**Chapter 16**

**Ready Player Two**

“*The Legionnaires were going to fail. You knew it. I knew it. Every Demigod with enough intelligence to count to twenty knew it.*

*And yet you sent them anyway to the Sea of Monsters.*

*Who can really say that their defeat was unexpected with a serious face? Besides me, of course?*

*Yes, it didn’t help that one out of the two Cohorts was weakened by Legionnaire politics.*

*But no, giving them more information and resources wouldn’t have changed the outcome.*

*Sending an Expeditionary Force to a Zone Mortalis is the equivalent of gambling on quantity when the enemy has already amassed enough quantity to make sure your numbers are useless.*

*You need quality, not quantity, to survive in these monster-infested waters. I thought the Lightning Thief affair would have at least taught you that lesson.*

*But it seems you are in dire need of a reminder why Great Quests exist in the first place.*

*Fortunately, it might not be so bad this time.*

*The Expeditionary Force failed, but in their failure, we gained vital knowledge about the Sea of Monsters.*

*The Triumvirate and the forces they have allied with have not revealed every secret weapon they might have hidden in the shadows, but they were forced to reveal a few of them, enough so that hypotheses can be made about what nasty little surprises await the second wave.*

*And the example of two Roman Cohorts being destroyed will be a salutary lesson for everyone not to underestimate again an enemy just because they lost decisively a naval battle two millennia ago.*

*The first part of the game is over.*

*Player One has had his chance.*

*Ready Player Two*.”

Attributed to Perseus Jackson, authenticity never confirmed.

**29 September 2006, Council Room, Olympus**

Perseus could have spent hours describing the magical creations he was allowed to witness before entering the Council Room. Take the gigantic hall they had just crossed, for example. It was a fabulous piece of architecture which changed appearance depending on the tastes of those who were able to witness it. No, it wasn’t an illusion. The hall was really changing, the changes originating from a panel of twelve possible different halls the one the visitor would find the most spectacular.

That was a demonstration of magical technology that would have made the Tyrants of Old salivating in his old life, and no doubt plenty of them would have tried to use it for their throne rooms. Here? It was more or less playing the function of antechamber.

Alas, the time to be impressed was well and truly over.

Massive golden doors opened, and guided by the Goddess of Wisdom, the son of Poseidon knew he had arrived exactly where the summoning had been made.

It was *the* Council Room, no doubt about it. If you had ever felt ill-at-ease at being small, then surely you were going to hate this one.

Each throne was monumental, easily dwarfing him. As for the beings who occupied them...well, they were so tall compared to him that it was not worth to think about size jokes, except if you wanted to be humiliated.

The only point which made Perseus smirk internally was that there were twelve huge thrones, but even after Athena walked towards hers, three remained empty.

“Lord Zeus,” the Demigod bowed theatrically...and in a pose that was a bit ridiculous, though he would never admit it to anyone.

Golden lightning provoked powerful and vivid sparkles all over the Council Room, and the Master of Olympus’ eyes were filled with thunder.

Interesting. Scenario O it was. Obedient, but not too much. The great Master of Olympus was peeved, and was searching for traitors.

“**Perseus Jackson**,” the voice seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere at once. “**Do you know why you have been summoned**?”

In happier circumstances, the leader of the Suicide Squad would have tried to play the role of the innocent or the idiot. Unfortunately, with the Thunder God already angry, it was not really an option unless he wanted to be incinerated.

“Yes. The Roman Expeditionary Force has failed. And you need replacements to go to the Sea of Monsters and succeed where they have not.”

His blunt reply caught the Master of Olympus completely by surprise. Ah, he had not expected that, didn’t he?

Reactions from the other Gods were more...varied. Dionysus laughed loudly, before being forced to stop by a glare of Demeter. Athena seemed extremely satisfied. No doubt the Protector of Athens had warned the other Olympians that sending several Cohorts which were not equipped for naval warfare was just asking for a big disaster.

His father looked at him proudly, which was always good for the vote of confidence...

Glancing at the nine Gods and Goddesses present, it was not difficult to acknowledge there were three against him. None of them were a surprise. Zeus, of course. Demeter. And Artemis. The others were more or less on his side, or had chosen to be neutral in that affair.

“**Your answer is correct, son of Poseidon**.” Zeus thundered, taking the form of a colossus of thunder and storms that could not be considered hum. “**I am calling a Great Quest. Athena will now give you your objectives**.”

Zeus’ daughter changed. The female hoplite disappeared in a bright flash – Perseus closed his eyes by reflex – and when he reopened them, Annabeth’s mother had changed her looks completely. The Greek theme was banished, now Athena had donned a perfectly tailored white uniform of the US Navy. Her hair had been gathered in a bun behind her head, and if she hadn’t been several metres tall, one would have thought this woman was a regular part of the most powerful non-immortal navy in existence.

“**Perseus Jackson. You are to free the God of War and the God of Forges from the chains the Titaness of the Seas and the False Triumvirate are using to imprison them. You are to return the Golden Fleece to New Byzantium. And you are to save as many Legionnaire survivors of the first expedition as you can, and help them escape the Sea of Monsters**.”

By the way Athena was talking, it was clear that it was not her plan. Most certainly, it was her genitor who had had this ‘genial’ idea.

“I will need an order of priority, please,” if he didn’t protest, it would look suspicious. “The Zones Mortalis are not known to be small, but this one in particular is an archipelago of a thousand islands in its own right. Since this is a Quest, I won’t have an army. Searching for every goal could take months.”

“**Are you refusing to obey my commands**?” Oh great, the imbecile-in-charge was a paranoid tyrant who saw conspiracies when someone told him something was impossible.

“No, Great Zeus.” Forsaking humour pained Perseus, but at such close range, evading the Master Bolt would be incredibly difficult. “I am just saying that I have not the exact coordinates of any of the objectives you have given me. The Sea of Monsters is large. The force I will take with me will be under fifty in strength. By trying to search for everything at the same time, we will accomplish nothing, and likely perish in the attempt.”

The shape of the *thing* of thunders and clouds slightly changed as he baited the Master of Olympus with the last part of his speech.

Well, it was nice to have the confirmation the Lord of Thunder didn’t believe he could survive this Quest.

How nice it was going to be to prove him wrong.

“**The Demigod has a point**.” Athena intervened.

Ho, ho, ho. To say those words in public, Zeus must have ignored a lot of times her advice when it came to strategy and war these last years...something that was really stupid, it went without saying.

Zeus didn’t return to a pseudo-human appearance. Yet it was clear that with his Strategist telling him he was wrong and the other Gods refusing to vocally support him, he had no choice.

“**Hephaestus must be freed first, and his Forge returned under Olympus’ control**.” The Master of Olympus ordered after several seconds of silence. “**By the fault of this treacherous Titaness, many advanced weapons are now delivered into the hands of our enemies. This cannot stand. Ares must also be freed as soon as possible, before the next Winter Solstice. The Golden Fleece can wait until my sons are back on Olympus**.”

The Legionnaires were going to be so happy when he told them their unimportant lives were not so valuable compared to the Golden Fleece. Yes, that was a nice ‘revelation’ which was going to be greeted with joy and cheers...

Of course, Perseus had to play the role of the obedient son...thus his objection had to be of a pragmatic nature.

“The next Winter Solstice, Great Zeus?” Bring the expression of surprise, look surprised, play the son of surprise, “but I won’t have a ship ready before mid-October! And the journey alone is going to take months!”

“**Your father will provide all necessary help so that you arrive in time, son of the seas**.” The cascades of lightning grew more intense. Truly Zeus must have not enjoyed at all the way the Romans had been defeated... “**You said your ship will be ready by mid-October? You will leave immediately and proceed to the Sea of Monsters to challenge the enemies of Olympus**.”

The ‘or else I will incinerate you’ was so evident everyone heard it.

“And the rewards?” Not asking, once again, would have been extremely suspicious. “With due respect, Lord, the price of a brand-new ship is not an insignificant sum. And attracting worthwhile Demigods for a Great Quest always demands interesting rewards, be they in interesting artefacts or in the form of important numbers of Drachmas.”

This was once again a bait, yes. If the finances of Zeus were in a good state, the Lord of Thunder wouldn’t hesitate promising millions...after all, they were expected to die in this Great Quest, and what use were millions of Drachmas to the dead?

But if on the other hand, the rumours of treasuries empty were true...

“**Your Quester group will be allowed to take the spoils of war for itself in the battles you will fight across the Sea of Monsters. Athena will impose a ten-percent tax upon your profits should you return successful.”**

Well, well, well.

It seemed the finances of Zeus were really in a very dire situation, after all.

No gold to give and a non-insignificant tax levied upon their loot in the ‘improbable’ case they survived? If that was not economic despair, Perseus didn’t know what it was.

“**Now go accomplish my will, son of Poseidon**. **You are dismissed**.”

“By your will, Lord Zeus.” Perseus smiled, bowed, and ran theatrically out of the Council Room.

The good news was better than expected, really.

It was really to be a pleasure to overthrow Zeus from his throne, when the moment was right.

