**Chapter 23**

**Gallowborne**

*Operation Nautilus’ true goals were not that complicated to understand. The principle behind it was relatively simple too. As Jackson himself said, it is difficult to fear the Master Bolt if you’re already on fire.*

*Obviously, it would have been far better for our common sanity if a certain infuriating son of Poseidon had told everyone the truth about what really happened when the Giant died, instead of waiting for a few days down the line.*

*But alas, with the benefit of hindsight, I don’t think it mattered that much in the end.*

*When everyone wants to send you to the gallows, the cold comfort you can take is that they can only hang you once when you’re alive.*

*This promise evidently doesn’t apply to what will happen when we will be dead and facing our Judges. After what happened, we’re sure to spend some time in the Fields of Punishment, unless Hell needs some professional demolishers. I can definitely vouch the Suicide Squad is overqualified in that domain.*

*Anyway, the sensation of victory did not survive long the victory of Pear Island and the recovery of the Golden Fleece.*

*As many of our unfortunate members would quickly discover, the Golden Fleece is indeed an incredible healing artefact. But it can’t heal the dead. You still need some breath of life in your body, otherwise the whole process is useless. Death is final, unless you’re a monster...but then the Golden Fleece doesn’t work on you.*

*Gods, these days were just a chaotic mess.*

*Unlike what happened in the last battle to recover the healing artefact, here it is easy to say the plan didn’t last long after making contact with the enemy.*

*These were the last hours before the Dark Solstice. And once again, the Suicide Squad was going to enter History with a big ‘H’ by doing things no one had ever dared to attempt...ever.*

Extract from the Chapter 5 of *Seas of Madness: Chronicles of the Suicide Squad* Volume 2 by Annabeth Chase, daughter of Athena

**20 December 2006, Super-Mega Armoured Yacht *Inevitable Doom*, somewhere in the Sea of Monsters**

The ritual, in all honesty, looked like one of the most ridiculously-looking she’d seen in the last years, and given that she travelled with someone loving orange paint, Bianca knew it was quite a feat.

Making a military dance in a circle of blue shells, incanting a frenetic song while throwing quantities of salt all around, before offering god just dragged from the watery depths of the Sea of Monsters to the Gods...it was a purification ritual, all right.

But there were far simpler and less ridiculous ones available.

“Was it necessary?” the daughter of Hades asked. “Besides, I was under the impression you wanted to make the girl a Berserker.”

“If she wanted that,” the son of Poseidon next to her retorted, “she would have needed to eat a Lycanthrope’s heart with vinegar before bathing in their blood.”

“Now I know you’re joking.”

“The part with vinegar, yes,” Perseus Jackson reluctantly admitted. “But I wasn’t making fun of anyone when I spoke the part about eating the heart, no.”

True, there was no smile on his face...

“Well, if not a Berserker, what do you want to push her to do?”

“Now, your Most Dreadful Majesty, I will have you know no amount of pushing, physical or mental, was involved, it’s just-”

“Your tongue is definitely the most dangerous part of your body, even when you don’t use Charmspeak,” Bianca interrupted before it could transform into a monologue.

“Boring,” the green-eyed Demigod yawned. “Try harder.”

“We just sacrificed most of the gold you dragged from the watery depths, you know.”

“We will find other resources. If I did try to recover everything from that galleon wreck today, it was to make sure all of our debts were paid before the Solstice.”

“Including the rum bottles?”

In case anyone asked: the amount of gold they had found was very small, barely a little chest, and with a lot of empty space within. The numbers of rum bottles, however, numbered in the high thousands.

“*Especially* the rum bottles,” Perseus Jackson smirked. “I had begun to send some before we started this Quest, but this offering will definitely pay back everything I owed for using the Trident for a few minutes. Plus there are always big parties in the Atlantis Palaces when a Solstice takes place. Centuries-old rum bottles are collector items. My name will be on everyone’s lips.”

Bianca could have replied his name must already be on everyone’s lips, given the affair with Chrysaor and him slaying a Drakon. But it was also true delivering rum bottles to the Lord of the Sea’s capital would make Perseus a very important subject of conversation, and in very complimentary tones.

What was the saying this world had, that it was better to be loved than be feared? There was a proverb was something sounding like that, anyway.

“And you drink little alcohol, thus sending them cost you very little.” The former Dread Empress noted. “May I say I find very ironic that of all vices you chose, drinking is not among them?”

“I never drank much, Bianca.” The green eyes were...thoughtful. “In my first life, I saw what it did to my genitor, and I resolved that while I was going to be a villain, I wouldn’t be a drunken one. I needed a clear mind, if I wanted to engineer a myriad of overcomplicated plans. So far, one and a half life later, I have seen nothing to change my mind.”

This was...an interesting stance to be sure. And for once, the daughter of Hades didn’t doubt it was the truth. Oh, Perseus’ lips had touched alcohol, both before this Quest and during it. But most of the time it had been to please Dionysus, God of Wine, not because he wanted to sink into alcoholic delights. Annabeth Chase had also whispered sometimes that it was for the son of the Earthshaker a way for him to build himself an alcoholic immunity when adding some enchantments and curious artefacts, and she might very well be right.

“Well,” Perseus turned his head back in Clarisse’s direction. “The ritual is over. Now we can properly begin Operation Nautilus. Please gather the Suicide Squad, we’re going to attack.”

“Already?” Bianca shook her head. “I thought we had agreed to attack C.C’s spa after the sun set, so that the *Inevitable Doom* could arrive without being detected!”

“Yes, that part of the plan hasn’t changed. But we are going to attack somewhere else first.”

“Jackson,” the Demigoddess growled. “This is just madness! Do you think our enemies are going to form a line in front of the gallows?”

“To answer your questions, yes and yes!” the leader of the Suicide Squad cackled, and the sea suddenly seemed far more tormented and violent than it had been seconds ago. “One must never forget that inevitable doom is a very finite resource. When split between multiple opponents, it becomes mere doom! Onwards, Suicide Squad! We sail for a glorious battle!”

Bianca sighed internally...why, oh why, had she thought it was a good idea to steal the Master Bolt and become the Lightning Thief?

**20 December 2006, the beaches of Bayou Island, Sea of Monsters**

Octavian had been partly wrong. Blackbeard had not just come to this god-forsaken island just to recruit monsters.

The son of Ares had also come because he wanted ammunition.

And of course, it wasn’t the bloodthirsty monsters which had been ordered to transport the barrels filled with gunpowder...

It was long. It was exhausting. It was dangerous, for after the bloodbath, the surviving monsters were still not satiated by the horrible feasting.

