The Telekhines had made themselves indispensable in the field of weapon manufacturing, they could hardly remain with unwieldy appendages. As such, their fins had been modified into sturdy and muscled arms with proper claws. That way they could work their metal and wield weapons properly, while their ability to fight underwater remained unmatched. Naturally this had demanded large-scale modifications of their workplaces, but after a few decades, no one thought about it anymore.

A sonorous melody of the shark movie he enjoyed above all came to disturb these pleasant thoughts. To his displeasure, it was his personal line. By all the fangs of the sea, he really hoped it wasn’t Hermes again! He couldn’t stand this harassment of telephone marketing.

“Yes?” The Godfather of all Telekhines grunted.

“Don Lino!” A familiar voice every Telekhine of the Family had learned to be wary recently echoed in his private quarters. “It is I, your eternal friend!”

“Perseus Jackson!” the Ancient Telekhine wondered for a couple of seconds how Poseidon had managed to sire such a crazy Demigod, before admitting he didn’t want to know the answer to.

“In the flesh, Don Lino.”

“What do you want?” the Godfather asked, centuries of experience returning his iron-clad control. “I was very clear the last time.”

“I suggest you to turn on Atlantis Seanews Network, if you have a second to spare.”

For a second, the Head of the Family was tempted to end this conversation, but curiosity told him there might be something worth his time. Thus he followed the suggestion...and froze.

For once the holographic water-screen had materialised, the Godfather recognised immediately where an excited Atlantean journalist had chosen to broadcast. These immense docks, this large volcanic cavern, it was...

It was the Forge of the Ancient Telekhines. The Forge of his ancestors! But how was it possible? The monster that had chased them away was impossible to kill, be it by blade or any modern weapon!

As if to answer his thoughts, the holo-cameras pivoted, and Don Lino was delivered the side of the Ancestral Drakon’s corpse, minus most of its head.

“As you can see,” the Atlantean journalist spoke with a smile that wasn’t fake in the slightest, “the Suicide Squad has indeed accomplished the impossible, and killed the supposedly invincible Fimbulvetr! Glory to the Suicide Squad! This message was sponsored by Perseus Jackson, leader of the Great Quest, approved by Atlantis, the Underworld...and Olympus.”

“Well?” the voice at the other end of the communication device was insolent...but for once, Don Lino was going to let the Demigod get away with this.

“You have the Forge under your control.” The Godfather of the Telekhine Family acknowledged out loud. “What do you want?”

“The Forge must be turned into an impregnable fortress as quickly as possible, and weapon production must resume with all celerity. It would be a shame to slay the Drakon only for another squatter to occupy the place, wouldn’t you agree?”

“On that much, son of the Earthshaker, we are in agreement.” It had taken close to two millennia for Fimbulvetr to be slain; another opportunity like this one might never return.

“Good. I had the skill and the firepower to kill the Drakon; you have the Telekhine effectives and the Forge-lore to return the Forge of All Perils to its full production capacity. These are nice foundations for a proper partnership, would you agree?”

“I presume,” the Godfather spoke calmly, “you want the Forge’s ownership and certain quotas to be fulfilled.”

“I would prefer we speak of it in person. I’ve no doubts your communications are secure, but better not to tempt some of the deities we have good reasons to be wary about.”

“True.” The Demigod, for all that he acted like he had the wish to die incredibly young, was clearly no fool. But even if he was, Don Lino would likely have agreed for proper negotiations and contracts. “I am sending my son Frankie with a large Honourable Squadron to the Forge. He will follow your recommendations until I arrive in person to talk with you. Is it acceptable, Perseus Jackson?”

“It is acceptable, Don Lino. It is a pleasure to do business with you.”

The communication ended, and the Godfather of the Telekhine Family swam out of his private quarters to give out new orders.

He had just been given a chance to restore the Family to its true glory, and by all the coral barriers of the Sea of Monsters, he wasn’t going to miss it!

**5 December 2006, Grand Strategium, Forge of All Perils**

There was something incredibly funny about watching the daughter of Hecate fussing over their insane leader. Well, Lou Ellen Blackstone was doing that when she wasn’t glaring at him.

But it was still extremely funny, to see a sorceress behave like a mother hen when the exhausted madman was concerned.

“Yes, yes, I will behave,” that was a lie, but the two sorceresses let it pass, as Perseus Jackson decided at last to stay on the massive blue throne that served as his seat in the self-proclaimed ‘Grand Strategium of the Forge of All Perils’. “You have had the time to review most of the videos of our glorious battle. What do you think, your Dreadful Majesty?”

“I think that all those who still breathe right now are very lucky to be alive.” Bianca replied bluntly.

“True, and?”

The former Dread Empress watched the green-eyed boy attentively. In many ways, Perseus Jackson had emerged both weaker and stronger from his crazy battle with the Ancestral Drakon.

Why he was weaker was obvious. Pale, visibly exhausted, the leader of the Suicide Squad had lost a couple of years of life, and was likely going to need several weeks before being battle-ready once more.

But he was also stronger. His skin had now more or less gained the same sheer level of resilience as the Curse of Achilles, and that was just the ‘evident blessings’. Slaying a giant Drakon bigger than a skyscraper had imbued him with power beyond Demigod level, and his eyes had gained some mesmerising ability while his voice and his moves had benefitted in ways that hadn’t been there before. Perseus was definitely more charismatic, and it wasn’t just because of how everyone was in awe about his Drakon-slaying. It did not take much to guess that in all likelihood, his Hydrokinesis and Cryokinesis had been significantly empowered compared to the levels accessible to him before the battle.

“Your plan seems to have worked out in the end, even if the battle was far more desperate than it was supposed to be,” the former Dread Empress acknowledged. “You gained your equivalent of the Curse of Achilles, and lost only a few Huntresses and some expendable warriors in the process.”

“Indeed.” Perseus grimaced. “I would have preferred not to lose Douglas Smith like we did, he proved to have a relatively good head on his shoulders, but what is done is done. We must continue, and ensure the lessons paid in blood are learned.”

“And what are these lessons?” Lou Ellen asked with a smile that was really vicious. “That you must stop your theatrical lies and trust us a bit?”

“Now what would be the fun in-“

The hands the daughter of Hecate placed on the shoulders of the son of Poseidon must exert a lot of strength, because the ex-Tyrant yelped in surprise.

“Yes, yes, that’s one of the lessons.” Could Bianca repeat how funny she found the whole scene? “But a far harsher one is that without the equivalent of a divine gift like the Curse of Achilles or something offering high regeneration powers, the butcher bill is going to be monstrous.”

Unfortunately, there was no grin or smile to accompany these words.

“Is it that bad?” Bianca di Angelo asked, as many automatons around them were busy modifying the vast hall so that it became a command centre according to the son of Poseidon’s exacting specifications.

“It is probably worse, all things considered.” Perseus replied honestly. “If we ignore the three Questers in this Grand Strategium, our forces are awfully squishy when it comes to large-scale battles. Asterius is tough and death is not an inconvenience for him. Jade is going to gain a lot of advantages from her new allegiance. But the rest? Officers or non-officers, this is all the same problem: a single mistake, an enemy that is a perfect counter for their abilities, and they die in a second.”

“Aren’t you a bit pessimistic?” Lou Ellen shook her head.

“My dear sorceress lieutenant,” the black-haired boy huffed, “the Sire of Drakons didn’t even have to trigger a single curse to get Huntresses Kalinda and Eudoxia killed. And for all their fanatical behaviour, the members of the Evil Lesbian Cult are rather skilled at defeating low and mid-level monsters. They were easily overwhelmed during their first real battle. And let’s not pretend many of our officers would have survived if they had decided to take their place.”

That was...a good point, Bianca had to acknowledge. Sure, Luke Castellan and Ethan Nakamura would have endured the iguana onslaught, but younger and less experienced Demigods like Leo Valdez or Michael Yew might not have lived another day.

“I suppose you have a plan to correct that.”

“I have plans, yes.” The son of Poseidon admitted before grimacing. “I hoped I wouldn’t have to use them so soon, though.”

“Why? I will give you that most of the ones you used are completely crazy, but you have given us an entrance into the Sea of Monsters and a base of operations. By the way, congratulations on achieving the ‘blizzard’ part of the Underworld transformation.”

“Thank you! But it proves we saw only a possible future, unfortunately. We have no chance of achieving the ‘magma’ part.”

“Why?” Lou Ellen raised an eyebrow. “I assume you have to kill another Ancestral Drakon...the magma cousin of the big lizard you just slew, if I have to guess.”

“The guess is good, the implementation is impossible,” Perseus sighed. “This infuriating lizard is nowhere to be found. Apparently, the Sire of Drakons warned them to hide ahead of schedule. Fimbulvetr was sacrificed for the cause, but the two others disappeared. But I am not that disappointed.”

“Oh, and why that?”

“I am not disappointed because we stand no chance against these two Drakons.”

That was...quite an affirmation, all right.

“You engineered the death of one.”

“Yes.” Perseus admitted. “Because Khione helped me. You have seen how the two idiot Huntresses were twisted by their brief stay inside the Forge. What do you think will happen to an expeditionary force without X-Suits?”

“But we have the X-Suits...” then Bianca understood and grimaced in turn, “the suits are only good against magical monsters using frost and ice powers, aren’t they?”

“You have perfectly summed-up the problem. It should have been more a precaution than anything else, for Fimbulvetr wasn’t supposed to be powerful. Unfortunately, it has become a basic requirement if you don’t want to be cursed and die in mere minutes.”

And against a Magma Drakon, they would need a God of Fire...and the only one which might have helped was prisoner in the Sea of Monsters.

Not that it was that much of a problem, really, since they didn’t know where the Drakon was in the first place.

“Okay, we ignore that part of the plan.” Bianca licked her lips. “This Sire of Drakons is a very big problem.”

“I fully agree with you.” For a few seconds, Perseus Jackson looked...haunted. And as the automatons’ first actions had been to use some sort of crystals to give them perfect lighting in the Grand Strategium, Bianca was sure it wasn’t her imagination. “He ruined a beautiful plan, and someone not allied with us having an extremely developed ability to see the future is a massive headache. Worse, I don’t even know if this mysterious Sire is an Oracle, Seer, or Augur.”

“We got rid of his spy.”

“We don’t know if the Sire decided to find only one Demigoddess willing to spy. And the fact she was a true believer is another enormous problem I have to point out.”

“She seems to have had no reluctance to play the role of betrayer,” the daughter of Hecate answered, “but that doesn’t mean-“

“Lou Ellen,” this time Perseus looked unwilling to extend any effort in practical jokes and taunts, “one has to admit the reality before it smashes you in the face. The mysterious Sire of Drakons was able to convince someone reasonably intelligent to discard her humanity. Furthermore, it was a plan that would, for all intent and purposes, kill the Demigoddess to mould her into a new being entirely. Bella Medina is dead, and she won’t come back. I have little idea how it was done, but I can tell you there were many preparations and rituals before the final one inside the Forge; we only saw the last ritual and the triumph, not the sum of efforts that must have gone into this near-impossible deed.”

“You’re right, it’s terrifying.” Bianca nodded. “And there’s another point you haven’t mentioned so far. As far as I can tell, this Sire of Drakons respected his promises. He really changed her into something she wanted to be, or at least something she was brainwashed enough to believe it was desirable to be.”

“Err...” Lou Ellen coughed. “I’m missing something, right? I know I have less experience than you two, but it did look to me on the video like a partial animal transformation. You didn’t seem so worried about our golden penguin...”

“There’s no comparison possible.” Bianca explained, for once pleased to explain some arcane lore to one deserving of it. “In one of the normal animal transformations, usually the near totality of the power the God or the Goddess uses is utterly wasted. Our trio of penguins lost their human bodies, but they received absolutely nothing in exchange. In fact, they might have lost more, for their Demigods’ abilities are crippled. The transformations of Rico and the other cretins are a waste of energy...which is exactly the point, if you think about it. The Gods are so unhappy with you that they’re willing to waste a tiny fraction of their divine power to punish you. Okay, it is not that much of a problem for them, their reserves are filled back within seconds. But that’s still a waste. What happened to Bella Medina is very different. She sure as the Hells gained power, and a lot of it.”

“To use a mathematical estimate,” Perseus said quietly, “I think the Sire poured about ninety percent of the ritual’s energy into empowering her. By comparison, the penguins are the sort of ritual where ninety-five percent of the power is wasted.”

“Okay...you’re right, that is bloody terrifying.”

“Glad you agree.” A faint smile returned to Perseus’ face...though it didn’t last. “Of course that raises more questions than it gives us answer. This isn’t like when you turn an insolent mortal into a penguin. The loss of power is permanent; you have really given a part of yourself away.”

“I see what you mean,” Bianca frowned. “The power has to come from somewhere.”