**30 September 2006, Council Room, Olympus**

Naturally, Poseidon, Aphrodite, and Dionysus quickly departed once the important subjects were out of the way. In Aphrodite and Dionysus’ case, it was soon reported they had left for France. What they would do there...eh, you didn’t need to be an Olympian to guess correctly.

Apollo wished he could go with them...but.

And it was a big ‘but’: the tumultuous mood of the Master of Olympus.

“**He was prepared**.”

There was no need to ask who the ‘he’ the Lord of Thunder was referring too.

Athena took it far more calmly than the Sun God or anyone else still present in the Council room did.

“**The heroes of the city, be they Roman or Greek, have done their best to hack the divine channels so that they could follow the Expeditionary Force day after day. There are newspapers, both the credible and the non-credible sorts, which reported on the losses of the Twelfth and Third Legio’s warships. It didn’t take a clever Demigod to know we would need someone else to go to the Sea of Monsters**.”

The words rang, like most of the reasons Athena listed when confronting a problem, with the absolute song of truth.

But this time, Apollo was not ready to believe it was that simple.

Perseus Jackson had clearly expected to go to the Sea of Monsters...no, that was the wrong way to look at this issue. The son of Poseidon *wanted* to go to the Sea of Monsters.

That said, the God of the Sun and Musicians knew better than to say that out loud when his genitor was already fuming in anger.

“**Next you are going to insinuate he is loyal**.”

For once, even the strategist of Olympus looked ready to give their father the look she usually reserved to various narrow-minded fools.

“**If you wanted him to be loyal**,” the Goddess of Wisdom and Strategy said coldly, “**maybe you shouldn’t have killed his mother**.”

All Gods and Goddesses present froze. It was a powerful rebuke, and one the likes of had rarely been uttered in the last centuries.

“**What is done is done**,” the Lord of Thunder grunted after a couple of seconds. Translation: there would be no apology, and no acknowledgement a mistake had been made. “**Artemis**.”

“**Yes, father?**” His twin answered eagerly.

“**You will send several of your Huntresses with the force this treacherous spawn of my brother’s loins**.”

A grimace appeared on his sister’s face. For good reason, Apollo would admit. One Huntress had been part of the previous Great Quest, and to say it had ended well for his sister’s lieutenant would be lying through his teeth.

“**The boy is uncontrollable**-“ his sister began to protest.

“**That’s why I am ordering you to gather Huntresses whose hatred for men and disloyalty excuses of any kind are legendary**.” The Master of Olympus paused before continuing. “**At the first sign Perseus Jackson does not intend to go accomplish his mission or refuse to kill enemies of Olympus, your Huntresses will eliminate him**.”

The grimace disappeared as fast as it had appeared.

And when his sister smiled, it was a vicious, ugly thing.

At moments like those, Apollo would freely admit...his twin scared him.

“**With great pleasure, father**.”

“**Is it that good an idea?**”

And immediately they stopped breathing. Damn it, Athena...

“**You disagree with the need to get rid of this vermin, Athena?**”

The Master Bolt shone brilliantly, and many thunderbolts erupted from the Symbol of Power.

“**No. I am just saying that we are about to begin a war against a Titaness. Can we please avoid committing some deeds which will make sure the Earthshaker will fight this war on the side of our enemies?**”

That...was a very good point. There were three thrones empty today, having one more vacant when the time would come to begin the true hostilities was not exactly a wise strategy.

“**Very well**,” Zeus boomed, acknowledging the deed may very well be unwise, without admitting out loud, “**the Huntresses will act openly only when there is proof of evident treachery against Olympus. That way even my brother will have no choice but to acknowledge the removal of this vermin was completely justified**.”

“**Openly, father**?”

“***Openly*, Artemis**,” the expression of the God of Thunder and Justice was a mask of determination and ruthlessness, “**I’m sure your Huntresses can arrange lethal accidents in the middle of the night. The Sea of Monsters is *extremely* dangerous.”**

“**Yes,”** Artemis could hold a grudge, but here Apollo would have to do something, it was simply too...vicious. “**Yes, I’m sure something can be *arranged*.**”

The rest was just a debate on what forces had to be rebuilt for the next wars to come, making him wince more than a few times at the sheer reminder of how much they had demilitarised after the end of the last true threats to their rules decades ago.

But as Athena left with a concerned expression on her face, the God of the Sun wondered how many thrones of the Council were going to need new owners by the end of the Winter Solstice...

**30 September 2006, Olympus**

Perseus was really, really disappointed at the lack of vigilance from the Olympians.

‘You are dismissed’ and no escort when he left the Council Room? Really?

The more he learned about the Gods and the Goddesses living here, the less the son of Poseidon was surprised that Bianca di Angelo had been able to steal the Master Bolt, even with Hera’s support.

Security was extremely lax, and when there were important protections active, it was child’s play to see them coming.

Not that he was going to complain...it made the objective he was pursuing today far easier.

It wouldn’t do to delay things too much, however. The Olympians had clearly expected him to obey Zeus’ command to the letter, but one Olympian investigating at the wrong time could be a disaster.

Fortunately, the Goddess he searched for was rather easy to find.

Perseus had just to follow the long succession of cursed shops which were unable to open as their doors and openings were closed by a multitude of flowers and plants.

Past these first original marks witnessing the addiction someone held for the activity of shopping, it really didn’t take more than a couple of minutes to find her.

“I think the Goddess of Love is going to be a bit peeved if the district where she buys her perfumes is closed.” He commented idly.

“**Perseus Jackson**...”

“In the flesh, Lady Persephone.”

“**I could kill you here and now. You have no right to walk in these streets!”**

“As a matter of fact, I was summoned today before the Council,” the son of Poseidon said cheekily. “I was on my way out when I couldn’t help but see all those buildings covered in flowers, and I wonder if it was a new fashion for autumn sales.”

Persephone immediately took a guilty expression. She shouldn’t; while the first part of his tirade was certainly true, her redecoration efforts wouldn’t have been immediately visible if he didn’t specifically try to search for her whereabouts.

Though that was a lot of shops the blonde Goddess had closed when she was in a vengeful mood...

“I was just wondering...why?”

“**Everyone knows why**!” The favourite daughter of Demeter exploded. “**No money for your Persephone! No, you mustn’t do this, it’s too expensive Persephone! You aren’t the Queen of Hell, Persephone. I have slept with you once, I am too busy now with other women to say I enjoy your presence anymore, Persephone**!”

Even a Tyrant knew not to interrupt a scorned woman when she was furious and all the insults delivered upon her were released in a single monologue. All he had to do was nod at regular intervals until the fury abated.

“To be sure, a dreadful situation,” Perseus said in his best ‘wise and experienced’ stance. “What prevents you from changing that?”

“**Unless you have been living in garbage dump for the last month**,” Persephone hissed, and countless plants began to grow on her arms at an accelerated rate before moving in his direction, “**I am a divorced woman**.”

“A marriage has been dissolved, and oaths were declared null and void. But they can be renewed. The Wealthy One loves you very much...and you love him too, for all that you were upset with him when it came to his illegitimate children. Six months per year you stayed with him, and this for many, many centuries. And divorce has existed for quite a while.”

“**I ate pomegranate seeds. As per the Ancient Laws**-“

Perseus chuckled.

“I’m sorry, oh Goddess. I thought I was the one who was infamous for his clever manipulation of the truth.”

“**I am telling the truth, son of Poseidon**!”

“You ate the pomegranate seeds, I will give you grant that.” The former Tyrant acknowledged. “But I think that you did it deliberately. When your mother began to kill the harvests and every edible plant and fruit upon this world, a solution had to be found. The only thing that has never been mentioned is whether it was your Lord Husband or yourself, my Lady, who had that idea.”

“**And why I would...manipulate the truth?”**

Minor note for the posterity of his adventures: Persephone, daughter of Demeter, was really a horrible liar. The truth could be read in her blue eyes.

“Because unlike what the living souls believed they were haunted by, it wasn’t screams of pain that came out from your first ‘imprisonment’ while you stayed in the Lord of Hell’s Palace.” His amusement remained invisible; it wouldn’t do at all for Persephone to take her divine form right now. “Those were screams of pleasure. And while you ate seed of a sort, it wasn’t pomegranate-“

“**Fine**!” the Goddess of Spring stopped him from continuing, looking frenetically around him as if Demeter was going to arrive at any moment. And thankfully for her, there were no spectators right now to witness their conversation...nymphs and lesser immortals tended to stay away from an irate Goddess, liking their own life, thank you very much. “**Fine. What do you want from your silence**?”

“You mistake me, my Lady. I did not come here to blackmail you. Your former husband, I think, would punish me most severely the moment he became aware of it. I came to *help*.”

Persephone looked at him like he was a particularly dangerous breed of rattlesnake.

This was...actually quite intelligent on her part.

“**If you had not helped, I would still be married to my uncle**!”

Ah, yes. Incest. A truly common sin of the Olympians.

Perseus sighed.