If Blackbeard was not here, the Legacy of Apollo was certain the Empousai and all the other predators would have already attacked and torn them to pieces.

And finally, after many more barrels and caskets, after impotently watching as thousands of pistols and rifles were delivered in other hands than his, it was over.

The chains were tied to the collar around his neck, and soon there would be more near his arms and legs to make sure they were more defenceless than ever. They were going to be dragged into the dark hull of the *Queen Anne’s Revenge* and be allowed to rest for a bit. And maybe, just maybe, they would not be followed there by the predatory eyes of the-

“Guys, does the sea not look strange to you? It seems-“

An enormous explosion of water shook the warship, and Octavian gaped in sheer stupefaction.

It came out of nowhere.

It was...it was...

It was a gigantic yacht of white colour.

And on its prow, a mad Demigod that Octavian instantly recognised was agitating his tricorn.

“REMEMBER THIS DAY, CORSAIRS AND BUCANEERS! REMEMBER THIS DAY FOR YOU HAVE FINALLY MET YOUR MASTER! I AM PERSEUS JACKSON! I AM THE KING OF THE PIRATES!”

An enormous wave rose, and the two ships further away from the bay, both commanded by Captains who had recently rallied Blackbeard, were literally drowned in an instant.

Then an enormous turret chose to reveal itself behind a hidden panel of the yacht, and three missiles were launched. The *Triumph of Panama*, an old frigate which had seen better days since it left the service of the Viceroyalty of the Indies, took the brunt of the assault.

One missile would have been, for such a target, just overkill.

Two would have been butchery.

Three was just bloodthirsty madness.

One by one, the modern weapons detonated, and they devastated their target...and then the gunpowder magazine was hit.

In less time than it took to say it, the *Triumph of Panama* exploded like a volcano, taking in death with it all its crew, be it monsters, pirates, or slaves.

“To your guns, boys! To your guns!” Black beard shouted, suddenly rushing out of his cabin. “Sink me that bastard before-“

“SMASH!”

Octavian outright panicked as he saw what was coming. He felt what was coming.

The sea and the earth shook. The very world was shaken. Gigantic waves rose. On the beach not far way, enormous fissures opened. Two ships in the bay capsized.

“**NO**!” Blackbeard snarled...and as the human-shaped monster did it, he struck back.

The waves and something metallic collided, and the shockwaves were countered by blows which reeked of blood and death.

This was...this was just...ungodly.

The sea was in fury. The island was erupting in smoke and dust.

The power and the things growling...everything was doomed. They were so going to die. It wasn’t just possible for them to be mortal, the sky was almost cut in two-

And then it was over.

The son of Poseidon saluted with his orange tricorn, and the white yacht plunged back into the depths of the Sea of Monsters, leaving ruin and desolation behind.

Some galleons and other pirate ships fired, but it was too late...everything had happened too quickly.

Over a kilometre away, the *Triumph of Panama* finished burning...and the first two ships to be attacked were properly sinking too, with most of their hulls already swallowed by the Sea of Monsters. Inside Bayou Island’s bay itself, many ships had capsized or were heavily damaged.

And then Blackbeard laughed.

It wasn’t a fake sound imitating it, it was genuine laughing.

It was a sound of evil, and Octavian could almost see swords of utter darkness grinding together, biding their time before being unleashed.

It was monstrous. It was the voice of someone who had proclaimed himself the enemy of the world, and would keep sailing towards the Pit of Tartarus no matter who stood in his way.

“Consider your challenge accepted, Perseus Jackson!” Blackbeard laughed again. “Lafitte! It sounds like we are going to be a bit too busy salvaging what we can from this ambush! Who is the closest ‘ally’ we have close?”

“Cavendish, Captain! Do I tell him to pursue?”

“I think he won’t need the encouragement, no? Freedom and a life of untold riches await him! That is, if he is able to catch the son of Poseidon, ha!”

And Blackbeard laughed again, totally uncaring of the spectacle of destruction surrounding them...

Madness.

Octavian was sure of it now, they were all utterly crazy.

**20 December 2006, not far from C.C’s Spa and Resort, somewhere under the surface of the Sea of Monsters**

Perseus did not sigh in relief, but he wasn’t that far from it when Leo Valdez spoke again after stopping manipulating the console.

“I’ve opened a gap big enough for the *Inevitable Doom*.”

“Good, amigo,” the son of Poseidon replied in a whisper. “The kraken automatons?”

“Neutralised with the corrosion darts.”

“The torpedo launchers?”

“Inactive.”

“The pocket submarine?”

“Neutralised without sounding the alarm.”

Most of it, Perseus already knew, but it paid to check one by one, when each of these points could sound the alert and trigger a military response that would in all likelihood force them to flee far away from C.C’s Spa and Resort.

“Very good, amigo, you can go inform the others it is time to don their S-Suits, if they don’t already have done so.” Obviously, Perseus had already done so; it was just good sense when you were underwater to have protective equipment which would allow you to swim outside the Inevitable Doom if something bad happened. But Leo and many other members of the Suicide Squad hadn’t. Whether it was because they didn’t want to wear the S-Suits or they had hoped this part of the mission wouldn’t be necessary was one of these questions, the former Tyrant hadn’t had time to ask. “And the command applies to you too, my drone-expert lieutenant.”

The son of Hephaestus groaned, placed a hand in his hirsute hair, but walked away to obey his order.

“He is fire.” Lou Ellen grinned with her arms crossed. “And your reward is to send him into a lot of water.”

“That’s indeed a poor reward,” Perseus replied while taking the seat in front of the auxiliary manoeuvre console. “But there isn’t much of a choice. I won’t resurface the *Inevitable Doom* anywhere near the Spa. The *Eye of Helios* would destroy us in mere seconds. I would prefer to avoid that.”

“I would prefer to avoid that too,” the daughter of Hecate answered. “What’s the plan now?”

“The plan is to advance very, very slowly until we’re in position to launch our diving attack,” and when his fingers were on the control levers of the console, his caution reflected this. The gap was not very large, but even if it had been, there had been too many mines and other traps for him to rush headlong into the waters immediately surrounding the Immortal Sorceress’ island.

“We’re not going to have much time before the pirate fleet comes calling.”

“I’ve not forgotten them, Lou Ellen.”

“I certainly hope not, given that this was your idea to humiliate them in the first place and give your location to every hunter ever paid by the Triumvirate.”

Perseus snorted.

“The purpose was not humiliation, oh my sorceress lieutenant. The first goal was to make sure Blackbeard won’t be a factor for the next forty-eight hours. The second goal was indeed to have a pirate squadron or more pursuing us.”