“Yes. Arguably, this wasn’t a full transformation from mortal to immortal; there were symbolic elements and advantages that made the half-task easier. But it wasn’t a cheap thing done on a whim. Nocturna is extremely powerful, and I don’t have any idea what her limits are...or what kind of true capabilities beyond bat-themes powers she might have.”

Bianca wanted to open her mouth to add one more problem: that they had to take seriously the possibility of Demigods deserting in mass, but staring in the green eyes, the daughter of Hades knew the son of Poseidon had thought of it.

“This Sire may be the greatest ally to our cause or the most powerful enemy we will face.” The Lightning Thief declared. “You realise he could have truly become the Titan of Drakons, should he had wished to.”

“I know. If he had really wanted to fulfil that ambition, there’s not much we could have done.”

Perseus tried to leave his throne, but Lou Ellen was prompt to keep him on it.

“What are we going to do now?”

“Regroup, create new plans, get stronger,” Perseus Jackson rolled his eyes before sighing, “and organise the funerals of those who fell, I suppose.”

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

“**Well this is certainly inconvenient...for the Triumvirate**.”

Medea couldn’t help but let her lips twitch in amusement. This kind of reaction was absolutely typical for her Aunt.

“**You were expecting a stronger reaction**?”

“No.” The sorceress who had once been the Princess of Colchis replied honestly. “Storms might be unleashed and empire fall, it takes a lot to really anger you.”

“**Yes**,” long and elegant fingers clicked, and a couple of girls brought refreshments. “**Though it is a powerful storm these new Demigods have made. As far as entrances go, this one has been remarkable and forced everyone to pay attention**.”

‘Remarkable’...yes, it was definitely that...and more. Perseus Jackson and his cohort of crazy Demigods had created a brand-new entrance in the Sea of Monsters despite considerable wards standing in the way, and then used it successfully. The magical protections and Hell stood in the way, but it hadn’t slowed them down. Chrysaor’s legendary crew of murderous human-turned-dolphins had perished trying to fight them, before the son of Medusa was dragged screaming towards a fate worse than death.

And of course, last but not least, once it had been done, the Questers had charged towards danger, and Perseus Jackson had killed an Ancestral Drakon bigger than the highest point of this very island.

‘Remarkable’ was not perhaps the best word to describe this. ‘How in the name of Hades are they still not dead?’ might be more appropriate.

“I am not trying to imitate the famous Cassandra,” the female descendant of the Titan Helios spoke carefully, “but I think you should check up your evacuation measures...just in case.”

“**Where is the confidence that say you proclaim the Eye of Helios was an extraordinary weapon no Demigod would be able to beat**?” Her aunt asked humorously.

Medea gritted her teeth before answering.

“My confidence has massively decreased, now that I have seen a God-Beast die by the hands of a Demigod who has yet to reach the age of sixteen.”

“**He received help**.”

“With or without divine help, I wouldn’t have been able to do it at eighteen. I am honest enough to admit it. And I don’t think there are many Demigods in two thousand years who have been able to win battles as dangerous as this one.”

Circe, Immortal Sorceress and Owner of C.C’s Spa and Resort, tranquilly sipped her mint syrup before speaking again.

“**I will prepare potential escape plans, just in case**.” Her mentor and Aunt told her after a long period of reflexion. “**I think I have some time before the Suicide Squad pays me a little visit**.”

“You could be wrong. The son of the Master of Atlantis is noted to be unpredictable.”

“**I could**.” Circe agreed. “**That’s why I am going to hire a battalion of Amazons for a couple of months. I have good relations with them, courtesy of having trained and moulded many of them in the last decades**.”

“That they have reason to want some payback against Perseus Jackson is a funny coincidence, of course,” Medea grinned.

“**An extremely lucky coincidence**,” Circe replied in the same tone. “**And now that I think about it, they don’t like very much the Huntresses of Artemis either**.”

“How tragic,” Medea nodded. “A pity that at the pace things are going, the Huntresses who sailed aboard the flamboyant mega-yacht are going to be extinct before they reach your island.”

“**Yes, quite a pity**,” the other Immortal Sorceress approved. “**But the Eternal Virgin has only herself to blame. As recent events confirmed, it is best to have a few elite lieutenants around you than an army whose average level won’t survive the first real challenges. Why do you think I keep so few permanent military forces around me**?”

Medea snorted.

“In this troubled era we’re finding ourselves thrown into, the numbers have some appeal.”

“**The *Eye of Helios* is all I needed to decrease massively the Legionnaires’ numbers**.”

“And if the Suicide Squad finds a parade against it? Given their reputation and their recent exploits, you can’t dismiss the possibility…”

“**I don’t. This is why my father’s weapon was only the first of many relics I sent for repairs at Forge MP-42. I have the budget and the resources, and I doubt the God of Forges will be imprisoned for long. Why not exploit the opportunity**?”

“Why not, indeed...” Medea chuckled. “Olympus is likely going to insist for something called a disarmament treaty if they win, though.”

“***If* they win, yes...it’s not impossible, I suppose. But they will need more than the Suicide Squad. You and I have seen what Mark Antony and Cleopatra prepared. It will take more than a powerful fleet to ruin that**.”

“Oh, I’m not worried about the Roman duo of Love and War. I’m more worried about your personal protection...you don’t have the defences they take for granted, and while their Solar Ark moves, your island can’t boast the same.”

“**I will be fine**.” The daughter of Hecate smiled. “**If they can really bypass or neutralise every stratagem...they will forgive me, in the end**.”

“Because you have something they want?” It was a poorly kept secret that Circe was prompt to train the half-sisters who were sufficiently cunning to escape the Olympians’ vigilance and find her spa.

“**Because I am beautiful**,” the words were the height of arrogance, but as Circe spoke, it was if the sun and the rest of the world listened and poured more beauty into her immortal essence.

Medea kept her eyebrows raised in amusement.

“**And because I have taken great care to not be officially seen as an enemy of Olympus**,” the daughter of Helios admitted after a few seconds. “**The Romans attacked my island unprovoked; I was only defending myself. And of course the ancient weapons are a purely defensive measure. We are living in dangerous times**.”

“I love how you are able to say so many blatant untruths with a calm and reasonable voice, my Aunt.”

“**Thank you, my favourite Niece**.” Circe’s eyes became mischievous. “**Tell the Triumvirate they’d better win, this time. I can seduce my way out of trouble, but I have so many better things to do**...”

“I will relay the message, I promise.”

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

The funerals, all told, were done very respectfully. The coffins had been sealed once it had been clear the few body parts they had found were the sums of all that remained of Kalinda, Eudoxia, Phoebe, and Douglas Smith. Gold Drachmas had also been placed in them before they were closed forever. Beautiful funeral shrouds had been commissioned and arrived in record time, before being placed on the coffins.

A few minutes later, the enormous interior lake of the volcano had a great new barge on it, and the coffins went away, much like the souls of the fallen would have at one point to be taken aboard Charon’s ferry.

Jackson gave the order, and the barge was set on fire, with Leo Valdez being the one to provide the flames.

The blaze was powerful and burned for long minutes while they all watched in silence. Once the barge was reduced to ashes and the last of the flames were extinguished by the water, the ranks of the Suicide Squad dispersed.

Annabeth gave one more glance to the God-Beast filling a large area of the Docks. Even after watching it for so many hours, the daughter of Athena was still in disbelief Jackson had been able to kill such a huge monster.

And speaking of the son of Poseidon...Annabeth turned around and went on to finally obtain the answers to the many questions boiling in her head.

It was not hard to catch up; Lou Ellen had forced their leader to sit upon the ruin of what must have been a Viking ship’s prow.

“You tore a priceless artefact from the essence of the Ice Drakon when you won,” the grey-eyed Demigoddess didn’t waste time dancing around the subject. “How did you know?”

“Hello, to you, your Owlishness!” the mad Demigod replied brightly. “You are not busy trying to woo a certain son of Hermes on this fine day?”

Fortunately, right as she was blushing, the daughter of Hecate whispered something in the ear of the son of Poseidon...and the green-eyed Drakon-slayer moaned theatrically.

“Fine, fine, I will behave.”

Obviously, no reasonable Demigoddess or Demigod would take that assertion seriously.

“My question, Jackson.”

“For all their attempts to rewrite the history of the Titanomachy, the Olympians were not very successful. There were many witnesses, and some of them still breathe today. Furthermore, the Titans were not shy in sharing their version of events. If you dig outside of the existing paths, you’re beginning to find out secrets they don’t want you to know. Like what happened to the Titaness of Drakons.”

“Jackson...there is no Titaness of Drakons.”

“There was a Titaness of Drakons,” the black-haired leader of the Suicide Squad corrected with a satisfied grin. “Today? There is no one in charge. Olympus made sure of it.”

“Why would they do that?” She asked bewildered.

“Because for all the fact many Titans remained neutral – the Titaness of Sea and Oceans is a prime example – the Titanomachy was a far closer affair than many believe. The Titans who were the Scythe’s main Generals were punished proportionally. The more dangerous they were to the Olympians’ rule, the more severe the punishment in the end. When the judgements fell, it was decided the Titaness of Drakons was way too dangerous to be imprisoned like many others were. She had to be *shattered* first.”

“That sounds...exceedingly cruel.” Annabeth couldn’t help but remark.

“It was.” Perseus didn’t even joke about it; so yes, it was *that* bad. “Memories, identity, and everything that made up the personality of the Titaness were allowed to remain in a form that barely qualifies as a lesser Goddess, but the raw power? That was completely denied to her.”

“Then why did Olympus miss the chance to elevate someone to the Throne of Drakons?” Lou Ellen asked. “Don’t tell me the Council didn’t want such power, I wouldn’t believe it.”

“Oh, if Drakons had been winged creatures and had any connection to Air and the Sky, I’ve no doubt the power would have been claimed.” Perseus answered tranquilly. “But as it was, you needed someone with Drakonic qualities. It isn’t enough to want a Throne, you have to be synchronised with it. You have to love the idea of transforming yourself into a gigantic Drakon. You have to experience the desire to rule the Drakons. You have to want all skills and abilities that are associated with the Drakons. And though no one came to reveal it out loud, I have a feeling that at the end of the Titanomachy, there was no one among the Twelve who was a good fit. Paranoia made sure lesser Gods and Goddesses weren’t considered. And as a result, three Drakons which had betrayed their Mistress were given each a part of her titanic essence, thus allowing them to become God-Beasts in their own right.”

“Fimbulvetr received the Heart and the Ice dominion.”

“Yes.”

“So he was the most redoubtable of the three ‘Ancestral Drakons’.”

Perseus laughed, and for once, the sound was not mocking, but of genuine happiness.

“Incorrect, Annabeth. He was the least powerful of the three, and likely at this hour the only one I had a real chance to beat.”

That wasn’t exactly reassuring; the son of Poseidon had almost died, and to win, he had required the help of Khione.

“And what about-“

“You shouldn’t speak of these subjects, *male*.”

Annabeth scowled. The Huntresses had arrived.

Well, if one wanted to be accurate, the *surviving* Huntresses had arrived. Where there had been nine, now only four remained, as Jade wanted to do nothing with them anymore, and the others had reciprocated.

“I speak of what I want, when I want,” the son of Poseidon’s reply was as undiplomatic as it could possibly without voicing insults. “Kindly remember that your performance so far is so abysmal I have little reason to listen to your suggestions.”

The Huntress named Kimiko tried to glare at him...unfortunately with her long blue tongue unable to stay in her mouth, that was hard. And the uncontrollable blue scaly tail behind her did not help either.

Oh yeah, it had taken several hours after the battle, but not donning the X-Suits had been revealed as the folly it was. Kimiko had been cursed with a long tongue and a tail, as mentioned previously, and the other Huntress with her, Alexia, had now small horns growing upon her head, and she had to remove her boots, as her feet were replaced by red scaly talons.

“You might have gotten away with it for the moment, but remember, male, that Lady Artemis will wait for you at the end of the Great Quest.”

“Kindly remember, *Huntress*, that you began this Quest with nine members, and now you have been reduced to four, and we have yet to face the serious challenges,” Annabeth wanted to believe the last part was a joke, except there wasn’t a sign Perseus was ready to laugh or signal his hilarity. “If you don’t want this number to approach zero at the next island we will visit, I must advise you to listen to my warnings and obey my commands.”

“And if we don’t?”

“I will be magnanimous.” The son of Poseidon shrugged as if it didn’t concern him. “I will pay for more funerals.”

“Our Goddess will avenge us.”

“You will still be dead.” Lou Ellen remarked, her hand upon Perseus’ left shoulder. “Is there anything else to discuss?”

“We want the betrayer out of this Great Quest.”

“Out of the question,” their leader immediately replied. “Unlike you, Jade,” two out of four Huntresses reddened in anger when hearing the name, “has proven she could be salvaged from your Cult. Moreover, her allegiance gave Khione the possibility to intervene legally on the battlefield. I’m far more tempted to get rid of the four of you, to be honest.”

“You do that, and you will pay for it with your death.”

Perseus...yawned. Yeah, that was how impressed he was...