“Must we continue telling lies to each other, my Lady? You didn’t divorce because of me or because you were furious your former Lord Husband cheated with a mortal woman several decades ago. In my humble opinion, it was a combination of factors, and the most important of all was your mother’s influence, pressuring you and insisting there could be better husbands out there than the Lord of the Underworld. Yet a few millennia...it is a long period of time, even for Goddesses, and now that she has you here permanently, suddenly your Lady Mother is not so eager to deal with your day-to-day expenses and needs.”

“**I have yet to hear a solution, son of Poseidon**.”

“Return to Hell,” and for once he was sincere. “Become the Queen you were supposed to be. Release Spring, and let another claim the mantle. Your Lady Mother can be appeased by a new treaty and some hard-bargaining from the Rich One.”

“**Hell is horrible when it comes to shopping opportunities**,” Persephone did not grit her teeth, but she wasn’t far from it.

Suddenly, Perseus wondered how much her return six months per year in the world of the living had to do with wanting to appease Demeter, and how much it had to with ensuring the luxury goods of Olympus and the rest of the divine world not part of Hades’ realm.

“Then change it.” He told her bluntly. “In case you’ve forgotten, your former Lord Husband must have billions of souls of men and women who had experiences creating and selling the sort of objects you are happy to sink a fortune to acquire.”

To his satisfaction, Persephone looked...thoughtful. And she didn’t dismiss his arguments. That was better than his initial plan called for, really.

“**What do you want**?” the blue-eyed Goddess said at last. “**And don’t say you are doing it because you want to help our broken couple, son of Poseidon. I won’t believe you**.”

“Is it wrong to want to help a union torn apart by some sad misunderstandings?” the glare he received convinced him that unfortunately, the poor daughter of Demeter needed to develop her sense of humour. “I want to acquire some special seeds. The same seeds, in fact, that you ate an eternity ago to invoke the Ancient Laws and stay with your ex-husband six out of twelve months per year.”

“**Why?**” For the first time, Persephone watched him with genuine surprise. “**I was a Goddess when I ate them. For me, the risk was minimal. If you are the one to eat them, you will die in excruciating torment**.”

As the proud leader of the Suicide Squad, he couldn’t reveal the essential parts of his plan...but some hints wouldn’t prove too problematic, right?

“The seeds are virtually indestructible and will resist extreme temperatures, correct?”

“**Correct**,” the daughter of Demeter confirmed. “**But...you want to feed it to one of your enemies**.”

Perseus didn’t answer. Let the Goddess of Spring think what she believed to be the truth.

Her right hand tightened, before reopening and revealing...two seeds.

“I would easily give you several hundreds of thousands of Drachma for a dozen, my Lady.”

“**I didn’t think to stockpile them when I left the Underworld**,” the guilty look of Persephone gave her an extremely young appearance.

Well, that or it was guilt at the idea of having missed the opportunity to earn a lot of money to assuage her shopaholic fever.

The two seeds materialised in his hands. He immediately placed them in a special pouch he had prepared, before sealing it and placing in his pocket.

“And where the-“

“**Perseus Jackson**,” the voice of Athena echoed through the empty street, and one second later, the Goddess of Wisdom appeared in her pristine uniform of Admiral. “**When my father told you that you were dismissed, it meant you had to use the lift and return to New Byzantium**.”

“I am absolutely sorry, oh Mighty Protector of Athens,” Perseus bowed, “I got lost on my way to it, and I was asking the lovely Goddess here for directions.”

“**From the Council Room to the lift antechamber, it is a straight line**.”

“Really?”

The black-haired divine strategist closed her eyes and murmured something unintelligible. Ha! He knew Annabeth’s mother wasn’t as emotionless as she pretended to be.

“**I suppose**,” the Goddess reopened them, letting them show powerful grey eyes, “**that I will have to escort you to New Byzantium to make sure you don’t find yourself to some other forbidden location *by accident***.”

Ah, busted.

Athena turned away, presenting her back to him.

“**Oh, and Persephone? If I were you, I would remove those flowers and plants. Neither Aphrodite nor Hermes will be very amused by them if they find them when they return to Olympus**.”

Perseus didn’t chuckle. It would be extremely risky to do so, between two Goddesses that could destroy him if they shifted to their respective divine forms.

But the moment he was alone and safe, the son of Poseidon was ready to swear on the Styx he would laugh very loudly.

**30 September 2006, New Byzantium, New York, United States of America (de jure)**

As their insane leader had warned them beforehand, he didn’t return until dawn.

At some point, Ethan knew, he would have to discover how Perseus Jackson predicted that kind of things. The son of Poseidon wasn’t a bloody Oracle, but most of the time his words were coming true, and the worst part was that he shouldn’t be in position to influence the outcome.

Anyway, the leader of the Suicide Squad was back, and looking reasonably uninjured...something that couldn’t be taken for granted, given that he had been summoned by Zeus.

“Welcome back to New Byzantium,” the son of Nemesis went on to walk by Jackson’s side once the mad boy passed the walls.

“Thank you, my treacherous lieutenant.” Well, at least Ethan was certain he wasn’t dealing with an impostor.

“Good news?”

“Most excellent news!” the grin which was herald of calamity illuminated the fading darkness. “We are going to be taxed, in the highly likely scenario where our survival during this new Great Quest is assured.”

Ethan grimaced. Madness could truly resume...

“Jackson, that’s not great news.”

“Wasn’t it an American politician that said: in this life, there’s nothing certain but death and taxes?”

“Err...yes. But I don’t think he meant it as a *good thing*, Jackson.”

“Well, in this case, it is.”

Ethan was almost ready to pray to his mother for some karmic payback. The Gods knew Jackson deserved it.

“You want to make sure the gold we earn goes directly to fund Olympus?” The son of Nemesis suddenly had a very frightening thought. “Or do you want us to earn strictly nothing from this Great Quest?”

After all, while twelve percent was impressive, it was only a fraction of a total sum, and if the massive pile of loot was equal to zero, then twelve percent of zero was still zero...

“That’s an intriguing idea, my treacherous lieutenant! I admit I did not think of it.” Perseus Jackson smiled. “But in this case, no, the agreement was signed in good faith. In exchange for one more year of diplomatic immunity when this Great Quest will be completed, I formally swore on a certain Hell Sea that twelve percent of the wealth and treasures we earn during this Great Quest will be transferred to Annabeth’s mother.”

And with the last part of the last sentence, the trap was revealed.

The son of Poseidon didn’t intend for a single Drachma or Denarius to go replenishing Zeus’ treasury.

The flow of money created by this tax – always assuming they survived – would go to Athena.

“Will this hold?” Ethan said pessimistically as they continued walking towards the Questers’ Barracks. “I mean, I do not doubt the way you can scheme, but-“

“There’s a reason why I decided to swear something on a certain Hell Sea, my treacherous lieutenant. And when the Protector Goddess of Athens escorted me back, I specifically invoked her authority of Protector of Heroes and Questers.”

That was...very clever.

The tax was not really a tax; it was an offering to Athena.

The Suicide Squad formally asked for her blessings during this Great Quest; in return the Demigods would part with a significant portion of their wealth.

“The King of Olympus isn’t going to like that at all.”

“My treacherous lieutenant, him not liking this is the entire point of the plan,” the demonic smile was stronger than ever. “And honestly, it’s his fault I was able to implement this scheme at all.”

“How?” Ethan asked, extremely interested by the argument.

“The Master of the Olympus was the one to summon me, and the one to call formally for the Great Quest.” Perseus Jackson bared his teeth. “But he didn’t promise anything in return, even a bauble. A ship? A weapon or a shield forged by the Gods? Some talismans to repel some kinds of monsters? No. There wasn’t a single gift handed to the Suicide Squad as a whole. I was told to obey or else. That’s a relationship dangerously close to slavery...and the Ancient Laws don’t support that kind of petulant behaviour.”

“Ah.” So Zeus had shot himself in the foot...metaphorically speaking. His refusal to make a single concession, small or big, was going to make sure Jackson’s deal was legal, per the Ancient Laws. Athena was the ‘Protector’, and she was an Olympian. That was enough, especially with the backing of Styx.

But Ethan couldn’t help but think that the tensions must be near to the boiling point on Olympus. Athena, daughter of Zeus, should have tried her best to wiggle her way out that sort of ‘negotiation’. And Ethan had known firsthand how intelligent her children were. True, this intelligence often made them arrogant...but here the trap had not been subtle at all.

Ares and Hephaestus had been captured. Hera had been deprived of her immortality and powers.

The foundations of Olympus may look solid for the moment, but the behaviour of many Olympians suggested pretty heavily they were anything but...

“What now, of glorious leader of the Suicide Squad?”

Perseus Jackson...yawned.

“Now, my treacherous lieutenant, I am going to sleep several hours and then modify a few plans to adapt to certain changing circumstances. Tomorrow, however.”

“What about tomorrow?”

Ethan felt some trepidation mixed with an emotion he knew very well.

“Tomorrow, I will order the Suicide Squad to assemble once again. It is time for us to write a new page of our villainous legend.”

Of course. Why had Ethan thought Perseus would be half-reasonable this time?

**1 October 2006, The Senate of New Constantinople, New York, United States of America (de jure)**

Jason had rarely liked the ambiance reigning in the Senate of New Constantinople at the best of times, and he certainly didn’t like it now.