The *Inevitable Doom* left the sea mines behind it, and Perseus slowed down his ship even more, while multiple small drones were deployed for detection while the two bigger ones moved as his vanguard.

“We’re still not going to have much time left.”

“I know,” he murmured, “but C.C really created a large defensive system underwater. It was twenty percent more massive than my worst prediction. Since we had to break through it to have a chance...all right, I think we’ve advanced far enough.”

Perseus turned around...to see that the daughter of Hecate had removed all the clothes she had donned over the S-Suit. Naturally, the effect was...spectacular. When she moved, Lou Ellen very much looked like a natural predator...

The kiss was passionate, powerful, and Perseus certainly didn’t try to avoid it. If there was one thing he regretted having missed in his previous life, this was certainly it-

“Ahem,” quickly, the embrace and the kiss stopped.

“My heroic lieutenant, your timing is not impeccable,” Perseus complained before returning to the console.

“I see that,” Luke Castellan commented in a sarcastic tone. “But the others are coming, and they didn’t get in the Suicide Squad to see that. Leo told us we were close?”

“We are indeed close.” Perseus confirmed, as Lou Ellen still judged good to place her hands upon his shoulders. “About one kilometre from the beach, a bit more from the entrance submarine base...one kilometre and three hundred metres, I would say. Coming closer would increase the risks to the *Inevitable Doom* in an unacceptable manner, no matter how little moonlight there is tonight.”

Light footsteps were heard, and one by one, the Suicide Squad answered the call and entered the auxiliary command room. Small amount of satisfaction, this time everyone had donned the S-Suits, even the Huntresses. They glared at him of course, but that was incredibly predictable.

“For those who weren’t listening last time or missed the last brainstorming,” Perseus tried to keep his voice barely above a whisper in power, “I intend to deploy the entire Suicide Squad minus three members. Ethan, since you are the one who will pilot the *Inevitable Doom* in my absence and make it sail through the minefield so that when C.C’s servants search for our ship in the lagoon, they will find nothing. Clarisse, I know you are ready for a fight, but you just made an important ritual this afternoon; the Immortal Sorceress would turn it against you faster than I can say ‘Agent Orange’. And Antigone...well, C.C has enough grudges against you to make your death after an eternity of torture a priority, derailing potential negotiations.”

“Jackson,” Michael Yew began hesitantly.

“Yes, my bard lieutenant?”

“We’re attacking C.C’s Spa and Resort. This is not conduction negotiations.”

“Of course, these are negotiations,” the son of Poseidon replied with a charming smile. At least, he hoped it would pass as a charming smile. “Military negotiations, to be exact. We’re going to steal all the super-weapons we can, and make sure C.C accepts it officially.”

Yes, many members of the Suicide Squad groaned after that. How did you guess?

“And how do you intend to do that?”

There was a small musical ping, and Perseus returned to watching the screens, hoping it didn’t mean another complication.

Unfortunately, it was one, and not a small obstacle.

“We have a problem.”

“I hate those words,” Ethan came forwards to stand on his right. “What sort of problem?”

It took twenty seconds to be sure, but when the drones confirmed, his previous words were, if anything, an understatement.

“Argus A-7000 detection and engagement system, along with an energy shield,” Perseus spoke while raising his eyebrows, very impressed.

“What does it do?” Annabeth asked.

“The better question would be to ask what it doesn’t do,” the son of Poseidon replied darkly. “Think of a hyper-sophisticated divine radar, with none of the usual mortal weaknesses, save the fact it doesn’t work well underwater. Quite ironically, we passed under the outermost layer of the shields without being aware of its existence. If the Eye of Helios is the ‘sword’ of C.C, then the A-7000 will be the brain and the eyes.”

Worse of all, this kind of divine techno-magic could be deployed by very few factions, and most of them would never let an Immortal Sorceress borrow it for twenty-four hours, never mind buy one. That left the unpleasant and very real possibility a battalion of Amazons was there.

“What does it mean for the plan, Jackson?” Grant asked.

“It means we have to improvise, of course. The A-7000 generator and the brain, for lack of a better word, need to be neutralised before we attack the spa.”

On this point, Perseus was completely honest. If he tried the double assault the original plan was going to call for, the A-7000 would know in mere minutes the strength of each group, the exact path they would take, and probably more information than the Suicide Squad knew about themselves. Interception would be a guarantee; failure of Operation Nautilus would have odds above ninety-nine percent.

“The Immortal Sorceress would have placed it inside the spa, if she isn’t stupid.”

“She isn’t stupid, but an A-7000 generates a lot of interferences and magical disturbances the VIPs of C.C’s Spa have no wish to be on the receiving end of...ah, here it is. It appears C.C built a bunker there, surrounded by this group of trees. I think with the correct amount of explosives, the problem can be dealt with.”

“And the bad news?”

The bad news was that it was certainly a trap, and the Amazons, if they were present on the island, would likely wait for whoever was audacious enough to go after their near-infallible system of detection and surveillance.

“The bad news is that there is the beach on the way, and while I am sure the diving-ejection systems can get you most of the way to the A-7000 bunker for the first phase, you will have to cross back the entire length of the beach to join the attack on the spa.”

It was, of course, likely what the Amazons wanted them to, in the very unlikely case they managed to break through the outer layer including minefields, sea automatons, or on the surface the *Eye of Helios*.

“And who...” Miranda cleared her throat. “Who is going to volunteer for such a suicide mission?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, please,” Perseus grinned. “While volunteers are of course accepted, this mission is exactly why I kept the Gallowborne alive until today.”

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

Nick Coleman couldn’t help it, he gloated when the fin of the penguin pushed the last button and the supposedly ‘flawless’ device switched out.

“So much for the suicide mission,” he chuckled to the Legionnaires, and many of them laughed.

“Be quiet,” Elvis Knight hissed. “Sound is carrying far away on this beach and-“

“Centurion Knight,” the son of Quirinus said with unhidden relish, “I respect you for volunteering for this apparent dangerous duty, but I am in charge now.”

“This wasn’t what the Boss said,” one of the penguins of course had to open his beak.

Many swords were unsheathed, and the beak closed.

“Seriously, the time to be afraid of our shadows is gone.” Nick Coleman told his group. “We pick the weapon containers at the edge of the beach, and then we go for the super-weapons.”

“Jackson told us to-“

“Jackson isn’t the boss here anymore, I am!” Nick exclaimed, annoyed. “And if you open your mouth again, Knight, you’re going to have problems. All the Legionnaires here are with me. Isn’t that right, guys?”

“Ave, Centurion Coleman!”

Twenty proud sons of New Constantinople replied instantly. These were the seventeen ‘Gallowborne’ and the three which hadn’t had time to declare their true allegiance before the mutiny.