“I have already received many death threats, some of them coming from Goldie the Blonde, the newest addition to my Penguin Infantry Squad. And yeah, I have commercialised the name.”

Four Huntresses seethed in anger...and quickly realised that no matter how hard they glared, their ability to threaten an insane son of Poseidon was non-existent.

“We want you to remove our curses.” Alexia told him in an imperious tone.

“I can’t. Why look so surprised? I warned you that there were things that are beyond me.”

“You can’t, or you won’t?”

Perseus Jackson rolled his eyes.

“I can’t, I swear it on the Styx.” The Hell Sea rumbled in the distance, but nothing happened after it; the Drakon-slayer was not swallowed by a pit of darkness.

“Now that we have discussed in all humility what I can and can’t do,” Perseus declared with one of his famous grins, “it seems our new friends are arriving!”

Annabeth blinked, before realising the Sea Gates were still open after they had used it to let the *Inevitable Doom* get inside...and there were many dorsal fins of sharks.

The daughter of Athena almost opened her mouth to ask him what the hell he thought he was doing by inviting sharks into a place where they couldn’t even inspect, never mind work...until the ‘sharks’ jumped out of the water, and reveal they could stand in a bipedal manner.

“Telekhines!” a Huntress barked. “You have made a bargain with Telekhines? We have orders from Lady Artemis to shoot them on sight!”

“Fortunately,” Perseus smiled, before slamming his feet on the ground...something that shook the very earth, “those are not Telekhines, those are bipedal Sharks of the Great and Honourable Family.”

“These are Telekhines!” Kimiko snarled, her blue tongue twisting and going out of control.

“We are Telekhines.” The leading monster, an enormous shark-shaped being which bared his teeth in an expression that had nothing very reassuring.

“My ears have suddenly stopped functioning!” Perseus suddenly declared, earning himself a slap from the daughter of Hecate. “What? As long as I am unaware of the presence of Telekhines on this island, I can order them to restore the island defences and to produce many long-range missiles and very dangerous ordnance.”

“You say the nicest things, son of Poseidon.” The fanged smile grew even wider.

“My sorceress lieutenants have begun to purify the Forge and remove all the most obvious Curses, but be careful, we are finding hundreds of new ones with each hour.”

“We are going to check first the areas which have been cleansed of the Drakon’s curses. Do you want-“

“THESE ARE TELEKHINES! KILL THEM!”

Perseus sighed and gave a nod to Lou Ellen.

One instant later, a spell struck the four Huntresses, and sent them to create nice splashes into the gigantic ‘lake’.

“Tell Clarisse I have need of her services. Something about breaking the stubbornness of a few Huntresses.” Perseus shook his head. “Frankie? If they escape our vigilance in the next days, try to not eat them. I will decide their punishment in person.”

“You’re the boss,” the Telekhine amicably replied...before adding under his breath that Huntresses, according to the ‘Don’, tasted awfully when you tried to digest them.

**7 December 2006, Helfrost Crater, the Underworld**

The shades which had first seen it had called it the Egg’s Crater at first. It wasn’t very imaginative, but there was an egg...and there was a crater. It was fitting.

As the frost began to spread, however, the name ‘Helfrost Crater’ had begun to be whispered, before it was repeated by the endless multitude of souls he ruled over.

The dead spoke about it, but they were doing their best to stay far away from it now. Khione was sleeping inside the Egg that changing her, but the Drakons of the Underworld were attracted to her presence nonetheless.

With every heartbeat, the colossal reptiles looked more and more like they were truly alive, as long as you saw them from a large distance away. They were changing, much like their new mistress did. Once ago, they had been born of Ice and Frost; now they were accepting Death inside their essences.

The crater, as a result, was ferociously guarded, though all Drakons remained at the edge of the crater, unwilling to descend into it. For all their instincts pushing them to do so, their new Goddess had yet to be born, and as long as the links weren’t forged, they would do nothing but guard.

This didn’t mean the Egg was alone. Hades gave an amused glance to the former Huntress who stood guard near the black scales imprisoning and transforming the Goddess of Snow.

One had sworn herself while alive; one had sworn herself while dead.

Both were changing, as their Mistress dreamed and was altered by the Drakonic essence.

Already the arms of the Huntresses were covered in black and white scales, and her eyes were shining an eyrie blue.

The Lord of the Underworld placed his hand upon the Egg one more time, and his suspicions were more than confirmed. Perseus Jackson had done an excellent work...and executed competently what Hades had commanded him to do.

Leaving a part of himself to keep monitoring the Helfrost Crater, the eldest God of the Olympians turned around, admiring the snow-covered landscape. Hell had truly frozen over...it was going to be interesting how the mortals would perceive it in their dreams.

Hades walked away, and the moment he was past the Drakonic guards, Megaera joined him.

“Is it wise, my Lord, to leave her alone here?” the blue-clad Erinye asked. “She was a Huntress when she was living...”

“**Wise? Perhaps not**.” Hades admitted. “**But Judith’s allegiance is genuine. She will serve Khione in death, much like her sister-by-choice Jade will serve in life for as long as she can**.”

The latter was not going to have an easy life, beginning with the Great Quest. Khione had made the girl stronger and given her skills she would have been only able to dream about when a Huntress of Artemis, but that may not be enough to fend off the attackers.

One thing to remember about the Olympians and several other parties was that they were incredibly petty. They couldn’t strike back against Khione; therefore they would try their best to inflict some minable vengeances against her servants.

“Well, if she is loyal...” Megaera cleared her throat. “I suppose there won’t be too many problems. “The changes have accelerated after she began to mount guard.”

“**That is because Khione is becoming part of my realm, not because of anything the girl did**.” Hades explained slowly.

“Lord? By the Ancient Laws, she will have only to spend one month here with you.”

“**The Laws can say all they want**,” the Lord of Hell replied with some sarcasm in his voice, “**the important part is the heart of the Goddesses**.”

“Err...I see?”

No, Megaera didn’t, but he wasn’t surprised; nothing of the likes had ever happened in his Domain. This was a true novelty...and it was really pleasant. The Underworld was changing, and with it, Hades could change and order things that would have been unthinkable a decade ago.

“**Speak, Megaera, I can clearly seen you have a question on your tongue you are impatient to voice**.”

“How long it will take for the transformation to be complete, my Lord?”

“**That is an interesting question**.” Hades admitted with a smile. “**You see, there is a secret that only two souls were aware of before the Battle of the Forge of All Perils began. The Pomegranate Seeds Perseus Jackson had in his possession were not only prepared to obtain react suitably with Drakonic blood; these Seeds were also magically synchronised with each other**.”

The blue-clad Erinye had enough knowledge and intelligence to gain a full understanding of the situation with that revelation.

“So the transformation is slowing down to make sure the second Pomegranate Seed will complete its own purpose.” Megaera said slowly. “I...I think I know what you are trying to do, my Lord. But are you sure *She* is going to react as you want her to?”

“**In my humble opinion**,” Hades gave a splendid smile, “**when all things have failed, a wise God must rely upon this powerful emotion known as jealousy to reveal the true feelings of a Goddess**.”

One of his jewels on his right armband flashed three times in black light.

“**Ah...right on time**.”

**7 December 2006, Grand Strategium, Forge of All Perils**

The moment she received the ‘magical invitation’, Persephone used it.

The Goddess of Spring was beyond angry...she had an urge to murder a certain Demigod.

The temperature when she appeared into the room where the circle for divine visitors had been installed did not improve her mood.

It was hot. Persephone did not know which purpose this room was supposed to serve, but there was enough water and warmth for the location to be used both as a Jacuzzi and a first-rate Sauna.

This enraged her further. Evidently, this opportunist demon had made preparations for everything, including his own accommodations...but done little to fulfil her own desires.

Persephone conjured a spear of obsidian and pointed it at the bare chest of the son of Poseidon.

“**Why shouldn’t I kill you here and now, Perseus Jackson**?” the daughter of Demeter snarled.

“Well, first because you may not have the strength to fight two sorceresses as powerful as the ones present in this room?”

Two? But the blonde daughter of Hecate was the only-

SPLASH!

Persephone didn’t have the time to parry that her spear was flying. As for herself, she was thrown into one of the large pools that seemed to be everywhere. And the Goddess could verify firsthand that yes, the water was of adequate warmth.

Unfortunately, it also led to realise that the one who had struck her was the daughter of her ex-husband.

“Do you really think we were going to leave him unguarded?” The black-haired sorceress snorted. “He’s mad, but we still need him.”

“Your dedication to protect my humble life is noted,” the son of Poseidon added as Persephone jumped out of the water while dismissing her current clothes for light black armour that would be impervious to any liquid.

“**I am in no mood for your jokes, mortal. Given how exhausted you are, it is not going to be a challenge to incinerate you**.”

To her displeasure, the Earthshaker’s son sighed.

“I warned you: this isn’t the story where you can stay on the sidelines and not commit until victory is in sight.”

“I participated! Without me, you wouldn’t have obtained the Pomegranate Seeds!”

The green eyes looked at her in serious disapproval.

“They were more useful than you could possibly believe, my Lady. But selling something that you would have sold to anyone for the right amount of Drachmas is not sufficient. I could walk into any shop and sell a few artefacts for the right price. Does it mean I want to marry or divorce the person I sell the goods to? No, it doesn’t.”

Persephone fought the urge that told her to use her power and transform the flesh of this insolent Demigod into a ruin no one would be able to heal. But as the mortal had told her, there were two sorceresses here...and though she could fight them, it would not change anything when it came to her problems.

“**In that case, does coming here counts as an insufficient gesture**?” She asked bitterly. “**New laws have been passed. We are forbidden to help you or to advise you in any way. I am already breaking the edicts of Olympus just by coming here. Is that what you wanted**?”

“Yes,” for once, the voice was deadly serious. “Months ago, you were speaking the words, but without believing them. Now you are truly committed.”

Yes...yes she was.

“**And now you are going to tell me I am too late. That the other Ancestral Drakons are missing, and the only part of the plan that could be done is the one you fought with the Goddess of Snow**.”

“No. You aren’t late. The Magma Drakon would have been a nightmare to challenge anyway, one I doubt that I would have emerged victorious, given how strong Fimbulvetr was.”

The Goddess of Spring barked in laughter.

“**The legendary Perseus Jackson admits he can’t beat something? Now I have heard everything**...”

“Think of an Ancestral Drakon at least the size of Fimbulvetr,” the Demigod continued in a calm voice, “though this one doesn’t radiate cold like an infernal fridge, but the kind of temperatures of a volcanic caldera. I must add that we wouldn’t have any protective suits to do the job, as the X-Suits of our benefactor are for sub-zero temperatures only. This would leave us extremely vulnerable to Drakonic curses and a lot of problems like dehydration. Then consider that the body of the Ancestral Drakon is partially made of magma, and his breath is certainly radioactive. Each wound made in its cuirass would pour onto our heads something extremely similar to a cascade of Greek fire. I won’t mention that the battleground will likely be an active volcano, or that napalm-spitting parasites may need to be fought before we get to the big bad Drakon. Last but not least, the magma powers are a perfect counter to most of my abilities, including Hydrokinesis.”

For the first time, Persephone had to let the Demigods see her shame.

“**Err...I apologise**.”

“Apologies accepted.”

“**Then by the time you will have a new plan, it will be too late**.” He might choose *her* instead of me, she didn’t voice out loud.

The son of Poseidon sighed, making her realise for the first time how much he had aged lately...and how exhausted he was.

“It is not too late, Lady Persephone. I am not making plans that are easily destroyed at the first obstacle or the first mysterious enemy deciding to screw with them. Moreover, the Lord of Hell, your former husband, could, if he really wanted, let a certain divine transition proceed extremely fast, and there would be nothing I or you could do.”

“Still,” the blonde daughter of Hecate said, “I presume time is a precious resource right now.”

“It is.” Perseus Jackson approve while shaking his head. “As soon as the island is fortified enough that the Triumvirate will have no hope to storm it without enduring murderous casualties, we are going to sail for the island where you, Lady Persephone, will have to fight the battle where you will have to reconquer the throne you abandoned.”

The Goddess of Spring snorted, and she wasn’t the only one.

“**Just like that**.”

“Just like that.” The leader of the Great Quest gave her an expression that dared her to rise to the challenge, making sure the flames of her wrath burned again. “There will be one Goddess and one Champion fighting an apocalyptic battle. It will decide if Hell will see the return of its Queen...or if we will get the coronation of a new one.”

She gritted her teeth...before one point forced her to leash her rage.

“**Assuming we are speaking of a battle to occur days away from today, you won’t have recovered enough to fight this battle**.”

“I won’t.” The son of Poseidon confirmed. “That said...is it your greatest desire to have me as your Champion, my Lady?”

“**No**.” The daughter of Demeter honestly replied.

“That said, I’m sure Bianca di Angelo here will be a perfect Champion-“

“I would prefer death!”