What had been a nest of Demigods and Legacies playing politicians – something extremely dangerous for your health – was now officially in mourning.

If you weren’t aware of human nature, that just meant every member of the Senate was busy reciting insincere eulogies for the Legionnaires who had fallen in the Sea of Monsters.

Well, that and searching for a scapegoat.

Two Roman Cohorts had, for all intents and purposes, ceased to exist.

This was a disaster.

Someone had to be blamed for it.

Quite evidently, Tribune Bryce Lawrence and Octavian were in good place to be thrown to the wolves, but the problem was that one’s demise had already been confirmed by Olympus, and the other was not here to answer for his failures.

“When I retire from the Legion,” Frank Zhang murmured next to him, something that was really not necessary given the ruckus of...very loud conversations made by the different Senators, “I will do my best to stay away from this vipers’ nest.”

“That’s a gross insult,” Jason grimaced. “Vipers are really quite nice compared to our esteemed Senators.”

“Err...yeah, you’re right.”

“The First Cohort of the Twelfth Legion sinned against the Gods! We gave them everything they asked for! We were assured the supplies and the resources we placed at their disposal would be used in an optimal manner! We were promised victory!”

“Who is this one?”

“I think he’s a son of Victoria...and a former member of the Twelfth.”

“Ah yes, that explains it.”

“Tribune Bryce Lawrence and his advisors have lied to us every step of the way, from their preparations to their plans! Wherever the survivors hide, this kind of disgrace will not be tolerated! I propose a Venator force be gathered at once and-“

“**This won’t be necessary**.”

The great doors of the Senate opened in a thundering clang, and shouts of alarm echoed through the vast assembly room...quickly followed by screams of outrage as the majority of Senators recognised the identity of the main intruder.

It was Perseus Jackson. It was the son of Poseidon who had managed to survive in the Labyrinth and the Underworld.

“You are trespassing in the Senate of New Constantinople, *Greek*!” A black-haired Senator was the first to react. “Remove yourself at once, or-“

“**Oh shut-up**,” the Greek Demigod smiled in a demented fashion, and power erupted like a tornado. Most of the Senators who had begun voicing their displeasure closed their mouths...and were unable to reopen them, no matter how hard they tried. “**And please don’t move, I have something interesting to tell you**.”

Someone should stop the insane intruder. Hell, Jason and Frank should stop him right now! But as Jackson advanced, flanked by a muscular daughter of Ares and a grim dark-haired boy, the son of Jupiter felt unable to take a step forwards and interpose himself.

And judging by the way the Senators – many of them veterans from one of the three Legios – were not advancing to stop him, preferring to stay immobile and glare at him, this was not only his body betraying him.

Therefore there was no one to stop the Demigod who had led a Quester group successfully to complete a Great Quest when he climbed up on the podium.

And it also gave them an absolutely direct view on the awful orange toga Perseus Jackson had chosen to wear for today.

“Senators, Peers of Rome,” for some reason, Jason Grace felt that if the smile of the Demigod grew larger, it would usher the end of times. “I bring great news. The Suicide Squad is going to be assembled for the second time! I can tell you, with great pleasure, that by the will of Olympus, a Great Quest has been called.”

Jason was not a politician. He was not an expert when it came to Legionnaire favours and inter-Legion politics. And what little he knew about the Quests of the Greeks didn’t incite him to acquire more information about them.

But even with this limited knowledge, the son of Jupiter knew there was only one reason Olympus would call for a Great Quest at this very moment.

“The purpose of requiring my extraordinary services, of course,” Perseus Jackson confirmed, “is to make sure the goals that were given to your Legions are achieved. The Master of Olympus,” the title was given with so much irony it was comical, “wants his sons back. And the Golden Fleece, of course.”

“What about the Legionnaires who have survived the first days in the Zone Mortalis?” A Senator had clearly managed to fight back against the effects of the order to be silent.

“I’m so glad you asked, Senator!” The grin that was delivered was pure evil. “They come at the bottom of my priorities. And if you feel it’s an outrage...well, that’s too bad for you. I didn’t make the list of priorities, the Gods did. Take it up with them if you are not happy with it.”

The atmosphere in the Senate, which was already murderous, became more intense in its desire to find a culprit and tear the throat of someone...but for once, this someone was not mortal.

“Now that is said.” surely the Hell’s survivor could not mistake the angry whispers for a support of his words, right? “Let’s talk about the good news. The Suicide Squad is recruiting. Unlike last time, I can’t promise a fixed reward like I did for our amusing adventures to the Underworld and back. But unlike the last Great Quest, looting will be encouraged! Olympus will get twelve per cent of the total as a blessing to the Protector of Heroes. Moreover, the twelve officers will get five per cent each. And the survivors of the non-officers will divide between themselves a magnificent twenty-eight percent of the gains.”

That sounded like a big incentive in terms of Denarii, Jason could admit it.

But of course, there was this little problem.

“Falsehoods!” An angry Senator barked. “We all know what you did with Scipio Varus! The moment you Greeks think you can get away with it, you use proud Romans as cannon-fodder!”

Perseus Jackson, of course, was insane. And he proved it by smiling like he found the subject of no importance.

“Only when they try to assassinate me in an unsurprising manner, Peers of Rome,” the son of Poseidon assured them with a virtuous expression Jason was already disgusted by. “I tolerate many things, but the cannon-fodder must be original to be forgiven in gold and profit. Originality. We must thrive to write an interesting story for the future generations!”

The Senate didn’t find a reply, and this time, there was no power to compel the Senators to remain silent. This was just a recognition of how crazy the Greek Demigod truly was.

“Now let’s address various bureaucratic problems when it comes to rescue operations and secondary Quests...”

**2 October 2006, Garrison Barracks of the Third Legio, New Constantinople, New York, United States of America (de jure)**

“I don’t like you, Perseus Jackson.”

Legate Gabriele Rossi, son of Fortuna, was the commanding officer of the Third Legio, though most called it ‘Gallica’ in a normal conversation.

Dakota also knew he was one of the most apolitical Roman Demigods serving in the Legions.

Something that undoubtedly had to do with the bluntness he began each conversation with someone that wasn’t a subordinate or a friend.

Thankfully, the insane madman they had at the head of the Suicide Squad wasn’t the type to be easily offended.

“Now that’s just rude,” the son of Poseidon complained, though the son of Bacchus could easily see it was for the sake of complaining. “And here I was about to swear my eternal friendship to you.”

Dakota recognised the look Gabriele Rossi gave the black-haired menace. It was one wondering if impaling the threat with a very sharp object would make the problem in question disappear.

And the answer this unvoiced question, alas, was no.

“I don’t care about your friendship.” Apparently, the brown-haired Legate – though his hair were cut so short it was difficult to ascertain what shade they would be if they grew long – had decided bluntness was to be his strategy when speaking with Jackson. “I don’t care about the insults you threw to the Senate and what twisted plans you have in mind. I only care about one thing: can you save my Legionnaires? Can you save the Cohort that is trapped inside the Sea of Monsters?”

The questions were important. If they weren’t, Jackson would have answered far faster...and with a grin on his face.

“I think,” the green-eyed Demigod, “that I can save the survivors once I reach the Sea of Monsters. Which, for your information, will be about one month after our departure from this city’s harbour.”

“And the departure date is?” The Legate inquired.

“Mid-October. We will try to expedite it as quickly as possible, but our ship hasn’t left its construction shipyard. We are already going to...make the journey to the Zone Mortalis its first sea trial.”

Gabriele Rossi’s expression went from stony to gloomy.

Dakota wasn’t going to pretend there was no reason for that. A departure in mid-October meant an arrival in mid-November. All in all, between today and the moment the Suicide Squad found the remnants of the Roman Expeditionary Force, *two months* would certainly be necessarily spent.

This didn’t sound very long...until you remembered that the majority of the Roman warships had been destroyed in *mere days*.

“By mid-November, the only thing you’re likely to find are beached ships and corpses,” the Legionnaire commander said. “Assuming you find them, that is.”

“My last drone was following the largest coherent squadron in Third Legio’s colours when its batteries failed.” Perseus Jackson spoke idly. “I can’t make assurances as to their survival, but I think I will have an idea where to search...provided what they’re up against doesn’t disintegrate them like Circe’s mega-laser weapon.”

This time Dakota was the one to grimace. The Roman Demigod had watched the videos of the destruction of the *Dominus Caelum* and the *Assyria*. The only thing positive that could be said about the devastating defeat was that it had been quick, and the dead Legionnaires in their great majority had not been tortured or rendered mad by thirst or lack of food.

It was a far better death than the ones this murderous bastard of Flavio Ronco had wanted to give to the residents of the spa, to be sure.

“Then they will have to hold on until you find them.”

Gabriele Rossi was visibly unhappy about it, but there was nothing to do. The only beings that could do something were the Gods, and by the voice of Dionysus and Hercules, the Olympians had made it clear they wouldn’t play favourites and intervene to save the survivors of the doomed expeditions.

“Then we have an accord?” Jackson asked.