Facing this opposition, Knight and the trio of penguins had no choice but to obey.

Soon, everyone was running towards the weapon containers washed away by the shore.

And what beautiful surprises awaited them! There were grenades, rifles, a large quantity of anti-tank RPG-7 rockets, or some variation of it engineered by the Telekhines! This was a true arsenal waiting for worthy hands.

Everything was calm. C.C’s Spa and Resort was the only major source of light in the distance, and everything was peaceful, devoid of patrols. They had had zero trouble disarming and pulverising the few automatons which patrolled at this late hour. The beach was serene and half of it had dozens of beach umbrellas, great colourful lounge chairs, as well as surfboards and other indispensable sea and beach tools. There were no weapon turrets, no minefields, nor any defences of any kind. Clearly, Jackson had massively overestimated the resistance they would find. It was not surprising, of course. The information of the sea of Poseidon delivered in the last days had sucked, big time.

And speaking of the madman...the communication device in his ear activated.

“*In the name of this idiot Giant we just got rid of, what the hell do you think you’re doing, Coleman*?”

“Ah, Jackson! I have to say your plan sucked, so I changed it.”

And Nick had to admit, saying it out loud felt good. No, more than that, it felt very good.

He could almost listen to the son of Poseidon grumbling and mumbling curses.

“*There’s a reason why I didn’t place you in charge of this group*.”

“Well, I am in charge now.” The son of Quirinus said. “Deal with it.”

“*I’m busy dealing with it, yes*.” Seriously, he could already imagine the scowl on Jackson’s face. “*I have changed my plan to account for the annihilation of your entire force*.”

What?

“What?” He managed to utter.

“*While you were busy self-congratulating your arrogant heads, a battalion of Amazons took position north of where you were. If you had obeyed my command, there would have been a fire-fight where you would have been able to use the trees as cover before dispersing in the mini-jungle. But since you were stupid enough to return to the beach, the Amazon in charge let you march back while she rallied more of her forces. Now she has you dead to rights, no matter how many heavy weapons you took from my containers*.”

“You’re lying!”

It couldn’t be true. It couldn’t be true!

Yes, they hadn’t a lot of night vision equipment, but surely they would have noticed if a group of Amazon scouts was present in the vicinity.

“*I’m not*.”

“Oh, come on, he’s lying,” another Legionnaire behind Nick said, making him realise their conversation had been listened to by everyone who had a communication device in his force. “There’s no way-“

One searchlight was switched on, directly towards them.

Then another illuminated the beach. A second later, there was a third.

Flash after flash, there were dozens of searchlights pointed at them, and the darkness swallowing the beach, revealing how hideously vulnerable the Legionnaire force was.

Behind the trees, Nick couldn’t see clearly, but there had to be hundreds of shadows. And some of them weren’t of individuals, but were looking like big guns.

An improvised magical wall was summoned into existence several hundred metres away, digging an improvised fortification into the pale yellow sand.

“DROP YOUR WEAPONS, SUICIDE SQUAD! THIS IS AMAZON GARRISON COMMAND SPEAKING! YOU ARE SURROUNDED AND FACING OVERWHELMING MILITARY FORCE! DROP YOUR WEAPONS IMMEDIATELY!”

Nick hesitated, then shook his head. They had just lost, but he wasn’t going to die for the ego of Perseus Jackson. Besides, he knew a lot of the Suicide Squad’s workings, so he could sell a lot of information! And the Legionnaires were with him. The ‘Gallowborne’ had no intention to die for the crazy Demigod who had threatened to crucify them. And-

“*Rico. There will be no surrender. The Gallowborne will fight their way through the Amazons, or die trying. Am I clear*?”

“Perfectly clear, Boss!” Rico Kowalski laughed like a maniac, and before anyone could stop him, fired an anti-tank rocket in the direction of the Amazons. “KABOOM INCOMING!”

KABOOM!

The explosion was significant, and several armoured shadows were thrown away by the blast.

“FIRE AT WILL!”

“TAKE COVER!”

And in three seconds, the beach of C.C’s Spa and Resort turned into the antechamber of Hell itself.

**20 December 2006, Super-mega Armoured Yacht *Inevitable Doom***

The moment the searchlights were switched on, Luke froze in shock.

Five seconds later, the son of Hermes heard Perseus’ order to Rico Kowalski, and his expression turned into horror.

“By the Gods, you can’t sacrifice all of them! There are-“

“Twenty-one Legionnaires, seventeen of them Gallowborne, my new treacherous lieutenant Nick Coleman, and a comical trio of penguins,” it said quite something that Perseus Jackson’s voice was one of exhaustion, and his expression was akin to a block of marble. “They are facing what looks to be a five hundred-strong battalion of elite Amazons. They will make a splendid diversion.”

And then they will die, Luke heard the words despite their leader not uttering them.

“There is not a second to waste. Annabeth Chase, you’re taking tactical command of the assault against the submarine base. Asterius, Michael, Leo, Luke and all the Huntresses will go with you. The rest of you, follow me.”

“For the love of Olympus, Jackson,” Luke insisted, “fire at least some missiles in support! You can’t let them butchered by-“

“I can’t, Luke,” and this time, Perseus seemed genuinely grim. “The Amazons have anti-ship missiles, and the *Inevitable Doom* is way too close to the beach. If I fire, I signal our ship’s position, and we will likely lose everything. Ethan, get our ship out of there when we will have used the diving ejection system.”

“I hear and I obey,” the son of Nemesis seemed to be as displeased as the son of Poseidon, to be fair. “This is going to get ugly.”

“Understatement of the night,” Perseus Jackson snorted. “All drones are to go into kamikaze mode. What are you waiting for? HURRY RAIDING FORCE!”

Luke grimaced, but did as he was commanded...

“And if any of you want to survive this beautiful and fiery night, stop believing you know better than me and change the plan at the worst possible moment!”

**20 December 2006, the Hell Beach, C.C’s Spa and Resort**

The first long-distance bombardment of the Amazons involved mortar shells, missiles, and magically-propelled grenades.

The entire beach disintegrated into bloody chaos.

There were explosions everywhere.

There was so much sand around that visibility decreased until they couldn’t really see what was in front of them.

The penguins fired nonetheless.

Rico Kowalski had released his RPG-7 with another rocket, while Fergus Cook had somehow been able to carry an enormous rotator gun that was almost the size of its golden penguin body. As for Julian Skipper, he was an adherent of the grenade launcher club.

Together the penguins threw an impressive amount of explosions.

“KABOOM! HA! HA! HA!”

Then the missiles hit, and the laughter abruptly ended.