“**Out of the question**!”

Persephone was a bit bemused that the Lightning Thief had replied before her. But at least, it was satisfying: no way would this usurper be tied to her immortality. The former Queen of Hell was willing to ignore her, but not have her in a position of power anywhere near the Underworld.

“In that case, you will have to make a choice between all the Demigods and Demigoddesses of the Suicide Squad, save one or two exceptions.” The green-eyed boy turned his head towards his blonde-haired sorceress. “For reasons that will become clear later, Lou Ellen here is not an option, I’m afraid.”

“**There is one big problem remaining**.” Persephone warned him. “**You might be confident your preparations have managed to fool Olympus, but once I arrive to fight my battle, the Council is not going to stay idle. They will intervene**.”

“No, they won’t.” Perseus retorted with iron-clad certainty.

“**His pride is on the line, and I, one of his daughters will have made clear I care nothing for his will**. **He will act**.”

Some part of Persephone still didn’t believe she was ready to take these steps.

But the other part of her, the one which burned with divine jealousy, was ready.

And really, what was waiting for Olympus? It had been made clear after a few days that past the first carnal pleasures and the sessions of shopping, the Olympians did not want to tolerate her for more than a few months of the year, especially when she had not millions of Drachmas to spend on her new clothing collections.

“He won’t,” Perseus repeated. “For the island I am going to sail for is the one where I have been able to locate the legendary Golden Fleece.”

Persephone was opening her mouth to tell him not to be ridiculous...before closing it immediately. Yes, that was something that would stop Zeus from using his Master Bolt or choosing to unleash some extreme measures.

If he did, he would break the very purpose of the Great Quest he had himself ordered, and well...there would be many, many Gods, Goddesses and Titans that would not like that at all. To make it worse, the Golden Fleece would be missing, and it would likely be the end of all resurrection attempts for his late mortal daughter, her latest half-sister.

“**It is still a massive risk**.” Persephone declared before being forced to admit the bitter truth. “**And I won’t be able to help you much before the true fight begins. Unlike the Goddess of Snow, I doubt my domain or my skills really apply to this island**.”

“Lady Persephone, I did not call my group the Suicide Squad because it was going to be an easy adventure!”

The daughter of Hecate gave him a light slap on the cheek to remind him of his own mortality.

Maybe this Demigod should have been raised by Amphitrite, he couldn’t have possibly turned crazier, of that Persephone was certain!

**7 December 2006, the Tri-Palace, Atlantis**

Amphitrite had been playing of her harpanorgan for a good hour when her husband arrived.

It was certainly the melody who had pushed him to return faster. One of the Atlantean most beloved musical instruments, the harpanorgan played the song of the seas and life itself. It was such a powerful music that alas the mortals often thought it was the voice of Sirens overwhelming their senses, with alas the same fatal effects.

Amphitrite continued to play, caressing the keys and the chords as if she was alone in her quarters.

It took quite a bit of concentration when his hand went to massage her naked back. The silver robe had chosen today left very little to modesty, and it seemed that it had the effect she wanted.

“**Triston is worried**,” her husband murmured when it became obvious that she wasn’t going to stop playing unless he began to ravish her here and there. “**You never had a male favourite among my children before**.”

“**Your sons never gave me any reasons to like them before Perseus was born, my Lord**,” the Queen of the Seas replied as she began a new music singing of the melancholy of the Nymphs watching the Trojan War. “**But there are favourites and then are Heirs. Triton remains my son and your Heir. Perseus will never replace him**.”

“**It would be better**,” Poseidon removed his hands from her skin, “**if you say these words in person. You are his mother**.”

“**How kind of you to remind me that little detail, my Lord**.”

At least her husband had the good sense to wince.

“**I know I have not been the best of fathers**.” The admission cost him. “**And I know we have grown estranged as a consequence of my actions. But I can’t change the past**.”

“**You can’t**,” Amphitrite continued moving her fingers upon the harpanorgan. “**However you could properly support your children. Rhode is making her moves as we’re speaking**.”

Poseidon winced again.

“**Do you have any idea how tiring and deafening the rant of my brother was? He accused me in person of going behind his back and giving asylum to the Telekhines. I would have liked a little bit of a warning**.”

“**Rhode chose to reveal to me the relevant details only a few days ago. Would it have changed anything**?”

“**Probably not**,” there was some grumble, but as always, the pragmatism ran out. Poseidon knew there were things he wouldn’t be part of. He wasn’t a conspirator, and for many deeds, the need to keep Olympus in the dark was paramount.

“**Rhode can’t be my successor**.”

“**Rhode can’t be your successor**,” Amphitrite repeated, making him blink in surprise. “**What? You think I am blind to her flaws? If we gave her the crown right now, my dear daughter would spend most of a year changing the laws, not because they are wrong, but because you promulgated them. Rhode is the Light of the Sea, but she is also filled with spite at the moment**.”

“**I will freely admit I am reassured, yes**.”

“**Unfortunately, all our children are unsuitable to one degree or another. Triton...let’s not talk about him, we have debated his issues long enough. Rhode is not powerful enough, even if Perseus give her back her former servants and many Forges. As for Kymopoleia, she definitely has the power, but she would terrify Olympus if we put her in charge**.”

“**And I wouldn’t blame them...**” Poseidon whispered.

Amphitrite played the songs of loss and mourning that were so many times returning to haunt her heart, and as always, music helped to push the pain away.

“**I notice you didn’t mention the flaws of my son**.”

Amphitrite giggled.

“**Do you really need to ask? He has inherited all of the madness of the seas, in addition to what he had already had in his soul at birth. He could be a superb ruler if he wanted to. But in this vast realm we rule over, from the surface to the abyss, Perseus would get bored far too easily. And once your son will realise he is bored, he will take steps to remedy to that boredom. I have no desire to see Atlantis burn so he can get his quota of amusement, Lord Husband**.”

“**Since I am a responsible God, I can only support this**.” Poseidon paused. “**I note you only said it disqualifies him from the succession of Atlantis**.”

“**Well, if he ever gets immortality and a throne on Olympus**,” Amphitrite remarked, “**boredom is not something that will threaten him. Your brothers’ bastards are always one step away from civil war, whether it is be their own negligence or some centuries-old feuds they let fester. On the other hand, we will have to make sure he is surrounded by many Goddesses that can keep him in check. Your brother is enough of a walking disaster, I am not going to let a potential replacement do a more catastrophic job than him**.”

The music she played was more determined from thereon was joyful...joyful and martial.

“**I will make sure nothing happen to your son until he is fully recovered**.”

“**The Titaness**-“

Amphitrite raised an eyebrow.

“**As you wish**.”

Amphitrite smiled...and then she finished playing her last song.

The Queen of Atlantis abandoned her crystalline coral stool, and unclasped the two strings on her shoulders that made sure her silver dress espoused her body like it was silk.

“**Now it is time to fulfil another of your husbandly duties, my Lord**.”

As always when this invitation was given, Amphitrite had not the need to add one more word.

**9 December 2006, approaches of the Forge of All Perils, Sea of Monsters**

Their orders, coming straight from the mouths of their masters, had been to storm the Forge of All Perils, put to the sword its defenders, and capture the vast industrial and metallurgic installations intact. For the glory of the Triumvirate, and all of that.

If you ignored the promises of loot and untold riches waited for you, it wasn’t difficult to notice that most of the ‘assault squadron’ had included very few Triumvirate Legionnaires, and no modern ships whatsoever. Yes, it was a respectable naval force, but the galleons and the ironclads were not exactly what anyone would want to eliminate a fortified enemy.

Since he wasn’t a complete imbecile, Edward thought he had a good idea of what Cleopatra’s real plan was: assemble a maximum of expendable warships, and throw it against the defences of the Demigods who had vanquished an Ancient Dragon and its progeny.

If it worked, then the Triumvirate would have won once again a victory, and likely bled the forces of the enslaved pirates participating in this dangerous operation. If it failed, the Egyptian Queen would have lost nothing important...from her point of view.

“The good news, as far as we can tell, is that they have only a single missile-launching battery firing at us.” The Master of the *Queen Anne’s Revenge* said with a grimace.

BOOM!

A second later after he had spoken the words, one of the galleons that were part of the assault squadron received a missile. And as usual, the initial explosion set a lot of things aflame...and some of them were too close to the gunpowder stores or other unstable ammunition.

Fate was good; the galleon was not in cannon’s range, and there was a ‘wooden shield’ of three other ships, one of them an ironclad, between his warship and the doomed hull.

The explosion was thunderous, and as a veteran, he felt very proud to have prepared enough earmuffs for everyone. Because this kind of noise? You could really become deaf if you listened to it without anything to protect your ears.

Unfortunately, that left the fire. Edward didn’t know what kind of ammunition had been used, but as sure as his pirate name was Blackbeard, the galleon was destroyed like it had been on the receiving end of Zeus’ wrath.

What had been a galleon was now a fireship, literally.

It was a horrible spectacle. As there had been no warning, the sailors working in the masts had been turned into living torches, and the few which weren’t had now to choose between jumping into the Sea of Monsters and burning to death.

“Captain, the Ironclad *Sweet is the Plunder* is trying to plunge to escape the missiles!”

“That’s against our orders...and a very bad idea.”

Edward Teach would have preferred to being proved wrong, but in the first seconds the Ironclads tried to use its submersible capabilities, the magnitude of his fellow captain’s error was revealed for all to see.

In mere seconds, enormous shapes attacked the ironclad underwater, and everyone among Blackbeard’s crew could see the waters take a bloody colour...at the same time hundreds of men were devoured by shark-like monsters.

“Telekhines,” the legendary pirate growled, “of course it had to be Telekhines.”

These carnivorous beasts had the cunning and the viciousness to forge the worst weapons imaginable, and the lack of morals to sell them to anyone willing to pay an adequate price for them.

“What are they doing there?”

“I imagine the Demigods who defeated the Drakon hired them to teach us a lesson.” Two explosions in the next minute answered the evident question if the Telekhines had thought preparing an underwater minefield would be funny. Yes, yes they had thought about this basic tactic.

“Isn’t negotiating with these monsters a capital crime, or something like that?”

Blackbeard shrugged.

“Some people love breaking the rules, and according to what we have learned, the son of Poseidon leading this Quest is crazy even by our impressive pirate standards.”

Galleons continued to die. Galleys blew up or went down in flames.

And of course, every time a warship was so damaged it was beginning to sink to the bottom of the Sea, the Telekhines were there. They waited until the sailors were fighting not to drown, for the critical moment where a pirate had to remove his armour and abandon most of his weapons in order to swim...and then there were moving for the kill.

One more Ironclad was destroyed. A galley in perdition changed brutally course and rammed a galleon.

Two more missiles killed hundreds of sailors and terrified thousands of others.

The approaches of the volcanic Forge were now a spectacle of ruin and destruction.

“Captain, this battle is lost!”

“I know. But we haven’t the order to retreat.”

The gesture towards the golden collar around his neck was all that needed to be said.

Yes, they were now over thirty ships destroyed out of one hundred, and there were still had a great distance to sail before anyone would risk a landing.

Some turrets had hurled projectiles at the enemy, but they were terribly lacking in accuracy, and if everyone could hit the mountain in the distance...well, it was a big mountain. It wasn’t with a few dozen shells and some missiles they were going to do serious damage.

“What good will come from this disaster? We have confirmed some defences are operational! And we won’t be able to storm the Gates of this damned Forge with the losses we endured!”

“The ones who gave the order may have a different opinion than you. Maybe they want to force our enemies to reveal more of the batteries and stratagems they keep secret in the depths of this volcanic Forge. Or maybe we’re merely the first assault of many, and this wave is to make sure the Telekhines exhaust all the ammunition they transported in a hurry here.”

One thing was sure, hundreds of pirates were dying, and many black flags were burning for a battle that couldn’t be won anymore.

The Sea of Monsters had turned red, and the monsters were feasting. Not just the Telekhines; Blackbeard had noticed a young kraken approaching a sinking galleon. It had been attracted by all the underwater ruckus, and now it was coming to play its role in the butchery.

“**DISPERSE**!”

Obviously, a Lord of Pirates was above certain things like showing his relief and laughing at something that could be rightly considered cowardice.

Most of his men shouted their relief nonetheless.

The order had resonated like the whip of a slaver, and in many ways, the description was all too accurate.

But for once, Blackbeard didn’t care.

“**WITHDRAW IN GOOD ORDER**.” Cleopatra’s voice rang, imperious and deadly. “**RETURN TO THE ISLAND WHERE THE MUSTER TOOK PLACE. YOU WILL RECEIVE NEW ORDERS HERE**.”

Fate had not forgotten him, it appeared...though it wouldn’t do to scream victory too fast. It was going to take some time to escape to a safe distance where the Forge’s batteries could not slaughter them in all impunity.

“You heard the order. Change tack immediately, and without colliding with another ship, if you please! My former command stands, do not, under circumstances, use the submersion mode! Return the ammunition to its storage compartment!”