“We have,” the commanding officer of the Third Legio grunted. “What kind of offensive artefacts do you want?”

**5 October 2006, Secret Shipyard of the Rogue Engineering Company, Norfolk, United States of New America (de jure)**

Leo had never worked harder in his life.

Then again, he’d never managed to work for that long without exploding something important.

And all the work done with the Cyclops had led to...something beautiful.

The entire operation was very close to the end.

Still, satisfaction was everywhere, including in the son of Hephaestus’ heart.

Of course, not being satisfied when you had that majestic white yacht dominating everything in the cavern-dockyard would have been very difficult.

“AMIGO! Magnificent, isn’t it?”

“Argh!” Leo jumped, before realising it was only Perseus, who, as usual, had somehow arrived and sneaked up upon him without being noticed. “Don’t do that!”

“You have to be aware of your surroundings, Fiery Amigo!”

And here Leo really, really regretted telling the older boy he could wield fire as tool and weapon.

“Don’t do that again, please,” Leo Valdez repeated weakly. “Anyway your new ship is nearly ready. We flooded the dock yesterday and made the first tests. No problems so far.”

“I’m glad to hear it. And it is *our* new ship. In time, it will be the future grand flagship of the Suicide Squad Fleet.”

Somehow, it didn’t reassure Leo at all. After a few seconds, the son of Hephaestus decided he wasn’t going to think about it. There was nothing he could do about whatever dangerous plans the ‘Big Boss’ had in mind, and the other Demigods had warned him trying to guess the plans of Perseus Jackson would turn him mad.

“What you say...we were forced to change a lot of the Daedalus’ design. The engine you gave us was too big.” Leo hesitated, before deciding to ask for a precision. “And weren’t we supposed to have a maximal speed of twenty-five knots?”

“No,” the green-eyed boy grinned, which was, as everyone in the cavern had learned the last month, an advance warning something was about to go very wrong. “That was very much the minimal speed I wanted to sail on the most dangerous seas ever explored by mortal beings. That’s why I bought this ship engine and turbines from my contacts.”

“It is a beast,” the ‘volunteer engineer’ declared. “I’m not even sure I will be to repair it if it suffers major damage.”

“You will be successful, of that I have no doubt.” The ‘Big Boss’ declared while handing him a bag of his favourite sweets. “And the machinery being ‘a beast’ is exactly what I wanted. Any battle we fight must start when and where I want, not when the enemy decides for us.”

The smile of the son of Poseidon was not...very funny.

“Err...the ship should be able to sail up to fifty knots. At least that’s how far we plan to push it for the next two days.” Leo grimaced before asking what he really had on his heart. “Are you sure we can’t take your brother Tyson and a few Cyclops with us, Perseus? You say I am the best, but-“

“No, I am afraid not, Amigo.” For once, there was no joke or grin which came to scare him...which was not making him afraid...absolutely not. “Tyson has his own company to run...and even if he didn’t, taking Cyclops with us would be problematic.”

“Problematic?” The son of Hephaestus really, really didn’t like that...

“Unless I am greatly mistaken, Amigo,” Perseus Jackson’s eyes never turned away from the super-yacht he had ordered them to build, “the Master of Olympus must have recruited the unholy lesbian cult to serve as our overseers...and executioners if we fail to heed their orders.”

“The lesbian what?”

“They are known as the Huntresses of Artemis,” oh, *those women*... “you know, they are wearing forest scout garb, love to use bows and dangerous arrows on poor Demigods, and swear for eternity they won’t have a boyfriend.”

“I heard about them,” Leo confessed. “Wait a minute. They aren’t just hating monsters! They are hating all male Demigods!”

“Amigo, that’s what I tried to convey in my previous warning.”

“Err...” damn it, the ‘Big Boss’ was right. “Okay...yes. But is it that good of an idea to have them aboard? I mean...we are not Demigoddesses...”

“Unless you have hidden something that I am not aware of, indeed we aren’t.” Leo scowled before the enormous smile of Perseus Jackson.

“They hate men.”

“Indeed they are,” the son of Poseidon nodded seriously...though Leo was never sure when the older Demigod was serious or not. “Amigo, the evil lesbian cult hating men and boys in general is the very reason we will be told to accept them as part of our crew. That way the Master of Olympus has a group that will relish into killing all crewmates who are not girls.”

“That’s not good,” Leo said weakly.

“Bah, what’s life without a few dozen obvious traitors close to you? The advice is to keep a lot of enemies close to keep you sharp, I believe...”

In Leo’s opinion, whoever said that should be punished and given the most tiring and boring duties when working into a forge.

“Anything else?”

Leo thought about what he was going to say next. The various details about the beautiful ship they had built?

No, Perseus Jackson knew them. The ‘super-mega-yacht’ was one hundred and fifty metres-long, weighed ten thousand tonnes now, had a draught of approximately six metres, and its cruise speed was predicted to be around fifty knots.

All of that had been said over and over. The only thing that hadn’t been said-

“We need a name for the ship...Captain.”

“I chose one for this beautiful Lady of the Seas long ago, I assure you.” The dangerous grin increased. “This ship will be known to all as the ***Inevitable Doom***!”

Leo Valdez groaned in despair.

**6 October 2006, Conference Hall Number Three aka ‘Suicide Squad Recruitment Office’,** **New Byzantium, New York, United States of America (de jure)**

Annabeth knew when she woke up this morning that it was going to be one of *those days*.

The odds of a certain son of Poseidon not doing something crazy were so low even a drunk son of Dionysus/Bacchus would not gamble on them.

Still, even adopting a pessimistic point of view, it was difficult to believe how badly the whole ‘recruitment operation’ was starting.

The first being to walk through the doors had been...the Minotaur.

Yes, the Minotaur, it wasn’t a hallucination. Because of course, Jackson wanted his bull-headed accomplice back into the Suicide Squad.

Luke had whispered to her it was going to get better after that.

It didn’t.

Oh, by the Pit of Tartarus and all its countless horrors, it didn’t.

“Ah, our gallant duo is back! Did the offer for free mackerel convince you at last?”

“Don’t push your luck!” the smaller penguin snarled.

“What he said!” the Emperor penguin added next to him.

Yes, the next two potential recruits were the Legionnaires that had been transformed into penguins by the Goddesses Khione and Rhode.

Yes, it had been funny when she heard it...but that was many, many days ago.

Now, when they wanted to apply for the Suicide Squad?

Suddenly, Annabeth’s tolerance for that sort of madness was growing rather thin...they had had Jake Mason transformed into a donkey before, but it was been something forced upon them during the Great Quest.

And moreover...penguins.

“Jackson, are you sure it’s a good idea?”

The answer, alas, was kind of predictable.

“The Suicide Squad is a bastion of tolerance! We will accept all candidates, no matter how many fins, beaks, feathers, and hooves they have! And we have a lot of free mackerel to distribute!”

“We told you before we are only in it to find a counter-curse for our condition!” the Emperor penguin squeaked indignantly.

“But who am I to naysay your motivations?” The leader of the Suicide Squad grinned while ignoring superbly their retorts. “Penguin Rico, it has come to my attention you played with explosives before your little...unfortunate accident. As such, I propose you the role of ‘Demolition Expert’.”

“Do I have a choice?” the smaller penguin grouchily replied.

“Absolutely not,” the son of Poseidon didn’t miss this opportunity to give an easy and humorous answer. “Penguin Skipper, you will be a special operative for amphibious operations and other stuff needing a penguin’s touch.”

Proof that the transformed Romans could learn, the bigger penguin didn’t ask if there was an opportunity to change the role he was given.

Annabeth wrote their names. For some reason that she wasn’t going to like, Jackson insisted that the paperwork had to be in order.

*Former Centurion Rico Kowalski, Demolition Expert*

*Former Decurion Julian Skipper, Special Operative for Amphibious Operation*

The penguins signed the papers...or at least covered their fins with ink to do something that could be described as such.

“Now that we have recruited the most terrifying force on the seas, a duo of Penguin Marine Infantry,” Annabeth sighed; at this rate they were all going to be utterly mad before entering the Sea of Monsters, “the next volunteers must step forwards, please.”

And yes, there were volunteers. Many in the Conference Hall had come to be the witnesses of this crazy spectacle, but there were Demigods who had decided to come on this sunny morning with the intention to volunteer. A dozen had fled when they realised that Asterius the Minotaur being a member was not a joke, but several remained.

Whether it was because there were greedy or for another reason, Annabeth didn’t know.

The first Roman to walk to the recruitment table was a dark-haired tanned boy who had to be close to eighteen in age. Unlike many potential aspirants, his grim expression told the grey-eyed Demigoddess that this one, at least, had no illusion about his chances of survival.

“My name is Douglas Smith, son of Volturnus, Quester. I volunteer in your ‘Suicide Squad’ to have my revenge. My brother was one of the Legionnaires that this moron of Bryce Lawrence led to his death.”

“Welcome aboard, Douglas Smith. The Suicide Squad will do its best to help you fulfil your vengeance.”

The grim-faced Roman nodded, and then after signing, went to wait by Ethan Nakamura’s side.