The penguins took cover, like everyone else...or at least they tried to.

A beach was really, really a horrible defensive position.

“We have to attack!” Jim shouted, Gladius in one hand, rectangular shield in the other. “We have to retake the initiative! With me!”

He hadn’t made five steps that shells and bullets struck his shield, and for all the resistance of a protection of New Constantinople, it wasn’t that resistant. Elvis counted five explosions before the shield broke.

“ATTACK! WE MUST-“

There was another explosion, and then a rain of blood. Whatever had got Jim, it had struck him directly in the head and in the chest.

His lifeless body collapsed, painting the sands red.

And the battle escalated, turning into a world of shrapnel, tainted sand, and worse.

More explosions shook everything, throwing one rifle directly in front of him. Not bothering asking where this strike of good luck had come, Elvis raised it, aimed, and fired. In the distance, a shadow fell, and in answer there was a monumental amount of bullets sent his way.

The former Centurion sprinted and went to take cover behind a miniature dune combined with the wrecks of several beach things, most of them looking quite burnt right now. As far as defensive protection existed, it was horrible, but it was better than nothing!

“WE MUST RETURN TO THE WOODS!” Nick Coleman screamed, as one more missile struck, and this time, it had hit dead-on target. Two Legionnaires were pulverised by this violent bombardment.

“ARE YOU CRAZY?” It was more than four hundred metres of beach, with little cover, and the Amazons free to decimate them every step of the way!

“WITH ME! WE RETURN TO THE WOODS!”

Unfortunately for the son of Quirinus, this was the moment the female warriors sent orb-shaped levitating objects over the battlefield. Based on what Jackson had done in the last battles, they were certainly drones.

Nick Coleman and four Legionnaires had barely the time to run twenty metres when each of them were under merciless fire, and then a goddamn laser got through his skull.

The Gallowborne who had chosen to accompany the bastard screamed and tried to return fire, all the while taking cover again.

They didn’t make it.

“KABOOM! HA!”

“GET OUT OF THE WAY!”

All into his bloodlust and eagerness to trigger more explosions, Rico the maniac penguin had not noticed some drones were not made for surveillance. They carried large nets, some shrouded in maleficent energies.

Fergus Cook and Julian Skipper reacted fast enough to avoid the trap falling from the skies. Rico didn’t, and like the penguin he was, was rapidly disarmed. Seconds later, the net closed in, and Rico was taken away by another drone like he was an exotic aerial piece of luggage.

“PENGUIN IN DISTRESS!”

And always came more bullets, more grenades, and more explosive ammunition.

“Jackson! Get us out of here!” Elvis heard one of the Gallowborne screaming.

“Shut up, you are making it easier for them to find us!”

“I don’t care! I have not signed for that! I want to go back home!”

The Gallowborne Legionnaire, his identity difficult to establish given that he was crawling in the sand and his voice was filled with terror. He stopped crouching and hiding, and stood on shaky legs, before trying to run towards the sea.

He managed to reach the water. And then the same infernal laser which had killed Coleman sent him straight to the Underworld, leaving a big nasty and bloody hole in his back.

“I AM INVINCIBLE!” Fergus Cook roared over all the explosions and the mayhem. “THAT’S HOW JACKSON IS DOING IT, NO? I AM A GOLDEN PENGUIN! I AM INVINCIBLE! CHARGE!”

Elvis was so speechless he hadn’t had the time to even think this was not how things worked in the real world.

To his credit, the penguin-transformed Demigod made it far farther than everyone, including Coleman, had achieved.

Fergus managed to grab a malfunctioning drone, use it as a sort of acrobatic support, and then launch himself towards the Amazon ranks. All with just fins and pure dumb luck.

But everything had its end.

In a corona of blue lights, the Amazons unsheathed over fifty spears sparkling with powerful energies.

Fergus’ charge had been insane, and he had zero support from the Legionnaires.

“I WILL NOT DIE A PENGUIN! I AM INVINCIBLE!”

In a couple of seconds, the golden penguin was impaled by so many spears you couldn’t count them.

And then he fell.

“The battle is lost! Flee, you fools!”

In a battle like this, screaming this was a guarantee to demoralise your own side, and today was no exception. That another Gallowborne died within thirty seconds did not help, of course.

But the worst part was that it was completely true.

Their ammunition levels, which had looked so stupendous when they pilfered the weapons from the containers, had been consumed in minutes.

The Legionnaires were falling one by one, not listening to a single order he gave.

And ultimately, Julian Skipper, extraordinary Emperor Penguin, was captured exactly like Rico had been.

“SECOND PENGUIN IN DISTRESS! HELP ME!”

The bombardment continued. There were only...there were three of them left now.

Centurion Elvis Knight prayed for a miracle.

Then darkness and pain engulfed him.

It was atrocious dolorous, monsters screamed at him in his nightmares.

And then something big hit him.

The former Centurion screamed loudly.

“You see, Laura? This one is still alive!”

“Yes, it seems you’re right. We take him prisoner?”

“We’d better. For the moment, aside from the two murderous mascots, we got a bunch of corpses for this bloody skirmish.”

Murderous mascots? They thought the penguins were mascots? Elvis laughed...or at least tried to, just trying to exhale and speak made him cough up blood.

Oh, Jackson was going to love that.

As the world stopped spinning and his vision grew clearer, Elvis was at last able to see there were several blades very close to his throat.

“Surrender?” a hoplite-armoured woman spoke, her bloodthirsty expression making clear the offer wouldn’t be repeated again.

“I...yes. Yes, I, Centurion Elvis Knight, surrender.” Whatever Jackson had hoped to achieve, the battle was over now. “The other Legionnaires...”

“They’re all dead.” The Amazon gave him a respectful nod. “I have to say, Centurion Knight, your men deserved their reputation. They really died like madmen...like a Suicide Squad.”

Elvis Knight groaned pitifully. Jackson was going to love that. And most certainly, be even more insufferable than he already was when launching Operation Nautilus!

**20 December 2006, C.C’s Submarine’s Base**

The explosive drones had made an impressive opening in the gates of the submarine base, and entering was child’s play, with the S-Suits making sure they were akin to fishes in their natural element.

Annabeth didn’t have the mental fortitude to rejoice at the moment. Not when she knew so many people were dying for a diversion. Mutineers they may be, but the daughter of Athena was not so fixed on global strategy she could admire the cold-hearted stratagem.

Coleman and all his band of sycophants were dying right now, and worse, she knew intimately Jackson knew he was sending them to their deaths the moment the A-7000’s existence was revealed to him.

Suicide Squad indeed...

No, it was better to think of something else, something Annabeth could deal with...the mission.