Blackbeard gave a last glance to the volcano before turning away and barking more orders. Today had been a significant defeat, but he was still alive. There would be other battles...and opportunities to escape the slavery the witch had condemned them to.

“They are insane, these Demigods, Captain. Bargaining with Telekhines...”

“Come on, Lafitte, it is not madness if it works! Unlike the Legionnaires we captured, these one really mean business!” Blackbeard laughed. “They have understood the first and only rule of piracy...the victor will be the only one standing at the end of this war!”

**10 December 2006, Solar Ark *Spear of the Gods*, hundreds of metres above an uninhabited island of the Sea of Monsters**

Just for the view alone, the sheer amount of money and resources devoted to the *Spear of the Gods* had been worth it.

The Solar Ark was in a stationary position at a very low altitude, far from reaching its technological limits.

Yet just by watching the Sea of Monsters like this, one could truly enjoy a spectacle which millennia ago had been reserved to the Gods and their most devoted servants.

Cleopatra could enjoy the caress of the wind upon her skin, the warmth of the sun, and the smell of the sea in other locations; but above the *Spear of the Gods*, divinity felt like a birthright.

“You could return under the sheets, you know.”

The Second Triumvirate Caesarea gave her husband a false mocking glare.

“As much as I enjoy the activities we pursue in this bed, there is a mess I must clean up today.”

“I’m sure we could make the pirates wait.”

“We could,” the woman aspiring to become the Goddess Neo Isis replied, “but this latest battle has already forced me to detonate a few dozen slave collars. We lost no one important that way, but the most powerful Captains are getting restless. They didn’t enjoy at all the role we forced them to play.”

“They are slaves,” her husband grinned. “They may dislike being used as missile sponges; it will never stop us from throwing them against our enemies if we decide it is necessary.”

“I agree.” She continued watching the vast and endless mass of waters below their flagship while crossing her arms, “but the reality is, unless you found me a new fleet of Legionnaires we can trust, we need the pirates to scout ahead of our modern squadrons...and thin the ranks of our enemies when it comes to the real battles.”

“Their numbers makes them easy to replace.”

“The situation has a bit changed in that regard in the last months. The rumours have spread how we are keeping so many prestigious pirates obedient. And I’m afraid my gamble to storm the Forge of All Perils before its defences were fully operational has been a disaster. Thirty-seven ships have been lost with all hands.”

At last, her husband abandoned their bed to join her on the observation bridge of the *Spear of the Gods*.

“I am not going to say I am pleased by the losses, but there was a reason why you threw the pirates against this island. We lost nothing important, and we learned a lot about the opposition’s resources.”

“True.” Cleopatra breathed out. “We must remove the ‘Suicide Squad’ from the war as soon as possible. The longer they survive, the harder it will be to crush them militarily. Already they have secured a base and allies that can withstand a major assault of our fleet.”

“Well, I suppose it couldn’t be just blind dumb luck and the incompetence of Caligula who led them to victory during their first Great Quest.”

Her husband took her in his arms, and for many minutes, Cleopatra closed her eyes and enjoyed the present.

“What will be their next move, in your opinion?” Mark Antony asked at last.

“I admit I have not the faintest idea.” The mistress of the Solar Ark admitted. “Days ago, I swore they would have gambled everything on a decisive battle in safe conditions. Apparently, I was completely wrong.”

Not even in her wildest dreams had Cleopatra imagined the son of Poseidon would challenge and kill a monster that everyone in this Zone Mortalis had done his or her best to stay hundreds of nautical miles away from.

The Ancestral Drakon of Ice and Frost had been such a titanic force of nature according to the rumours that no one sane had envisaged to directly challenge him, first-rate Forge to take over as a prize or not.

Except Perseus Jackson had clearly thought otherwise, and unlike the other expeditions which had landed by mistake on the volcanic island, the son of Poseidon had triumphed.

The shockwaves of that victory were, in many ways, just beginning. On the one hand, it was definitely good for their cause, as the Olympians had once again been caught by surprise, for all that the Suicide Squad was fighting under their banners. On the other hand...

“It is quite rare I am forced to fight this kind of foe.” She continued. “Unfortunately, waiting for him to die of old age is not an option here. And the Sea of Monsters is exactly the battlefield that suits his unpredictable tactics.”

“By dispersing enough the fleet, we could intercept this mega-yacht. We only need to get lucky once, in the end.”

“No. We need to get lucky quite a few times. The slaughter of the Drakon and the vermin surrounding it has proved we can’t presume the Legionnaires we send will be able to hold their own, even if they outnumber the Olympian Demigods ten-to-one.”

“I see. Well, this is your fleet. How do you intend to proceed?”

“I am going to retain most of the fleet around the *Spear of the Gods*; this is going to be likely a waste of military assets, but I don’t want Perseus Jackson to try a decapitation strike against our flagship. At the same time, I am going to gather the pirates, corsairs, and other assets that were not committed so far into three massive squadrons.”

“I thought you said the pirates needed to get lucky several times.”

“I don’t intend to rely upon luck,” she sniffed, “in the end, Perseus Jackson can be as unpredictable as he wants, but he has to obey his sailing orders, and we know what they consist of. He has to recover the Golden Fleece; he has to liberate Forge MP-42 and its august prisoner; and he has to storm the island where you keep the Butcher God. Speaking of which?”

“For now, the architects and the workers are keeping up the timetable you gave them.”

“Good.” Her relief would have not been evident for anyone else, but her husband knew her too well.

“While there is some necessary improvisation, we have competent subordinates.” Mark Antony said gently before kissing her on the lips. “The three pirate squadrons?”

“I will make sure they follow orders; one of the modernised Battleships will be enforcing my will for each squadron.”

“They will need anti-Telekhine weapons.”

“They will need a lot of weapons, though I don’t necessarily expect victory; the chief goal here is for the squadron to delay the son of Poseidon long enough so that our fleet can arrive in time and catch the Suicide Squad between the anvil of the pirate squadron and the solar spear of my own fleet.”

“That sounds to me a perfectly reasonable strategy. Of course, I would have said the assault which saw a Drakon be slain was impossible. I suppose we need to reinforce the assets we have on each island?”

“We do...except Forge MP-42. If a Titaness, the Legionnaire garrison we have stationed here, and a considerable army of heavy automatons are not enough to stand against an attack of the Suicide Squad, then nothing will. The island where the Butcher God is prisoner is difficult to access and is more and more defended as we build up its magical defences and heavy fortifications. However that leaves the island where the Golden Fleece is kept.”

“The owner of the Golden Fleece is not exactly a lightweight. In many ways, he will be more difficult to defeat than an Ancient Drakon.”

Cleopatra chuckled, though there wasn’t much happiness behind it.

“I don’t intend to take any risks this time. I want the son of Poseidon out of my war. I underestimated him once by waiting for him next to the Charybdis-Scylla Strait; I won’t make the same mistake again. The guardian of the Golden Fleece will get his reinforcements. And I want you to use your contacts. The Telekhines are working for the ‘heroes of Olympus’; it is time we get our own monsters.”

“I see what monsters you are talking about. It is going to be...expensive...especially to transport them within days to that island.”

“As long as you can rise as a God on the Spring Equinox, I don’t care, my love.”

“And I will do everything to have you by my side as the Goddess of Love on the Autumn Equinox, my love.”

Their lips joined, and finally, they both decided that their duties and obligations could wait for another hour, after all.

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

“**What a repugnant display of fluids**.”

Thethys was not the kind of Titaness who accused immediately the parents because their children were emotionally stunted.

But in that particularly case, Thethys really wanted to teleport on the Forge of All Perils, grab Hera, and ask her what the hell the girl had been thinking when she was raising Hephaestus.

No. No, you couldn’t call that raising a child, whether mortal or divine.

You could call it a disaster-in-the-making. You could describe it as ‘how to screw up when it came to the emotional being of a Child-God’.

Damn it, Hera.

“**Why did you waste your time and mine? Setting aside the evidence you don’t trust the Triumvirate leadership, I fail to see how this unproductive method to spend the daily limited number of hours can be any interest of mine**.”

For him, it may have sounded like a waste of time, but it certainly wasn’t for Thethys.

It had confirmed what she knew for sure: the marriage of Aphrodite and Hephaestus had been a colossal mistake from day one, and there was no real hope of it getting better without entirely changing the personality of Hephaestus. It may very well be beyond the powers of a Titaness like herself, needless to say.

“**I thought you would be interested by the fact one ancient Forge is once again free to fulfil its purposes. And though you are my prisoner, I see no reason to hide from you the deeds of the Questers sent by Olympus to free you...and their consequences**.”

“**But you do not have come to tell me that**.” It was a pity Hephaestus showed so much clarity when mechanics and metallurgy where involved, and so little when the affairs of heart were at stake. “**One more Forge returning to life? It is a single fire, no matter how great it is. And I don’t share my father’s stupid aversion for the Telekhines. Smiths are smiths; we can forge weapons as much as horseshoes**.”

“**You are right. I have come to speak about you if you had heard the title of ‘Sire of Drakons’ before**.”

The black eyes grew thoughtful. Unlike Hera’s other son, Hephaestus was extremely intelligent, woe to any who forget the ugly looks hid a mind of steel.

“**No**,” the God admitted after several seconds of silence. “**The greatest monster to have ever lived is a candidate, of course, but if he was able to bolster the power of Fimbulvetr, he would have already broken his chains**.”

“**Yes. And to answer your question, no, Yellowstone and the surrounding region are perfectly normal at this time of the year**.”

Which was good. Thethys wasn’t fond of the Olympians, but she had no wish to see Typhon ever released from his prison.

“**The Mother of Monsters could be the answer**.”

Ah, yes. Echidna.

“**I have it under good authority she has yet to escape the Pits after her latest defeat**.”

“**Then I have no idea which monster could have claimed the title,”** Hephaestus grumbled. **“You should ask your daughter**.”

Thethys, for the first time in days, allowed her prisoner to see her grimacing.

“**I don’t think it is a good idea**.”

The last time the Sea Titaness had visited her child, the conversation had been extremely unpleasant, and that was describing it in a nice way.

Thankfully, Hephaestus didn’t insist.

“**The two other Ancestral Drakons could provide answers, if you can find them**.”

“**And if we can a way to force them to answer some of our questions**,” Thethys pointed out. “**Fimbulvetr, in theoretically, was capable of speaking the human language. Watching his fight against the Suicide Squad of Perseus Jackson, I didn’t see anything to confirm it. It is entirely possible the Ancestral Drakons have no desire to speak with anyone they consider ‘lesser’...or their ‘Sire’ has removed their ability to speak**.”

But since the Demigoddess who had revealed her betrayal could converse after her transformation, Thethys didn’t see why this mysterious opponent would have bothered with the Drakons.

“**Nasty beasts**,” Hephaestus replied while picking up a hammer and returning to his task of assembling an automaton of bronze colour. “**They are always difficult to expel from a Forge once they are inside. The son of Poseidon did very well killing this one**.”

Did Hephaestus know the Ice Drakon had attacked the Telekhines on the orders of Zeus? Or was he simply letting his disgust of Drakons speaking?

As always, the sheer waste of potential was to be mourned.

Ares...his mother had screwed up here, but at least Thethys was sure his habit to butcher everything he met and to go from battlefield to battlefield and slaughter millions was not something she had taught him.

But Hephaestus held so much promise, and was able to do so many great things despite how he was raised and the obstacles placed in his way...

“**You are really not going to like our next conversation, Hera...”**

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

Hera shivered.

It was strange, because she hadn’t uttered the name of Khione, and her surroundings were anything but cold.

She was going to blame this anomaly on Jackson. Somehow, it had to be his fault.

“Well, what do you think, Antigone?”

The former Goddess scowled. She had thought for a few hours that being exhausted was going to stop the son of Poseidon from using that ridiculous name. As always with this infernal sea spawn, Hera had been completely wrong.

“I think my name is Hera. And that you are completely insane to let the Telekhines change the Forge per their monstrous whims. There are now water slides everywhere!”

“First of all,” the cheeky grin was back, unfortunately, “the whims are mine, though obviously our dear allies didn’t raise an objection.”

“You put half a dozen enormous hot pools in your Grand Strategium!” the former member of the Olympian Council snapped. “A quarter of the Forge of All Perils is a combination of fire and water right now!”

Hera wished she was joking, but it wasn’t the case. The Telekhines had built a massive desalination plant from scratch, making sure there was water both for industrial and leisure purposes.

Even here, high in the Forge, one couldn’t miss the colossal effort to change the Forge into something where fire and water coexisted.

“Only a quarter? Disappointing.” The bastard had the gall to pout! “We will have to do better.”

“The temperatures are unbearable!”

“That’s why I told everyone to go into swimsuits, your fallen divinity.”

“I won’t don these damned atrocities against all fashion sense, Jackson!” These orange abominations were an insult to every swimsuit which had ever existed.