The second Roman volunteer could not have been more different. The amused grin on his face was only a shadow of Jackson’s legendary smirks, but it was sufficient to generate the feeling that this Demigod was in it for far less noble reasons than avenging a dead brother.

“Fergus Cook, son of Liber,” the fair-haired boy who had to be sixteen or seventeen drawled with a lazy stance. “I did two years in the Legion before they threw me out. “Now I’m in it for the money. You told us there would be plenty of loot, right?”

“Indeed, indeed, I did,” Perseus Jackson approved and shook his hand enthusiastically. Annabeth suddenly had a bad feeling this one was going to be another Scipio Varus. Their insane leader may think it was extremely to approve potential assassins in their ranks just to counter their betrayals... “Welcome in the Suicide Squad, Fergus Cook! Your dedication to the acquisition of Drachmas will be remembered for a very long time!”

The third Demigod to step forwards was...looking sickly. This first impression was more than justified as he coughed violently. The noise made plenty of souls in the Conference Hall wince, for it wasn’t a sound that came when you wanted to simply clear your throat.

“Nick Coleman, son of Quirinus,” the brown-haired Roman presented himself. “I caught a nasty curse while serving the Gods. If I can’t get the gold to pay for my medicines, I will die within three years. Your Great Quest is my best chance to survive.”

“You have made the right choice, Nick Coleman. The Suicide Squad’s goals will not disappoint you.”

Many Demigods and Demigoddesses decided at this moment that no, ultimately, that this whole business of going into a Zone Mortalis which had already been the downfall of two Legionnaire Cohorts was far too risky.

The number of ‘enthusiastic volunteers’, which had already been reduced significantly, fell further, leaving only two...and none of them were Greek Demigods.

“Bella Medina,” the black-haired Demigoddess spoke in a condescending tone, and instantly, Annabeth began to dislike her. “I’m the daughter of Scotus, and you can rejoice for I will save you from the incompetence of those morons who volunteered before me.”

“That’s a big claim, we have very high standards, you know.”

Black eyes filled with arrogance stared at the mischievous green eyes, and Annabeth sighed internally. Someone was going to die during this Great Quest...

And finally, that left the last candidate...one who, when he abandoned the black cloak hiding mostly everything about him, was revealed to be a heavily-muscled Demigod of twenty-something that the daughter of Annabeth had never seen before at camp.

There were powerful Demigods in New Byzantium, like Luke...but this one seemed to be shining from his sheer strength.

“Richard Grant, son of Hercules,” the voice was so filled with confidence and arrogance that instantly, Annabeth rolled her eyes. Great, after the daughter of Scotus, they had another arrogant mountain of muscles. “I am here because you need the best of the best for this Great Quest.”

“And you are the best?” Obviously, the son of Poseidon couldn’t resist asking this question...

“Evidently!” Richard Grant proclaimed so loudly that there was no way each and every spectator could mistake his words for anything else. “In my opinion, you don’t need crying babies, you need real men and-“

No doubt the son of Heracles would have loved to continue, but he was forced to jump aside as an arrow narrowly missed him.

A heartbeat later, Annabeth acknowledged it wasn’t Richard Grant who had been targeted. It was Jackson.

The proof?

The arrow had hit the table right between his hands.

“Who dares-“

“The Huntresses of Artemis.” Luke announced with a fatalistic expression. Annabeth grimaced in turn. Oh great, they had been rid of Nightshade – the Huntress, not the Hellhound – in Hades’ Palace when her Goddess took her away.

She had not the time to think more about the subject as teenagers armed with bows and clad in forest-themed hunting attires stormed into the building. There were nine of them. All the Huntresses looked armed to the teeth...and were clearly ready to use them against the crowd if they were given the order.

“Welcome to the Suicide Squad!” Perseus Jackson beamed. “On behalf of all my lieutenants, treacherous and heroic, I bid you-“

“Be silent, *male*.”

Annabeth winced, and she was far from the only one. There had been many times disgust, exasperation and anger in Nightshade’s voice when she was in the Suicide Squad.

This was different.

This was hatred, and it was not because Jackson had done something to her.

It was hatred for the sake of hatred.

It was hatred because he hadn’t been born a girl, and for all the conspiracies and treacherous plans the son of Poseidon had done in the last months, this was definitely something he wasn’t guilty of.

“We will go with you on this Great Quest, by the will of Olympus. You will obey your orders, or I will obey mine and dispose of you before leading this Great Quest to victory.”

*Zeus* had decided this...man-hating girl was to be their new leader if Jackson disappeared? Pit of Tartarus, that was a stupid idea...

“So be it,” with a shining silver arrow pointed in the direction of his head, even Perseus Jackson seemed to have decided a joke was not worth it right now, “I will need your names for the records. The Greek and Roman bureaucrats insisted after the paperwork mess of the last Great Quest.”

The leader of the Huntresses looked at the most powerful Demigod of their generation like one looked at a worm...and it offended her, because unlike this hateful lieutenant of Artemis, they had accomplished great things, damn it!

“I am Phoebe.”

“Oh yes, the daughter of Eris-“

Jackson had to throw himself out of his chair, or the arrow fired would have found its mark between his eyes.

“She is no mother of mine,” Phoebe hissed angrily, “and if you open your mouth again, *vermin*, I will make sure to cut your arms and your legs before throwing you to a pack of hungry wolves for dinner.”

Looking at Jackson, Annabeth could tell the threat had been acknowledged seriously.

And from a Great Quest worth of experience, the daughter of Athena was confident of one thing: the other volunteers, penguins included, may have had low to insignificant chances to survive the Sea of Monsters, but their chances of survival pales compared to those of the Huntresses of Artemis...

**7 October 2006,** **Director’s Barrack, New Byzantium, New York, United States of America (de jure)**

Chiron was so surprised he let all the cards he had in his hands fall on the table.

“**Ha!**” Dionysus laughed. “**I knew you were bluffing, you old horse!**”

At this moment, the millennia-old centaur could care far less about losing the game and the tokens he had bet a few minutes ago.

Card games were something to take seriously, of course, especially when Apollo was fond of reminding him his losing streaks when he visited.

But there were things more important in life.

Things like the huge ship entering the New Golden Horn Bay as he watched in disbelief.

“Did you know?” He asked.

“**Hmm? Did I know about what**?” The God of Wine conjured some grapes and threw them to his favourite leopard. How did Chiron know it was the favourite? The poor animals should do some exercise after all the ‘presents’ he received from Dionysus.

“The ship which has entered the Bay!”

“**Oh, that’s why you were so distracted**...” a bottle of red wine appeared from nowhere, “**nice yacht, by the way. I think even Aphrodite and Apollo used smaller ones one year ago when they showed off at Saint-Tropez**.”

“This is not my yacht!” Chiron seethed.

“**Well, no, obviously**,” Dionysus yawned. “**You don’t have enough humour in you to call your ship the *Inevitable Doom***.”

“The what?”

In the blink of an eye, the latest model of binoculars sold by Hermes was around his neck, and when Chiron placed them in front of his eyes, they allowed him indeed to confirm the Olympian’s words.

The ship coming in their direction was indeed a yacht, albeit one of colossal proportions. Poseidon had likely a bigger ship when he wanted to show off. Zeus had one too, one bigger than the ones his brother had, because the God of Thunder would never tolerate being second, no matter how insignificant and childish the ‘contest’ was. Well, that, and the Master of Olympus had never been shy copulating with barely-adult women in bikinis when summer arrived near the hottest Mediterranean destinations.

This yacht was big. And it was entirely painted in white, with the notable exception of the ship’s name, which had been painted in orange.

And indeed, in plain English, the letters INEVITABLE DOOM could be read.

Chiron did not need more clues to know who exactly had ordered this ship to be built.

“The son of the Earthshaker is mad.”

Dionysus chuckled.

“This isn’t funny, Mr. D!”

“**I disagree, old stallion!**” the God of Wine guffawed. “**You should see your face!**”

“This is not funny at all!” Chiron glared, and to his consternation, the sole effect it had was to make the Olympian howls of laughter get increasingly louder. “Do you have any idea how much such a ship has cost?”

“**Millions of Drachmas, I would say**,” the God of Wine continued to chuckle as a pride of leopards got closer to be rewarded with small pieces of meat, grapes, and caresses. “**Who cares? When you are mortal, Demigod or not, it’s best to assume you won’t get another chance. Better enjoy your life to the fullest**!”

Sometimes, Chiron really wondered whose side Dionysus was...

“Do you have any idea how much it is going to increase the tensions between the Olympians, to have the son of the Earthshaker build something like that in secret?”

The Olympian adjusted his bright violet toga before delivering a loud sound of burping.

“**My dear little pony**,” the son of Zeus’ expression went to adopt a maniacal smile, as purple flames began to burn in his eyes. “**I didn’t find myself in the middle of India with the populations of entire cities worshipping me because I didn’t want to offend Hera or something equally ridiculous! I walked eastwards, got drunk, and made a rampage because I wanted to have FUN**!”

Chiron shook his head. To his regret, he had almost forgotten that in addition to being the God of Wine, Alcoholic Substances, Drugs, Attraction Parks, and a lot of entertainment locations...’Mr D.’ Was also the God of Madness.