They swam until they saw light, then used a space next to a large submarine to leave the water.

Only when she was completely out of the water did Annabeth order the hood and the underwater breathing system to be removed. The S-Suit was like an exotic swimsuit again. It was a swimsuit which had allowed them to enter the Immortal Sorceress’ submarine base without being transformed into something animalistic.

“Well,” Michael Yew gave her a roguish smirk, and making several steps of the way to let Kimiko and Ellen follow them onto the pier. “I have to say, it was quite a submarine experience. And we managed to get in without being noticed, which is-“

Annabeth froze.

Everyone froze.

And Michael’s smile vanished, and he turned to see the same thing they did.

There was an Amazon standing ten metres behind them, and though the black-clad girl looked as surprised as they were...well, she was an Amazon.

“INTRUDERS! MILITARY ALERT, CODE DESTROYER!”

Luke reacted the fastest of them, and knocked her out in two blows.

Unfortunately, it was too late.

Strident alarms shrieked everywhere, and a lot of red lights began to flicker in and out everywhere in the gigantic submarine base.

Annabeth began to spring towards the exit, the tunnel leading out the undersea cavern and into the spa, but it was futile.

It was five hundred metres away...and the blast doors had already begun to close everywhere before she began to run.

“You won’t go anywhere, intruders.”

And of course, there was a second Amazon, looking at her like she was a judicious prey.

Annabeth drew a dagger.

“I could kill you,” the daughter of Athena growled.

“You could,” the black-haired girl agreed, “but don’t think it will give you anything but a fleeting moment of satisfaction. I don’t have the codes to open the doors, and I’m not armed. I’m just a contractor who was paid to see how much it would take to refurbish some of these submarines.”

As tempting as it was to ignore it, the blonde Demigoddess had to acknowledge the woman wearing a black bodysuit espousing her curves was likely saying the truth. Of course, being an Amazon, she was not without weapons, and Luke immediately disarmed her, taking one sword and two daggers for himself.

But the file in her hands was all about the study of the diesel-fuelled submarine next to them.

“If you can return to your ship, I advise you do,” the Amazon warrior continued calmly, ignoring the arrows the Huntresses were ready to skewer her with.

“Not without the *Red October*,” Leo smiled. “I always wanted my own submarine.”

The black-clad woman scoffed.

“Please, son of Hephaestus. The command centre to open the undersea doors is not here. I heard the explosion, and you are here, so I guess you made your own entrance, but I seriously doubt it is big enough to let this gigantic Typhoon-class submarine escape.”

Heads turned towards the juggernaut once built in the shipyards of the Soviet Union. It was indeed something gigantic, a leviathan of metal sleeping before it was called to launch the Apocalypse.

Unfortunately, the Amazon was right. The drone attack had created a gap from which four Demigods could use together, but it wasn’t big enough for a small ship to go through that, never mind one of the biggest submarines ever built by human shipbuilders.

“And if we threaten to execute you and your friend?” Alexia the Huntress had now this evil expression on her face that everyone had come to hate in the Suicide Squad. “You are our prisoners, Amazon, don’t forget that!”

“How could I forget, *Huntress*?” the venom was evident, which made the smile all the more surprising. “But I think you have far more urgent things to be worried about.”

There was a thunderous sound, and the ceiling opened for a brief instant...letting something huge fall and slam onto a pier about fifty metres away.

Then the thing rose.

It was an automaton, about four metres tall. It looked vaguely humanoid, though it had little in common with beings of flesh and blood. It looked like an antique knightly armour of pale silver, yet it gave off a terribly sinister vibe.

And Annabeth knew what it was.

“Destroyer...you have a Destroyer?”

“Oh, so your mother told you of their existence?” the Amazon seemed pleased.

“Err...” Leo Valdez had begun to sweat, betraying his nervousness. “What is this...Destroyer?”

“It’s one of the most recent automaton weapons Olympus intends to build in mass numbers to protect Olympus key fortresses, vaults, and temples.” The blonde Demigoddess explained. “It was a collaboration effort between some Cyclops Clans, the God of Forges, the God of the Sun, and my mother.”

And quite evidently, now with Hephaestus a prisoner, the enemy side had access to these extremely advanced weapons.

“Why my father?” Michael asked.

The Destroyer answered the question on its own.

Suddenly, the ‘head’ of the automaton was lit on fire.

“EVADE!”

A death ray hit where they had stood mere seconds ago. It was as if the sun had decided to burn them in a tight beam.

Where there had been the pier’s stone, there was now a small crater.

“DISPERSE!” Annabeth shouted. “DON’T GIVE HIM A SINGLE TARGET!”

“Understood!” A Huntress answered. “Where is the weak point of that thing?”

“I don’t think it has one!” She retorted as the Destroyer went on the move, and tried to incinerate a Huntress, who luckily for her largely avoided the attack.

“Okay...then WE ROCK!” Michael Yew had his guitar in his hands, and suddenly, the violent atmosphere changed, as extremely powerful music engulfed them. “WE ROCK! I ROCK! YEEEAAAAHHHH!”

The sonic blast was extremely powerful, and the Destroyer received it head-on.

It stopped advancing towards them, and began to falter.

“HIT IT! HIT WITH EVERYTHING YOU HAVE!”

“TAKE THAT!”

Leo Valdez’s hands burned, and two columns of flame went to strike the silver colossus.

Annabeth obeyed her own command and threw several grenades. Luke went to pour anti-tank rounds into it.

And the Huntresses went to war.

“BY THE WILL OF LADY ARTEMIS, YOU ARE TO BE ANNIHILATED!”

Four arrows burned in silver fire, and they all struck the section where the fire attack and the sonic blasts had carved open the strange silvery metal.

Dust and explosion darkened everything. About half of the lights of the submarine base flickered out, leaving them bathing in a reddish glow...

“Let’s hope, Jenna, we won’t have to do it too many times tonight. It’s really exhausting, even with her blessings...”

“Yeah, and we don’t have that many arrows able to withstand the power-“

The dusts and the explosions cleared...and every Demigod, Demigoddess and Huntress froze.

“Oh, that’s just...unfair...” Michael Yew noted weakly.

The Destroyer was standing up again.

It was once more preparing to battle them. And the part of the ‘chest’ where they had hurt it was already half-repaired.

“Living metal,” Annabeth murmured to herself. “We need to inflict it such blows the capacity of self-regeneration fails!”

“And...” the son of Hephaestus was in full-blown panic mode now. “How are we supposed to do that?”

To be honest, the daughter of Athena hadn’t the faintest idea.

“RUN!”

A new ray of destruction burst into existence, and the members of the Suicide Squad began to fight so that they could live a few more minutes.