“Well, if you wanted to wear something else, you would have bought brand-new swimsuits yourself!”

“How would I have done that when I have no funds save the allocations you give me? And of course these allocations pay for other things but my clothes?”

But to her fury, Jackson had already turned his head and began to ignore her the moment she asked the first question.

Instead, the Earthshaker’s son began to speak with the former Huntress.

“Is the pain tolerable this morning?”

“It is. I did as you instructed; I am almost certain I had a vision of her, of being trapped inside a cold substance...of the cold and power of the Drakons changing me. And when I woke up...well, see for yourself.”

The X-Suit Jade had donned after the battle against Fimbulvetr withdrew from her arms, revealing that they were entirely covered in black and white scales.

Hera shivered. The idea of a Demigoddess or a mortal changing to suit the whims of a Goddess was not something she had ever seen for herself...and it put her ill-at-ease, because it was reminding her how powerless she was.

That a second later five small claws emerged from the tips of the fingers was not reassuring at all either.

“No pain?”

“None. And the claws are perfectly retractable.”

“The rest?”

The X-Suit changed to become a one-piece swimsuit of dark blue. It was a conservative piece of cloth, by the standards of the Suicide Squad – Perseus Jackson and several boys were going bare-chested, and many girls were in two-pieces swimsuits which revealed most of their bodies.

But that Jade was adopting it of her own volition showed how much the former Huntress had changed mentally.

Of course, the changes weren’t limited to the mind. The arms were covered in scales of black and white, but the legs and the rest of Jade’s body had scales too. She was taller; before the battle, the teenage girl had been roughly as tall as Hera’s; now she was a good head taller. And she had gained a significant musculature too.

Khione was not trying to change her new lieutenant so that she had a copy of Clarisse La Rue in the end. Jade would be far stronger than many officers of the Suicide Squad when her changes would be over, but she would keep a recognisable womanly body.

And the emphasis on the *womanly* was important.

All Huntresses of Artemis looked like teenagers, and Jade had already abandoned that behind. The new lieutenant of Khione was a young woman now. Her face had taken older traits in addition to luscious black hair. She was also the only member of the Suicide Squad to have her skin become paler, not more tanned, after the Telekhines began to pour more heat and water into the Forge of All Perils. And last remarkable detail...her eyes were now a deep blue, the fury of the blizzards contained in human irises.

“The changes are strange when they happen, but I get use to them. The worst part is to learn how to fight again. Most of my talent with a bow is gone.”

“I see.” Jackson nodded as he examined many of her growing scales. If another man had done it, Hera would have thought the boy was a pervert, but for all his flaws, the son of Poseidon was all business when he was examining the results of Khione’s ‘blessings’. “Well, the transition is proceeding well for now. If the pain suddenly becomes too much, come to find me immediately, I have some painkillers which should be useful.”

“I will.”

“I don’t understand,” Hera shook her head, “why her Goddess is giving her so much power. Is it because she wants to insult the Goddess of the Hunt?”

Perseus Jackson smiled.

“I’m not going to say it didn’t play a part. The two Goddesses...are not the best of friends, shall we say?”

Jade snorted.

“They hate each other’s guts, you mean. Not that my Lady is the only one to feel the scorn of the Hunt and the Moon. The Goddess of Love is likely the Olympian they are the most insulting about.”

“Well, if you say no, who I am to naysay it?” the son of Poseidon said lightly. “But there are other reasons when it comes to the differences of how each Goddess empowers her lieutenants. Jade’s former mistress has clearly made the choice of quantity combined with low investment.”

Hera frowned.

“What do you mean?”

“You haven’t checked their numbers recently, I take it.” For once, Perseus was presenting a serious expression. “I was never able to get a precise order of battle, but I am near-certain they are over five thousand Huntresses in active service as we speak. And yes, I think it is part of the reason why she didn’t intervene when you asked for her help against Fimbulvetr. One or two servants dying in battle is a humiliation, but it is something that will be easily compensated for. In fact, even if the nine sent for this Great Quest were all killed, the losses would be negated in a few years, and that’s likely a worst-case scenario.”

“But losing one Huntress to another Goddess is a far bigger blow,” Jade didn’t snarl, but she didn’t like the news Jackson had delivered.

“In terms of power lost, no.” The Demigod replied. “As I said, the investment of the Goddess is minimal in each of you. The loss was titanic only in terms of prestige.”

“Empowering five thousand girls must not be cheap, Jackson,” she tried to find a counter, though not because Artemis deserved it. “This is a Legion in all but name.”

“It isn’t exactly cheap, but remembers the main benefit is immortality. As such, there aren’t really hundreds of Huntresses recruited every year. And the benefit is obvious for the Goddess: she has probably the most experienced military force of Olympus, at least when it comes to the semi-mortal side of the battlefield. It is a very good thing they are trained in hunting groups, not as Legionnaire Cohorts, otherwise all male Demigods would be in extreme danger.”

On that point, Hera had no counter-argument. A Legion of Huntresses, trained both for massive battles and hunting operations in the wild, would be a nightmare to deal with.

“Some girls have a bit more power than others,” Jackson continued, “Phoebe and Zoë Nightshade are good examples of it, or in the former’s case, she *was* a good example of it. But while they were or are senior Huntresses, they aren’t that much imbued with divine power. A lot of their superiority came from their divine parentage, not what the Virgin Goddess gave them in the first place.

“That would certainly explain some things,” Jade said grimly. The former Huntress looked really, really unhappy.

Perseus Jackson shrugged.

“To be fair, I don’t think it began as a true strategy, but as most of the monster-hunting isn’t really dangerous when you have a Goddess watching over you, the equivalent of giving some girls a teacup worth of divine power proved efficient and not worth changing. By contrast, the new Goddess of Ice Drakons clearly thinks her lieutenants have to be powerful. The good old tradition of quality over quantity, if you will.”

Hera wasn’t stupid; the similarities between what Khione had been doing and what Perseus Jackson was pushing for were obvious. Where the Gods had favoured a large Expeditionary Force to the Sea of Monsters, Perseus Jackson had chosen a single ship and a crew of a few dozen Demigods and Demigoddesses.

It had its advantages.

But it also had its weaknesses. In a single battle, they had lost four members of the Suicide Squad, and while a Legion would have shrugged at such insignificant losses, this had been a large percentage of their initial complement.

Hera said it aloud now.

“You may choose quality, but we can’t endure these casualties for long. Otherwise you may be the only one returning to New Byzantium, Jackson.”

“Don’t worry your pretty little head, dear Antigone Barbara.” The fallen Goddess immediately scowled. “There are plans implemented as we speak to make sure our losses are made good.”

This didn’t reassure her; in fact, these words spoken with a smirk made her instantly wary.

“What sort of plans are we speaking about?”

**11 December 2006, Titan Containment Facility Number Five, Sea of Monsters**

Elvis Knight didn’t like being woken up in the middle of the night, especially after having taken the first watch.

But the expression of the Legionnaire who woke up stopped his groan before it happened.

“We have visitors, Centurion.”

Since there wasn’t any sound of fighting, and their musician hadn’t played the music to call them to battle, it meant they weren’t inherently hostile.

“Visitors from New Constantinople?”

The other Demigod grimaced.

“No...you’d better come and speak to them in person.”

Elvis was intrigued, but decided he could wait for a few seconds. He donned his armour and his helmet – this was the Sea of Monsters, and enemies had come from the sea since their arrival here – before leaving his tent.

Two Legionnaires escorted him to the ‘visitor’, under the light of the torches, as the moonlight was completely absent tonight. When he saw them, the stupefaction was total. Because these were monsters. While many dangers had been underestimated or outright ignored, this species had been mentioned in many war councils.

“You are Tele-“

“Shush! Shush!” the enormous bipedal shark-looking monster placed a hand-fin before his maw, “we are dolphins! Nice dolphins! See? We have the right colours!”

This had to be the most stupid thing he’d heard this year, and he had been forced to listen to Eustache’s rants. Of course, these were Telekhines, not dolphins, some paint wouldn’t change anything to that!

But they were here, and they definitely had not come to attack them; otherwise why take the risk to wake them all?

“Speak your piece...*dolphin*. Why are you here?”

“I am Lenny of the Honourable Family. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Centurion Elvis Knight!”

There was something worse about watching the shark grin; it was to realise the Telekhine was far better informed about you than you were about him.

“As for why am here, I have been chosen to be the humble messenger of Perseus Jackson, the Glorious Preserver, First and Only Leader of the Suicide Squad.”

That name...well, everyone had heard of it, unless you were trying to your best to live alone cut off from all communications.

It was relatively good news. Sure, the Suicide Squad had a lot of Greeks and couldn’t boast of incredible numbers, but at least they had survived a Great Quest before, and survived crazy situations that were common in the Sea of Monsters.

“I’m pleased to hear that. When is the Suicide Squad going to arrive to reinforce us?”

The five Telekhines behind the emissary laughed. Even the polite Telekhine seemed to find his words very amusing. Elvis didn’t like that at all.

“My apologies for the misconceptions, Centurion,” it was weird to see a shark apologise...and apparently mean it. “The Preserver wants you to reinforce the Suicide Squad, not the contrary.”

“Ridiculous,” a Legionnaire by his right scoffed. “We must easily have twice the manpower of the Greeks! What drugs did this insolent commander take to be convinced he can command us?”

“Drugs I don’t know,” Lenny countered, “but he has a large ship able to sail under its own power, a considerable armament, the Forge he killed a Drakon to seal the alliance with the Family, and plenty of redoubtable Demigods and Demigoddesses by his side. Oh, and he has the favour of many Goddesses too.”

The eyes of the Telekhine turned towards the wreck of the *Hispania*, and to say ‘Lenny’ was impressed would be a lie.

“By comparison, err...your ship seems to have a small problem, Centurion.”

Some Legionnaires snickered, the traitors.

“I’m aware the *Hispania* is missing its prow, *dolphin*.” Elvis Knight replied, not feeling amused in the least. “You are a messenger. Give me the message of the son of Poseidon.”

“Oh, yes, the message!” a large bag was launched on the beach, and a large scroll was drawn from it. “The Preserver, the mighty Drakon-Slayer, is happy to tell you news of your desperate situation has reached him! As such, he is ready to provide a submarine method of transport – that’s us, by the way – so that you are able to heal your wounded and regain your strength within the mighty natural and metallic defences of the Forge of All Perils!”

The smile, for all its ‘gentleness’, decided to become very shark-like suddenly.

“But obviously, you must officially become part of the Suicide Squad first. I’m afraid this is non-negotiable.”

“I suppose there is more to it about the fifty-two surviving Legionnaires present on this island recognising him as the supreme commander of this expedition.” Elvis Knight said prudently.

“I’m glad you’re so quick to understand. The Preserver told me all was explained in the scroll!”

A scroll which found itself in his hands without warning. Elvis gave a dark glance to the Telekhine, before beginning to read.

It took him three lines to stop.

“He’s not serious!”

“I can tell you...he is.”

“Such terms would make us no better than looters, servants, or whatever role he has in mind for us, and the vows would be enforced by magic, superseding those we swore to New Constantinople!”

“Yes!” Lenny shook his enormous head rapidly. “I am so glad you understand, I was a bit less confident than the Preserver you would arrive at that conclusion so fast.”

Elvis didn’t know if he had to feel honoured or insulted by the comment.

“My Legionnaires won’t accept that. I won’t accept that. I want to speak to the son of Poseidon. Don’t tell me he didn’t give you the authority to negotiate in-“

“Release me, you brutes!”

Hey, he recognised that voice!

More torches were brought about, and the Centurion of the Twelfth Legio widened his eyes as he saw the pirate-mistress of the island, Anne Bonny herself, be dragged across the beach by a couple of Telekhines.

The daughter of Demeter was shouting and screaming, and it wasn’t difficult to find out why: the massive shark-like monsters had captured her with a gigantic magical net, one whose parts shone in a sort of dark miasma.

“Mission accomplished, Lenny. That was really easy. She put up a fight, but the Preserver was right about her capabilities.”

“Err...” Elvis suddenly found himself completely taken aback. “You are aware she can’t leave the island, right? This is part of her curse!”

“Shush!” the Telekhine made a contemptuous move with his fin. “She is not leaving the island of her own volition, she is kidnapped! And to make sure the kidnapping sticks, we used one of our first-class nets! If we had brought Atlantean fighters with us, they would have told you the things are near-unbreakable without divine help!”

Suddenly disinterested from the negotiation, the seemingly-young Telekhine went in the direction of the pirate daughter of Demeter.

“Rejoice, pirate! You have been captured by the Family, under the orders of Perseus Jackson the Preserver! Welcome to the Suicide Squad!”

“Hey! What about us?”

“Sorry,” the Telekhine didn’t seem to be sorry at all, “but the primary mission passes above all, and this pirate being kidnapped is my primary mission. I promise we will find a transport or two for you...as soon as this war is over...you shouldn’t have to wait for long...maybe a couple of years?”