“Sometimes I wonder why the Lord of Olympus wanted you to be rewarded with the Twelfth Throne.” The old centaur – though clearly, he didn’t look like his real age – declared bitterly.

“**To be honest, old horse, I wonder the same thing every time I enter the Council Room**.” Dionysus yawned in an exaggerated fashion. “**It’s certainly not because of my sane and pleasant personality. Anyway, I await eagerly the next shocking moves of the Suicide Squad’s leader**.”

This was not...oh, who was he kidding.

By voicing it like that, Dionysus had just made it inevitable the name was going to be as good as carved in the marble, if it wasn’t already.

Chiron sighed, all the while continuing to observe the gigantic yacht and the growing crowd of Demigods assembling to greet it in the New Golden Horn Shipyards.

Madness was everywhere, and often he felt like he was the only sane person in the middle of an asylum...

**8 October 2006, Hades’ Barrack, New Byzantium, New York, United States of America (de jure)**

Bianca di Angelo was used to see a lot of mocking expressions on Perseus Jackson’s face every day.

Now that those expressions had been replaced by reverence, the former Dread Empress didn’t exactly know how to react.

True, the black-haired boy’s reaction was directed at the artefact-lanterns, not at her, but since Bianca was the one to craft the magical devices in the first place.

“This is extraordinarily work, thank you.”

“You have me first-rate materials to work with.” The daughter of Hades decided to play the ‘humble role’ for once...especially as it had the merit of being true.

“Of course! When it comes to the creation of artefacts, it is out of question to buy cheap. Vital parts of my plans must not be endangered because someone succumbed to the temptation of saving a few Drachmas.”

This confirmed the son of Poseidon was a being filled with contradictions. For some things, he was absolutely ready to buy cheap stuff that would break in the first seconds, if not sooner...

“I can’t confirm it for everything, but I guarantee the lanterns I crafted will fulfil the purpose you want.” Bianca stared at him as enchanted boxes were brought forwards by the inevitable gargoyles. “Still, I don’t doubt you have contingency plans if we experience major problems and the plan fails.”

Perseus grimaced, and once again, it wasn’t one to amuse or break the concentration of Nico like the son of Poseidon often did during their Mythomagic card games.

“Every plan can fail; this is an imperfect world after all. But I would prefer this one didn’t.” The green-eyed boy gave her a thoughtful look. “This plan has the benefit of giving us the initiative, the surprise, and possibly a lot of information as we really begin our Great Quest. If I can’t make it work, the alternative is following the same journey the doomed expedition of the Romans did.”

“The Charybdis-Scylla Strait,” Bianca said slowly. “Yes, it wouldn’t be an easy beginning-“

“I could care less about the Strait by itself,” the Zeus-appointed leader of the Great Quest dismissed the problem presented by two gigantic monsters as if it was nothing. “I am more worried about the entire fleet of the Triumvirate waiting for us right behind the strait. The *Inevitable Doom* has been equipped with many weapons and an engine capable of leaving Battleships miles behind it in a straight race, but in such a battle, we will unavoidably take casualties and lose the element of surprise. And it is safe to bet that no matter how many ships we sink before breaking through, the enemy leadership will order one or two survivors to shadow us. That way they will have plenty of information about our moves...and which islands they will be able to intercept or ambush us in the future.”

Bianca had to admit the scenario described was very likely. Indeed, one could easily acknowledge that despite the storm which had allowed the Romans to get through the blockade of the Triumvirate, the Mark Antony-Cleopatra duo had triumphed using this very strategy.

The ships sent by the Twelfth and the Third Legio had been outthought, outmanoeuvred, and outfought every step of the war.

If the Suicide Squad didn’t want the same to happen, Jackson’s first mad plan – she knew far better now to hope it was the only one – was their best chance to enter the Sea of Monsters with a significant advantage against the numerous enemies they intend to confront.

Unfortunately, whether or not the plan would work had to wait they were sufficiently close to the Zone Mortalis. Until then, it was useless to speculate further.

So the daughter of Hades changed the topic of the discussion.

“What is the big deal with the King of Pirates, anyway? The information collected by the drones is enough to fill books about it, yet there is no one who is certain of what the title they search for truly is.”

“I have many theories,” Perseus grinned again, and alas, normalcy returned...and by normalcy, Bianca meant ‘madness’. “I have no doubt the pirates unleashed across the Sea think it is about becoming immortals and achieving what the Immortal Sorceress of the Labyrinth did.”

And Pasiphaë had become the Goddess of the Labyrinth. That would imply that the title of ‘King of Pirates’ would reward its owner with immortality and the power to truly rule over the Sea of Monsters.

But the former Dread Empress had not spent decades in a previous life ruling the Dread Empire of Praes by not paying attention to the way people phrased ‘their’ truths.

“The pirates think...one might say you don’t have a great deal of confidence this theory is true.”

“One might say that.” Perseus replied with a smirk. “One might also say the Gods used this legend to bait a lot of the most dangerous pirates to have ever existed, at a time where the Olympians were eager to extinguish the Golden Age of Piracy. They may have rewritten the history books afterwards, but I have grabbed enough priceless lore to say that the Demigods who hoisted the black flag were turning into an uncontrollable problem before Olympus decided to implement this desperate plan.”

“One might wonder,” the Lightning Thief said cautiously, “where they did find the idea to go for a Zone Mortalis’ creation.”

“Oh, that’s an easy one,” the ex-Tyrant surprised her again. “They took inspiration from the trials of Odysseus across the Mediterranean. The poor King returned home only ten years after the sack of Troy, and he was alone, empty-handed, and friendless. And he did so only with the help of the Owl Goddess, his protector. It didn’t take much to make the new version of the Odyssey a near-perfect trap.”

“And our next Great Quest will take place inside it. Lovely.”

“Yes, absolutely!” Her next word had been filled with irony...but Perseus Jackson once more grabbed like it like it had been intended to be serious. “The Master of Olympus denied to all, including his brothers and children, the right to rule the Sea of Monsters. As a result, no God or Goddess is dominant there.”

“The Triumvirate could be on its way to do exactly what you say.”

“I don’t think so. I think they are after a far bigger prize.”

“And this prize is?”

“That will remain my little secret for now...” and here for what felt the thousandth time already, Bianca had the urge to strangle him. “Think about it as part of the challenge every time you want to discover my plans!”

And worse, the infuriating bastard had so well manipulated the conversation that in the end, the daughter of Hades was still in the dark when it came to the issue of the King of Pirates...

**8 October 2006, Poseidon’s Barrack, New Byzantium, New York, United States of America (de jure)**

Lou Ellen did believe she was not the kind of Goddess to react rashly when something extremely unexpected happened...and thanks her mother’s power she didn’t, for with Jackson and the Suicide Squad, there had been enough events since they departed for the Labyrinth’s entrance to lose yourself in a sea of craziness.

But there were some things you couldn’t help but react.

And the massive arsenal of magical artefacts and hyper-advanced weapons waiting for them near the entrance of the Poseidon’s Barrack was clearly one of those things.

“Perseus,” the daughter of Hecate sighed.

“Yes, my dear sorceress lieutenant?”

“How much trouble we would be into if right now some Olympian emissary happened to visit us and discover this?”

“We’re transporting this cargo in the middle of the night to the *Inevitable Doom*, protected by several devices which are supposed to prevent any spy from being interested in our nightly adventurous deeds. Does it answer your question?”

“Yes.”

Most of said artefacts were completely illegal, then. Or at the very least, the Council of Olympus would never have tolerated them falling into the hands of the Suicide Squad’s Questers.

Lou Ellen did her best not to sigh again. It was hard.

“I know many of those weapons are going to be useful.” Three large boxes were clearly some kind of very dangerous grenades that could be of use both on land and sea battles. “But couldn’t you go and store the very dangerous stuff on the super-yacht while it was in its shipyard?”

“My dear sorcerous lieutenant,” suddenly a bad feeling made her shiver, “the very dangerous stuff is already aboard the *Inevitable Doom*. The Armageddon missiles, for example-“

“The Armageddon what?” Lou Ellen hissed angrily.

“The...is it too late to tell you to forget about it?”

“Yes!”

“The Armageddon missiles is one of my plans to make sure that if the entire fleet of the Triumvirate fleet tries to corner us into a massive naval battle, it won’t be the Suicide Squad who will die and feed the monstrous fishes of the Zone Mortalis at the end of the day.”

Lou Ellen looked at the son of Poseidon with a very skeptical expression.

“I know what missiles are, Jackson. There is no way we have a compartment big enough to store them. There’s also the fact of what would we use to launch them to begin with?”

“The swimming pool we have on the prow can be emptied in three seconds, and once the mosaic decoration is removed, the launchers are revealed and the annihilation of the enemy is in its preparation stage.”

Lou Ellen gaped.

“What?”