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

Infiltrating the spa had been rather easy, though their group had to do it individually rather than together.

That was very much good news for Lou Ellen, and bad news for the two other groups of the Suicide Squad. The blonde Demigoddess had seen hundreds of Amazons in hoplite armours rushing towards the beach and to lifts which certainly led to the submarine base.

Jackson, unfortunately, had been right once again. If this island was less defended compared to the God of the Forges’ prison, then they had absolutely no chance against the Titaness. And it was far better to engineer a ‘defeat’ there.

Lou Ellen shook her head, and slowly, she placed a step past the magical threshold separating the two parts of the Spa, the one every mortal would be able to see, and the rest reserved to the divine side.

Immediately, it was...it was as if an ocean of Mist washed over her.

But it wasn’t the Mist, or to be more accurate, it wasn’t just the Mist.

It was magic too.

And when the Demigoddess opened her eyes, paradise greeted her.

It was soon to be midnight, so there weren’t a lot of people to be seen, but the vegetation and the decor seemed divinely perfect. There were pools and cascades which seemed more real than everything she’d seen. Of course, Lou Ellen had kind of expected it since it was a spa, but not to this degree.

It was as if the very island had been transformed to merge exotic plants and water, and recreate something that was both relaxation park, a succession of swimming pools and a space dedicated to health regeneration and other things.

Everything breathed out serenity, calm, and peace, from the soft bird songs to the gentle swashing of the waves. And the magic-

Lou Ellen had to murmur an incantation to clear her thought.

Yes, it was paradise in the form of a jungle-exotic spa. And she had no doubt the Mist and the sorcery enchantments deliberately amplified it.

Circe had built a place you would never want to leave if you didn’t stay on your guard. No doubt the ‘divine VIPs’ spent a lot of their resources there. Well, the female ones did, since men were not exactly welcome.

“Super-weapons, super-weapons...if I was my half-sister, where I would keep my super-weapons?”

Naturally, there was the obvious. At the centre of this small Domain, there was a lighthouse of golden marble, and at its top, burned golden sparks which reminded her of the Sun.

But Lou Ellen was not stupid enough to believe she could steal the *Eye of Helios* on her own. In fact, a good part of the lighthouse had to be filled with the machinery the super-laser required to fire.

It was better to find something more portable.

The sorceress of the Suicide Squad examined several times the white houses – small palaces, really – before noticing one was really far more enchanted than the others. The Mist was swirling around it, providing over twenty illusions every time you blinked.

Yes, it was definitely a place important for the island’s mistress. The runes and the enchantment burning on the walls and the approaches were evidence enough of that. Yet there was a small bridge one could use to reach it, and it lead directly to the door. Maybe Circe didn’t fear anyone arriving that far, or that the Mist would hide it sufficiently?

Not seeing anything worth her time elsewhere, Lou Ellen decided she might as well try. The bridge did not collapse or the pool underneath had any Demigod-eating predators. The door was unlocked with an advanced spell and-

The sorceress couldn’t believed her eyes the moment her eyes fell into the heavily protected palace.

“**Enter Lou, we have much to speak about**.”

“Yes, yes we do...mother.”

It wasn’t an illusion. It wasn’t an enchantment to trick her eyes.

This palace...this relaxation home...was really where Titaness Hecate, Mistress of Mist and Magic awaited her.

“How?” the young Demigoddess asked as she took the chair her mother indicated her, trying not to moan as the object felt like felicity itself.

“**How**?” her mother repeated amused.

“You couldn’t know we were coming tonight.” The blonde sorceress said, utterly convinced of this fact.

“**Lou Ellen, I know what is going to happen tomorrow in the Underworld**.” The Titaness of Magic’s appearance changed, taking the aspect of a beautiful blonde woman who looked like her only a decade older. And her clothes were limited to a variant of a S-Suit, but in a flamboyant red colour. “**Unlike the narrow-minded fools of Olympus, I frequently visit the Underworld. I spoke with the Lord of Hell. And since I did, I can hazard a guess Perseus Jackson would want to protect those Demigoddesses and Demigods he cared about, even if he likely won’t admit it to them**.”

Since Perseus had more or less hinted something like that during their conversations, Lou Ellen wasn’t surprised by that. She was far more surprised, to be honest, by the fact her mother had predicted correctly the next Suicide Squad’s moves.

“I suppose there aren’t that many islands which are completely out of the reach of...of the Master of Olympus, if things turn really bad.”

There was Forge MP-42 and the secret Triumvirate Base, yes, but to go there, they would likely have to swear allegiance of Thethys or the Mark Antony-Cleopatra duo, and hoped the Titaness or the Roman-Egyptian rulers would accept it.

“**There are not**.” Her mother confirmed.

For what felt like an eternity, no one spoke.

There were only the bird singing, the waters swashing, the enchantments playing siren-like voices of temptation...and light footsteps...the lieutenants of Circe taking position near the bridge.

Lou Ellen raised an eyebrow.

“**No, I didn’t need to summon them. Your half-sister knew of your presence the moment you passed the threshold. You are really powerful now, and I am proud of the efforts you made these last months**.”

“Thank you, mother...though evidently, not powerful enough to know when I am spied upon.”

“**Circe had a few millennia to discover, transcend, and perfect the talents I gave her at birth**”, Hecate dismissed the point as it was of no consequence. “**You are young. You will learn**.”

It was really flattering...and a bit prompt to give anyone anxious emotions, given how stern a teacher he mother could be when she wanted.

There was one more issue, however. One which was far more important than the ‘how’?

“Why?”

“**Assuming your group of chaos-spreading ‘Heroes’ is still able to continue its Great Quest after the next forty-eight hours are over, I will create a magical simulacrum, copying your memories and imitating your magical abilities. Assuming the Suicide Squad is successful and is granted the permission to leave the Zone Mortalis without being bombarded by lightning bolts, it will replace you while you will return here for your training**.”

“I could-“

“**Lou Ellen**.”

The eyes of her mother swirled with incredibly powerful magic, and she had to look away, lest she be hypnotised or worse by them.

“**Your boyfriend is getting more and more powerful**.” The blonde Demigoddess tried to keep an innocent expression, but the Titaness of Magic hadn’t finished speaking. “**If you want to stay by his side as an equal, you must improve your sorcery might and your skills as fast as he does. Perseus Jackson might not wish you to be injured, but this world is dangerous. If you lack the strength, you end up like these foolish Legionnaires the Amazons are busy toying with on the beach**.”

“I...I understand.”

“**Good. Now we are going to speak of spells I have noted that would have been deadly useful to you in the battles you were most recently involved**...”