“You forget to mention,” another Telekhine added in a thoughtful pause, “that the Olympians are going to need a new Warden as soon as the sun rises here and they discover our kidnapping. Since they will be in a happy mood, I have absolutely no doubt they will react calmly to this little problem.”

There was no need to be a genius to understand the hidden message behind these sentences. Anne Bonny no longer playing her role, the Gods were going to replace a Warden by fifty-two Wardens. They, Legionnaires of New Constantinople, would be near-immortal...and condemned to guard the prison of the Titan until someone came to relieve them of their curse, one way or another.

Now Elvis Knight knew why the Telekhines hadn’t attacked, and Perseus Jackson had been confident when writing this ultimatum on the scroll of parchment. There had been no need to, not when Anne Bonny was their prisoner.

This was an insult against the First Cohort of the Twelfth Legio as a whole.

It was a clear sign the son of Poseidon was utterly insane, not that they needed really that confirmation, with the evidence the mad Demigod had allied with *Telekhines* of all monsters!

Elvis felt like kicking himself at the very idea of saying the words, but there was no choice. Looking at his Legionnaires, he could see already a dozen of them were ready to do everything to avoid the fate that had been Anne Bonny’s for centuries. Give it a few more seconds, and all his authority would be gone, never to return.

“And should we decide that, by a strange coincidence, we have found out a sudden interest in volunteering to join the Suicide Squad?”

“Why then,” it was really, really disturbing to see a Telekhine smile so gently, “I suppose the Family will do its utmost to provide you a transport to the Sea of Monsters while a repair team works upon the *Hispania* at night.”

**12 December 2006, Hades’ Barracks, New Byzantium, United States of America (de jure)**

For a second, Nico thought the Iris message had a massive problem.

But no, once the image was properly stabilised, the son of Hades could see he wasn’t dreaming; Perseus Jackson was indeed drinking some kind of beverage in a crystal cup while knee-deep in a large pool. Behind him, there was a cascade of lava being funnelled into some enormous pipes and foundry machines. And why was Perseus way too old, given how little time had passed?

“Nico!” the Hellhound next to him barked. “Oh, and hello to you to, Zoë.”

The second bark was more powerful, as if the Underworld-born female was telling him ‘apologies not accepted!’

That was how the son of Poseidon took it too, by the way.

“I know you are unhappy, but there wasn’t simply enough room for you aboard the *Inevitable Doom*.” Perseus continued. “And honestly, with so many Huntresses aboard, you wouldn’t have been safe.”

“WOOF!”

“Yes, Asterius volunteered, but he can stay out of the way when the situation is too tense. You can’t and won’t.”

“WOOF!”

“And I am going to shamelessly bribe you; we are saving you a few delicious Drakon bones to play with.”

“WOOF! WOOF!”

And the Hellhound ran away from the room, certainly to dream upon the fantastic toys and reward waiting for it in the future.

“Now that my favourite Hellhound is gone...how is life at New Byzantium?”

“Oh, you know, your survival has enraged pretty much everyone who bet against your survival,” the son of Hades said cheekily. “About two-thirds of the Romans gambled you weren’t going to survive forty-eight hours once you were in the Sea of Monsters. They are very disappointed.”

“But they paid their debts?”

“Oh, they paid...err...the speed may have something to do with Lord D. insisting he wouldn’t look fondly at the ones which didn’t respect ‘that betting against a Priest of Madness has its consequences’.

“I knew I could count on Lord D.,” the black-haired boy said while placing his crystal glass on the black mosaic making most of the pool’s edge.

“Err...yes.” The more he observed, the more he was sure... “You are really older.” The son of Hades blurted. “It’s not an illusion, the ASN didn’t speak of that...”

“If you learn only one thing from me, beyond how to get beaten at Mythomagic games, of course, learn this, Nico: power always comes with a price.” The leader of the Suicide Squad grimaced. “The Drakon was way more dangerous than I thought, and I was forced to do something ridiculously *heroic*. As a result, I am resting most of the time.”

“Oh.” That was really humbling, there weren’t any Demigods and Demigoddesses that were more powerful than Perseus and his sister. “Bianca is fine?”

“Bianca is more than fine,” Perseus reassured him. “She’s busy cancelling hundreds of curses and opening the vaults of the Forge of All Perils. You should be more worried about those who are trying to keep up with her. Even Castellan, our thief extraordinaire, has not opened as many vaults and cleared as many trophy halls as she did.”

Nico laughed.

“That sounds like her...triumphant upon a pile of treasures and weapons.” The young Demigod smiled. “You sound like you have things well in hand in your new Forge and headquarters. Do you want me to trick more Romans into betting against your survival? I’m afraid the Greek Questers are refusing to gamble anymore...the Hermes kids’ next trick is about a charity organisation called the ‘Kaiju Preservation Society’, by the way.”

“That sounds awesome! But no, no more gambles. It was much more about giving them a lesson of humility than the money by itself. Between the loot of the Forge of All Perils and other plans I have urged my lieutenants to prepare, money won’t be a problem anymore...as far as this Quest is concerned, of course.”

“That’s good to hear.” Nico answered honestly.

“It is, it is. Thus my next request has nothing to do with Drachmas, Denarii, or anything that is associated with any divine currency. I’ve not frequented them assiduously, but I am aware there are several big libraries within this fair city of Demigods.”

“Err...yes,” the son of Hades was taken aback by the change of subject. “You want me to research something?”

“I want you to hire researchers,” the son of Poseidon corrected immediately.

“This is about the rumours spreading about a ‘Sire of Drakons’, isn’t it?”

“Absolutely not.”

Nico blinked; well so much for his best guess...

“That was a good try, don’t worry. But you mustn’t mistake the trees for the forest. And now that I am thinking about it, it will be better if you hire a few librarians in my name. Use the secret purse I gave you. We might as well convince our enemies we are searching via the official and obvious ways.”

“That’s...clever.” Nico cleared his throat. “But now that you told me what I am *not* supposed to look for, what is the thing you want me to discover?”

“Using all the cunning you are capable of, and taking great care to not attract attention, I want you to collect information about the Empty Throne.” Perseus’ deadly serious expression made it clear how important the mission was. “Be careful, and always keep Zoë close.”

“Err...the Empty Throne is well...empty.”

“I know. And yet, for some reason, nobody is worried about what happened to the Great God Pan.”

**12 December 2006, Grand Strategium, Forge of All Perils**

You could say a lot of things about the Telekhines. They were flesh-eating monsters. Their respect for the laws of war was more or less equal to what Perseus believed in, which was to say ‘none at all’.

But you couldn’t accuse them of laziness. For all the fact they had to be fewer than one hundred of them and the Forge of All Perils was beyond gigantic, they had launched themselves into the process of restoring and modernising the immense volcanic headquarters and its gargantuan machines.

And they were working fast. Obviously, it was still going to take years before the Forge of All Perils didn’t look like a worksite, but they had managed to build a missile production line, a proper dock for the *Inevitable Doom*, and moved several weapon launchers which had devastated part of the Triumvirate forces. Sure, the Suicide Squad had provided help, but something told Drew that aside from the Drakonic curses, the Telekhines would have been fine on their own.

The daughter of Aphrodite calmly saluted the shark-like predators mounting guard as she entered the Grand Strategium, and once more rejoice she was in a swimsuit.

Much like a good part of the Forge which was restored day after day, the atmosphere here was one of water and fire.

At first, Drew had thought it was strange, even for Perseus Jackson, which proved how much her standards for proper insanity had changed since she ‘volunteered’ for the First Great Quest.

But after the first couple of days, the worries about being cooked alive had gone missing.

The working conditions in the middle of the water and the fire seemed hellish at first glance, but they were getting stronger. Well, maybe apart from Jade, whose increases in strength had nothing to do with fire, and more to do than she was developing the ability to change into a miniature Drakon.

But otherwise, they were all able to carrying far greater charges than they should, and while at the beginning they shouldn’t have survived in the steamy hell, sweating to death in mere minutes, now they were more or less tolerating it...and the fact they were getting stronger made it even more tolerable.

Drew approached the seat-throne of the Strategium...which was empty, as Perseus was taking a bath in a pool nearby.

“Frankie gave me the message that ten more siege-level batteries are now in service, Perseus.” The daughter of Aphrodite cleared her throat. “One team is busy fortifying them properly, so that they will be able to endure a punishing bombardment without problem. A few workers are now going to focus on the problem of the anti-air guns. There should be a solution proposed in a day or two.”

“Excellent! The joy of having competent subordinates, I suppose.”

Perseus turned towards her...and to her pleasant surprise, for once, he seemed taken aback. He wasn’t looking at her like she was an asset to vivisect...but like a young woman in a black swimsuit.

It didn’t last too long, obviously, his usual smiling expression returned very fast, but it had been there.

Drew gave a questioning look to Lou Ellen...and the daughter of Hecate made a few silent signs which reassured her. ‘You can look, but don’t touch’ was a clear message.

Well, the daughter of Aphrodite was certainly looking. Perseus was now older, and since he had nothing but a swimming short on him, there was nothing that stopped her from admiring his muscled chest. And there were many muscles to admire. Perseus was not Richard Grant, who justified his nickname of ‘mountain of muscles’, but his built was on par with Castellan: built for speed and lethal.

“Out of all officers, you were among the ones who didn’t request personal meetings in the last days.”

“Why would I have?” Drew asked. “Unlike others, I am not going to ask why I wasn’t volunteered for the Drakon fight: I know very well I would have died faster than the Huntresses, thank you very much.”

Her Charmspeak could have dealt with a few dozen Frost Iguanas, but the black-haired Demigoddess wasn’t enough arrogant to convince herself she would have survived a battle against thousands of them.

And even if by a major miracle she survived the first battle, it had been confirmed beyond doubt Fimbulvetr was immune to Charmspeak. That would have been her end, much like Douglas Smith died without achieving anything.

“Nice job removing the worst of the Huntresses, by the way. The survivors are way quieter.”

“Why does everyone assume I am trying to eliminate the servants of the Eternal Virgin?” Perseus complained aloud.

The two Demigoddesses gave him pointed expressions that clearly intimated him to stop the masquerade.

“Alright, maybe that detail was part of my plan,” the son of Poseidon snorted after a couple of seconds. “I have a mission for you.”

“If that’s building a new Jacuzzi for today, I will have to decline. The same applies to slides, pools, saunas, and other water-purposed infrastructure like aqueducts.”

“I’m not speaking about the little missions most of the Suicide Squad is busy with for now.” Perseus left the pool, and took an orange towel thrown by Lou Ellen while marching towards his throne-seat and pressing a few buttons, that, as far as she was aware, were activating the anti-spy devices of the Grand Strategium. The massive doors had closed while she wasn’t paying attention too.

Suddenly, the reason why the Jacuzzi-pools and every part of the Strategium were deserted at this hour became suddenly far more interesting.

“I have received an answer from the Goddess of Spring, former wife of the Rich One. She is willing to be our ally during the next battle...and she has chosen a Champion of all the officers of the Suicide Squad. It’s you.”

“Me?” Drew gaped. “There has to be a mistake. What did I do to annoy this Goddess recently?”

Perseus chuckled, before Lou Ellen slapped him on the arm.

“Well, to begin with, you didn’t trap her in a cage like a certain Lightning Thief we know. And you are a Demigoddess. The Goddess of Spring doesn’t share the Huntresses’ hatred for men, but she was never going to choose a male to be her Champion, now that I wasn’t available. And before you say anything, choosing me wasn’t a vote of confidence in men, just the recognition I am the most powerful Demigod she could fight with.”

“I...I understand.” The daughter of Aphrodite grimaced. “Would it be too much to hope the mission in question is incredibly easy and represents no danger whatsoever?”

“It is too much to hope, yes.” Perseus grinned before becoming a bit more serious. “As a matter of fact, the mission is horribly dangerous, and you deeds will need to be executed perfectly if you are to survive.”

“If it is a motivation speech, I want you to know it sucks.”

This time, it was Lou Ellen who giggled, and Perseus huffed.

“Well, I can lie and do it better!” the son of Poseidon rose from his throne, and waved his hand like a conjuror about to astonish the audience. “It is your time to shine! You will win eternal fame, and be the star of the show-battle!”

“Isn’t that your job?” she couldn’t resist the jab.

“The Demigoddesses of the Suicide Squad begin to have a lot of skill when it comes to repartees.”

“You trained us so well,” the blonde daughter of Hecate giggled.

Perseus huffed again, using his orange towel as an improvised pillow on this seat-throne.

“And yes, technically, I am supposed to steal everyone’s glory, amaze my enemies by my sneaky and underhanded tactics. Unfortunately, while I have begun to recover my health and my strength, I am still exhausted from this little squabble with the Drakon. That may have not stopped me, but there’s also the problem that if I try a bigger stunt by myself so fast after the Forge of All Perils, the Olympians are going to be very unhappy.”