“My dear sorceress,” the green-eyed Demigod was visibly enjoying her surprise as much as one mortal could, “I told you again and again like I did with the others that it is a super-mega-yacht. And yet-“

“This is an armoured cruiser pretending to be a mega-yacht, Jackson!” Lou Ellen calmed herself. “Well, at least we will have a lot of firepower to defend ourselves from common and extraordinary threats. Can I assume, for the sake of reassurance, that the Armageddon missiles are just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the weapons you stores inside the *Inevitable Doom*?”

“Oh, I think you can safely assume that.”

Was it wrong that the answer excited and worried her in equal measure?

“Okay, I will concede your point. This is not the most dangerous stuff which could make several Gods and Goddesses very angry.” The daughter of Hecate examined quickly several massive boxes. Magical arrows, dangerous swords and cursed javelins...explosive rings, disgusting concoctions which could be propelled at incredible distances with propelling spells...and even a magical flying carpet which must have been obtained from the Amazons. The other ‘not-weapons artefacts’ included strange compasses which were frozen in amber-coloured transparent globes and things she couldn’t decipher the purpose of.

By Jacksonian standards, it was nothing out of the ordinary...wait a minute. Lou Ellen walked forwards the bigger container which was surrounded by a massive number of gargoyles, and ignoring their squeaking, opened it.

The moment she did, the blonde Demigoddess felt the desire to strangle the leader of the Suicide Squad.

“Jackson...I thought we were all in agreement that the idea of the Hell Sarcophagus was to be abandoned after what the Lightning Thief did with one?”

“It’s not exactly what I said,” Perseus Jackson corrected her with a cheerful grin on his face. “I told everyone that an Orichalcum Sarcophagus to turn yourself into an immortal being is extremely impractical and shouldn’t be attempted again. You will notice that this sarcophagus, for all the gold foil embellishing it, has exactly zero gram of Orichalcum added to the precious metals which were poured into its construction. I will also let you examine the Greek scripts carved in the metal. Those are not magical formulas which encourage anyone to claim immortality.”

After several minutes, Lou Ellen was forced to acknowledge Jackson was saying the truth. The scripts which had been magically enchanted were all emphasizing the *mortality* of the unknown party the sarcophagus was destined to.

“But...what is the point? Between the Lightning Thief, my magic, your talents, and the other talents we have inside the Suicide Squad...we do not exactly have a problem to kill our opposition.”

And if the opposition was immortal...well, Lou Ellen was pretty sure no God or Goddess worthy of the name would jump in the sarcophagus no matter how nicely you asked or how much Charmspeak you could push in your voice.

“Ah, ah, ah. I think my intentions for this artefact will remain a secret...for now.”

“Fine, keep your secrets. Just keep it out of sight of the Rich One’s daughter, so that she doesn’t get new megalomaniac ideas.”

“You know we’re speaking about an Empress who conquered an entire continent by overwhelming might, right?”

Lou Ellen glared.

“Fine, fine. I don’t plan to use the sarcophagus for a long time, anyway. In fact, if we aren’t able to reach a certain island, it’s possible we may never use it. The Sea of Monsters, like all Zones Mortalis, is a location where classical methods of navigation fail, and normal maps are as useful there as they were in the Labyrinth. To go where we want to, we will have to rely on esoteric methods and a lot of contingencies.”

“Thus the artefacts?”

“Thus the artefacts.”

After a conversation like that in the middle of the night, twelve hours of sleep had never sounded more than attractive.

“What now?”

“Well, my sorcerous lieutenant, those boxes aren’t going to transport themselves...”

“If you don’t help, I will curse you into oblivion,” the daughter of Hecate threatened immediately while glaring at the infuriating member of the Suicide Squad.

It must have been indeed impressive, because Perseus Jackson immediately began to use his Hydrokinesis to move the container of the Egyptian-themed golden sarcophagus...

**10 October 2006, Golden Horn Bay,** **New York, United States of America (de jure)**

If they compared today with the day they departed for the first Great Quest, it was night and day...literally.

Before he led them to one of the entrances of the Labyrinth, they had scurried away in the middle of the night.

Today?

It was noon, the divine-mandated sunny weather was making the Bay a true haven of light and magnificence, and though it was hardly warm on the deck of the *Inevitable Doom*, it couldn’t be called either.

And of course, there was the crowd. It seemed half of the entire Roman-Greek population had come to watch them leaving.

Obviously, it was a far smaller number than the Expeditionary Force had been able to enjoy. When the Roman warships had sailed away, everyone had been here to give their farewells. But it had been summer, and the son of Poseidon was realistic enough to know that some things couldn’t be changed in mere months.

To begin with, a non-negligible percentage of Demigods, Legacies, and other citizens of New Byzantium thought the Suicide Squad had been extremely lucky when it came to the matter of their survival during the First Great Quest.

Those poor souls thought them fighting their way through the challenges of the Labyrinth, the Asphodel Sea, and several armies of skeletons...it was all a fluke.

Many were so blinded by their prejudices they had gone so far to officially bet against their survival in public.

The poor fools.

His treacherous lieutenant saluted him as he marched towards the prow.

“We’re ready to raise the anchor, Captain.”

Perseus gave him an unsatisfied look.

“Only Captain? I thought my promotion to the rank of Grand Admiral had already been approved!”

Luke Castellan, heroic lieutenant of the Suicide Squad, sighed loudly.

“We told you, Ethan, the power was going to go up to his head before we raised the anchor.”

“Be careful,” the son of Poseidon smirked while donning the superb Napoleon-themed hat his faithful gargoyles brought him. “We’re operating by the rules of the Suicide Squad Code, now.”

“And those rules are?” the daughter of Athena asked.

“The rules are whatever his twisted head will invent,” Dakota McDonald answered between two gulps of his flask. “Am I right?”

“He is,” Lou Ellen, his dear sorceress lieutenant, didn’t give him alas the opportunity to throw a splendid tirade.

“That doesn’t surprise me,” Bianca di Angelo commented. Perseus wondered if the daughter of Hades realised how much the last months had changed her. Probably not.

“We haven’t sailed a mile, and already mutiny is brewing among this crew! How cruel! How tragic!”

“Stop it, oh insane Boss!” the son of Hephaestus had arrived, and given how dishevelled he looked, he had visited once again the engine room in the last minutes. “Everything is in the green. We’re ready to leave.”

“What marvellous news!”

Perseus chuckled for several seconds before resuming his walk. He avoided the swimming pool – as tempting as it was, this was not the time to bathe – and went on to jump on the guard-rail formally marking the separation between the *Inevitable Doom* and the sea that waited below.

“Proud citizens of New Byzantium! Legionnaires of New Constantinople! I want you to remember this moment! Today I proclaim to you my eternal friendship! Today you are watching the Suicide Squad sail away towards adventure and danger!”

Thanks to the megaphone installed right in front of him, Perseus was sure everyone, from Dionysus to the lowest recruit of the Legions, was really listening to him now.

“I am really proud to announce the bets you have placed against my survival have been all recorded to the proper authorities!” Suddenly, the tumult of the crowd, which had resonated with many whistles reeking of mockery, were far more subdued. “By my record, the total of Drachmas you have gambled on my death is over two million! You will not regret it. We will plunder in your name. We will plunge the seas into bloody chaos. And you will pay for it! FOR THIS IS THE SUICIDE SQUAD, WE SAIL TO THE SEA OF MONSTERS, AND THIS GREAT QUEST WILL BE SUCCESSFUL! BY AND FOR THE POWER OF FRIENDSHIP!”

At last the son of Poseidon turned and watched all the Demigods waiting behind him.

The non-officers were gaping...the officers looked really resigned.

“So,” Perseus smiled, “what did you think of this latest monologue?”

**Author’s note**: Ready Player One failed. Ready Player Two.

To give you a reminder of the scale of what will be attempted in Arc 2 of this crazy story, here is the order of battle of the Suicide Squad as they leave New Byzantium.

**Suicide Squad Order of Battle**

Warship: Armoured Super-Mega-Yacht *Inevitable Doom*

Officers (12):

Perseus Jackson (Captain, son of Poseidon, appointed leader of the Great Quest)

Lou Ellen Blackstone (daughter of Hecate)

Clarisse La Rue (daughter of Ares)

Dakota McDonald (son of Bacchus)

Luke Castellan (son of Hermes)

Annabeth Chase (daughter of Athena)

Drew Tanaka (daughter of Aphrodite)

Ethan Nakamura (son of Nemesis)

Miranda Gardiner (daughter of Demeter)

Leo Valdez (son of Hephaestus)

Michael Yew (son of Apollo)

Antigone Barbara (former Goddess Hera)

Non-officers (8):

Asterius the Minotaur

Ex-Centurion Rico Kowalski

Ex-Decurion Julian Skipper

Douglas Smith (son of Volturnus)

Fergus Cook (son of Liber)

Nick Coleman (son of Quirinus)

Richard Grant (son of Hercules)

Hazel Medina (daughter of Scotus)

Huntresses of Artemis (Executioner Force, 9):

Phoebe, daughter of Eris

Kimiko

Kalinda

Alexia

Eudoxia

Judith

Jade

Ellen

Jenna

And if you think for some naive reason everyone is going to survive the Great Quest...well, this is the Suicide Squad.

It is time it lives up to the name, don’t you agree?

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