“That makes sense, but you could have imposed Clarisse to the Goddess.”

“First, I want to correct some misconceptions. I can’t order her around. She’s still a Goddess. I can just use her jealousy and her powerful emotions to guide her upon the path I want her to take. And while Clarisse will have an important part to play in the coming battle, she’s not the one I want to fight and win. It’s you.”

In many ways, the words were flattering.

“You could explain it to her.” Lou Ellen’s tone was strong...and not for the first time, Perseus took it seriously before nodding.

“Very well. To be blunt, Drew, most of the Demigods and Demigoddesses are way too weak as they are now. This isn’t the Quest to recover the Master Bolt. Ingenuity will only carry us so far before failing. If we are lucky and the traps waiting for us are manageable, we may only lose four or five members in the next battle to recover the Golden Fleece.” The green-eyed Demigod paused. “And if we are unlucky, if the Sire of Drakons prepares us a trap I didn’t account for, or if the Triumvirate is given time to make one more reinforcement effort, it is possible any battlefield will be the end of this Quest, by virtue of not having enough Demigods and Demigoddesses left alive. As it stands, there are four members who can survive major threats: Bianca, Jade, Lou Ellen, and myself. Everyone else will die if enough weapons find their mark.”

“Oh...” for a few seconds, the daughter of Aphrodite had nothing to say. “Fine, I understand the principle behind your extremely dangerous plan. Even if I don’t understand what I can do to help a Goddess. I am trying to improve my Charmspeak as fast as possible, but as you hinted before, there are no miracles here.”

“I know.” The leader of the Suicide Squad shook his head. “That’s why I want you to test one of the Telekhines’ inventions.”

“I was under the impression the Telekhines’ main hobby was to build weapons, not things which increase the physical capabilities of Demigods and Demigoddesses.”

“The Telekhines’ great passions are Forges and Weapons,” the black-haired boy insisted on the two words, so insistent in fact you couldn’t miss the capital letters. “But there are weapons, and well...they are *Weapons*.”

If the intention was to reassure her, it utterly failed.

“And how dangerous is this weapon?”

“Well...” Lou Ellen glared at Perseus, who rolled his eyes. “If it fails, the weapon will destroy you from the inside. You will have the satisfaction to have slaughtered a lot of enemies, though.”

“I would prefer to live,” Drew peevishly remarked. “Why don’t you to make sure the Telekhines stabilise your too-dangerous weapon before giving it to me?”

“Because there’s no way to stabilise it. The only way that can make this weapon stable is a total victory, one which sees a certain artefact recovered.”

“The Golden Fleece.”

“Precisely.”

Drew hesitated.

“And if I say no?”

Perseus shrugged.

“I will have to use another plan altogether. Fortunately, I am very good at finding alternatives. But I have to warn you: there may be not another chance to gain enough power to make your survival certain for the next battles.”

“Or could stop adding cryptic remarks one after another, and tell her your genial plan...” Lou Ellen smirked.

“Someone is trying to ruin my fun,” Perseus replied peevishly. “Fine, but I am doing it my way. Have you heard of the tale of Captain Ahab the Stubborn?”

**13 December 2006, the Vaults, Forge of All Perils, Sea of Monsters**

Luke had never had any doubts he was skilled when it came to opening vaults and other places.

But there was skill, and then there was what the daughter of Hades was able to do.

Bianca di Angelo often smashed her way through the protections while he was still scratching his head wondering how to enter without triggering all the traps.

Some lesser thieves would have said it was unfair, for the Lightning Thief had the Curse of Achilles to protect herself. Luke would be prompt to retort that often, there was not a scratch on her clothes. Really, what the sorceress could not fight against was the impressive amounts of dust which had accumulated over the last millennium.

And if you thought the traps weren’t redoubtable...well, it was better to think again and revaluate your assumptions.

Luke and his partner-in-crimes had found a lot of the pirates who had been part of Drake’s and the conquistador’s doomed expeditions. None seemed to have managed to break into the vaults before dying.

“This last vault better be worth it,” a Telekhine groaned, as the shark resurfaced from being thrown into a trap where he had to fight against crocodile automatons. For all the toughness of the Telekhines, it was clear it had not been an easy fight.

“The more defended the vaults were, so far, the more valuable the treasures contained within it were,” the son of Hermes answered. “And even the smaller and less important vaults had a lot of rare things.”

The Trophy Halls – which to be clear, were not part of the vaults – would already have been enough to satisfy the thirst of looting of the average Demigod. Once the curses had been removed after Perseus killed the Drakon, confirmation had quickly come that several of the trophies had truly been wielded by deities once upon a time.

Assuredly, most of them were completely obsolete today, courtesy of having remained an eternity inside the ice-covered Forge of All Perils, but for Demigods, this was priceless loot.

And once you came into the vaults, just watching it was enough for an honest thief to drool.

“Your ancestors love the poisoned barbed arrows.”

“They loved everything lethal,” the Telekhine complained, “and the more murderously efficient, the better. No sense of humour, it was better for them to get the job quickly. Unfortunately, it didn’t do them much good when the Drakon came.”

An enormous amount of flames rose in the tunnel, before disappearing as fast it had arrived.

“Sorceress! We told you to try to unlock the complex mechanisms first!”

“I tried, it didn’t work!” Bianca di Angelo was utterly unrepentant. “Now stop wasting my time, and help me pushing. Melting some parts isn’t just enough by itself!”

An order was an order, and Luke took position once it was clear the fire magic of Hades’ daughter had dissipated completely.

Naturally, it took four Telekhines and two Demigods to finish the job and finally open the vault by force of arms.

But once they had a glance of what was inside...

“Gold!” Yes, a Telekhine could drool at the sight of too much wealth. “Imperial Gold! Beautiful Imperial Gold!

“Celestial Bronze! Think of all the weapons we can forge with so many ingots!”

“Adamantine! The legacy of our race! It is here the Adamantine was stored!”

Well...Jackson hadn’t lied. They were going to be very, very rich once this Quest was over.

Okay, they hadn’t been exactly poor. At least the Demigods and Demigoddesses who had participated in the First Quest to recover the Master Bolt hadn’t been.

But that kind of wealth...even if they let the Telekhines have half of this vault, Luke was sure they could easily earn several millions of Drachmas individually once the spoils were divided.

There were neat pyramidal-shaped mountains of some of the rarest and most useful metals *everywhere*.

And when Luke said ‘mountains’, he wasn’t joking.

The vault was gigantic, and so was the quantity of Celestial Bronze – just to name one metal – stockpiled here.

“If I had known,” Bianca di Angelo said mournfully, “I wouldn’t have wasted my time trying to open my father’s vaults. I should have met Jackson before and convinced him to attack this Forge earlier! Why did I waste my time in Hell?”

“Because you were trying to become a Goddess?” Luke suggested cheekily.

“Ah, yes...” like he had said before, the Lightning Thief was completely unrepentant when it came to past crimes and deeds.

“Note that I am not complaining, but I don’t see any Orichalcum.”

“Too valuable to be stockpiled here, I’m afraid,” the daughter of Hades immediately replied.

“And besides,” the younger Telekhine added after a wince, “we never had a lot of it. Orichalcum can only be created using divine ichor, and for some reason, the Gods and the Goddesses were never fond of bleeding in our Forges.”

“I can’t see why,” Luke joked, before turning as footsteps echoed on the avenue where they had just removed most of the traps. “Hey, Dakota! Be careful, we don’t know if we found every-“

Spikes fell from the ceiling, and the son of Bacchus avoided a very unpleasant death by a very timely roll.

“Is there really so much gold in front of me, or did I just hurt my head too badly?”

“There is really that much Imperial Gold bullion in that vault, don’t worry.”

“Oh, good...” Dakota mumbled. “Ah, I have a message from Jackson. The visitors he awaited have finally arrived.”

“The Telekhine leadership?” Jackson had given them enough not-subtle tirades that the ‘Godfather’ was coming in person.

“The Telekhine leadership, several Legionnaires of the Expeditionary Force that have just been rescued, and his half-sister the Goddess Rhode.”

The first two were not completely surprising, the third however...

“Why would a daughter of Poseidon bother coming to the Forge of All Perils?”

“Because millennia ago, she was our Protector and Goddess!” a Telekhine promptly answered the question. “The Redeemer didn’t inform you?”

Luke sighed theatrically. The reaction of the Demigoddess was...acidic.

“No, no I think he must have *forgotten* to inform of us about *this tiny and unimportant issue*.”

If Bianca di Angelo used more sarcasm, there would be a flood of it inside the Forge.

“A War Council is called.” Dakota swallowed heavily, as the terrifying sorceress gave him a withering glare. “Err...don’t kill me?”

“I am not going to kill you!” Bianca proclaimed. “I can’t promise I will be able to control myself where this crazy Demigod is concerned...what possessed me to accept his leadership?”

“The fact you hadn’t a choice in the first place? ARRRGGHHH!”

Note for all Telekhines: not all truths were good to say out loud, especially in presence of an irate daughter of Hades...

**13 December 2006, Forge’s Peak, Forge of All Perils**

From top, many would have thought it was not as impressive as when you saw the changes on the Docks, but in fact, it was the contrary.

The volcanic Forge had been reawakened, and it could fulfil its purpose, now that the Drakonic taint was progressively purged from its foundries and halls.

“Would you believe me, sister if I told you it was all part of the plan?”

“**No**.”

Perseus chuckled...before coughing.

Rhode sighed.

“**You should return to somewhere you can heal properly...I’ve seen you have discovered the benefits of many Jacuzzis and other healing rooms**.”

“I will go there directly once the Council is over.”

The daughter of Poseidon glared...but the green eyes so similar to hers were unable to make him blink.

“**You are as stubborn as *she* was**.”

“I am going to take it as a compliment, sister.”

“**Why I am not surprised?**” Rhode asked rhetorically, shaking her head. “**I will give it to you, though; while your plan came very close to a disaster, you managed to claw your way to victory. And ultimately, the reaction of your opposition was incredibly close to what you predicted**.”

“This is the advantage of having relatively competent enemies.” Perseus smirked. “They tend to follow rational plans, while I have no such weakness.”

The blonde-haired Goddess had the urge to return the smirk. After all, a lot of her original strength had just returned in mere days. She was the Goddess of everything beautiful under the sea, Protector of the Island of Rhodes...and the immortal who ruled the Telekhines and this Forge. The Light of the Sea, they called her. Too often the mortals had forgotten that in order to have light, you needed to lit an inferno first.

It was pleasant to see so much of powers she had believed never to grasp for as long as she survived return to her immortal essence.

But there were many perils which stood in the way.

“**I hate to say it, but in this case, the rationality has its merits. You are forced to come to them; the imbecile with the Master Bolt will not tolerate a failure, not after you proved your *resourcefulness***.”

“I know. This is why I’m going to change my method for the next island.”

“**How so**?” she asked with curiosity.

“The actions taken against this Forge, sister, can be considered both offensive and defensive in nature. On the one hand, it was pure conquest and Drakon-slaying. On the other hand, we found a refuge, a supply base, and a fortress where the Triumvirate and other enemies must risk colossal losses if they want to dislodge us from it.”

“**This reasoning sounds logical...in theory**.”

“The next island is not going to be like that at all.” Her young brother bared his teeth. “I am going to muster the Suicide Squad, the Telekhines, the Legionnaires who are fit to fight, and every bit of firepower I can take from the Forge of All Perils while keeping it suitably defended.”

The grin, while different, reminded Rhode a sibling she had lost.

“And then I am going to crush everything defending this island. Save the Golden Fleece, they are all going to perish. Apart from this unique treasure, I don’t want anything bigger than an insect to survive. Some parties are taking us seriously now. I want them incredibly concerned by the end of this. I want them shocked; I want them to shiver because it will be the Suicide Squad’s officers accomplishing these exploits while I work upon my tan and drink an orange juice.”

“**By the Great Reef**...” unlike many Gods, Rhode had a fair idea of how much firepower was ready to be unleashed if Perseus gave the order. “**No enemy will remain on this island**.”

“Nothing at all.” The leader of the Suicide Squad approved. “What awaits our foes is *annihilation*.”

**Author’s note**: An Impractical Guide to Godhood will continue in the next chapter, which is (tentatively) titled *Chapter 20 Annihilation Tide*.

**Suicide Squad - List of Fallen (by order of death)**:

*Judith – Huntress of Artemis*

*Kalinda – Huntress of Artemis*

*Eudoxia – Huntress of Artemis*

*Douglas Smith – son of Volturnus*

*Phoebe – Huntress of Artemis, daughter of Eris*

**Wall of Dishonour**:

Fergus Cook – son of Liber: now transformed into a golden penguin

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

Jade – former Huntress: denied the will of Artemis, and swore herself to Khione

Kimiko and Alexia – Huntresses: due to not donning their X-Suits, the two Huntresses are now cursed and have a few Drakonic mutations