Midnight approached, and Lou Ellen tried to concentrate on her mother’s words as best she could, knowing that it was certainly going to be a matter of life-and-death one day. She wished she could go help the others, but it wasn’t an option anymore. The members of the Suicide Squad were going to have to survive on their own.

**20 December 2006, C.C’s Submarine’s Base**

He was just supposed to be a bard, damn it!

As the thought arrived, Michael gritted his teeth and stopped it.

Yes, Jackson had told him he would be a bard and a healer. And the enemy they were facing absolutely didn’t care.

“I AM ON THE HIGHWAY TO HELL!” The son of Apollo sang and played as fast as he could his guitar, and was ‘rewarded’ by an extremely powerful sonic attack.

Michael was more or less certain it would have managed to hurt seriously the Minotaur. But it did nothing to the Destroyer.

And speaking of the Minotaur, the bull-headed monster had been the last to arrive inside the submarine base, but he was now trying decapitation strike with its gigantic axe.

Alas, Michael’s own attack did barely force the Destroyer to take two steps back, while at the same time the silver automaton parried effortlessly the axe of Jackson’s ‘eternal friend’.

“We’re inflicting it less and less damage, Luke!” Michael managed not to scream or show his dismay.

“Thank you, I had noticed!” The son of Hermes replied with an ugly grimace. “Continue to play, we are going to take the fight at close-quarters!”

“ARE YOU CRAZY?”

There was a loud sound, and suddenly, there was a Minotaur flying in their direction. Fortunately, they all managed to avoid it. Asterius fell into the waters near the submarine with a colossal splash.

“Now that I think about it,” Luke announced in a far more hesitant tone, “let’s not go fight this thing at close-quarters!”

“You think?”

“I’ve yet to hear a good plan from you, oh bard!”

“I’m playing my guitar, barbarian! Do you want to take my role?”

“Annabeth!” Luke Castellan fired a few more bullets against the enemy before throwing his rifle away in frustration. The projectiles hadn’t even managed to pierce the cuirass of the Destroyer. “Please tell me you have a plan!”

“We simply don’t have the ammunition!” The daughter of Athena was slightly bleeding on her left arm, but her grey eyes were determined, not filled with panic. “If we could return to the *Inevitable Doom* and take some nasty explosives-“

“Don’t even think about it,” Ellen the Huntress resurfaced from the water and jumped on the pier. It said quite something that the servant of Artemis didn’t care about how it exposes her curves covered by the S-Suit. “They brought giant moray eels to make any retreat impossible. There are at least a dozen waiting outside, as far as I could see.”

“So it’s the Destroyer or the moray eels,” Luke said.

A death ray almost incinerated the Minotaur, who had charged again.

“We can breathe underwater with the S-Suits.” Michael said grimly. “And I’m pretty sure we can kill the moray eels too.”

“No,” Kimiko the Huntress drawled with her long blue tongue, “you might get away with a retreat, but I’m pretty sure Jackson won’t tolerate it from us. We have to vanquish the Destroyer. Daughter of Athena!”

“Yes?” Annabeth was as surprised as they to hear her advice was wanted.

“No matter how fast this ‘living metal’ can regenerate from the strikes we inflict it, there must be something inside the Destroyer to power it.”

The Huntress had to speak louder and louder as they all tried to avoid the death rays of their enemy.

“The God of the Forges is a master, but he can’t power something with nothing. What did he use?”

“As far as I can explain it...a miniature sun?” Oh, God, don’t tell him... “Better known as a mini-fusion reactor, of course.”

“The Gods built an automaton with a fusion reactor?” Luke was aghast, and the son of Apollo shared his astonishment. “Are you kidding me?”

It did explain the death rays, though. And why his father would have worked with Athena and Hephaestus to build the Destroyer. The Sun was Apollo’s Domain, and no one else.

“No.”

“What does it mean?” Leo Valdez stopped running momentarily. Something that spelled trouble, the young boy was sweating and looking about to collapse in exhaustion. Due to his engineer duties, he hadn’t been suffered like they did during the preparatory physical training of hell at New Byzantium.

“That means,” Luke spoke coldly, “that if Annabeth is right, this thing will never tire, never relent, as long as the sun inside its armour burn.”

“What do we do?” Alexia the Huntress asked.

“We attack,” was the depressing answer. “We attack, and we tear it apart, try to pierce this silver metal enough to cripple the mechanisms controlling the sun inside.”

“CHARGE!”

They screamed and they went on the attack.

It was just madness. They were all going to die. He was just a bard.

These were the thoughts which went through his head, and then the formidable clash happened.

Asterius the Minotaur was the first to fly again, but he had managed to deliver a heavy blow with his axe this time. This was a wound which was exploited by the arrow of the Huntresses before three of them threw themselves inside the water to avoid the death rays.

Michael did it closer than they...and then the gigantic fist of silver hit his guitar...and it was his turn to fly. By the time he was coughing of water and able to watch what was happening, the son of Apollo had been joined by Luke.

“LEO, DON’T TRY-“

The son of Hephaestus and engineer of the Suicide Squad had had what was possibly the most audacious, courageous, and suicidal idea of them all. With his hands on fire, he was trying to open further the wound. And the Minotaur in the meantime was trying to wrestle the Destroyer from behind ensuring that there was no devastating strike to crush the hirsute-looking Leo Valdez into bloody paste.

Unfortunately, that did nothing to the death ray.

The Destroyer fired.

Michael Yew closed his eyes.

“HOT! TOO HOT!”

Michael opened his eyes again, and it was to see Leo Valdez. Leo Valdez was absolutely naked, but well and truly alive. The Latino Demigod had a far tanner skin, like the son of Hephaestus had been slightly roasted.

“The Moon be praised, he’s not just immune to his own flames, he’s also immune somewhat to the Destroyer’s fire!”

“MY TURN!”

It was like the absence of incineration had given an overdose of courage to Leo Valdez.

No, it had done more than that.

The Destroyer fired again.

And as it did, the son of Hephaestus’ skin was darkening.

No, the rays were doing more than that.

Leo Valdez had been, with all due respect, a scrawny and physically unimpressive Demigod.

Now with each strike, it was like he was getting taller and more muscular.

By the time the Destroyer realised its ‘death-flame rays’ were having the opposite effect of what it intended to do, it was too late.

Leo Valdez had become a two metres-tall colossus of pure muscle and ebony skin, and his hands were more akin to tools of destruction.

The silvery metal of the Destroyer didn’t falter; it was simply *ripped apart*.

And then Leo, or rather, the massive hulk of destruction he had become, punched inside the terrible gap just created.

Asterius the Minotaur flew again, once again to make a colossal splash.

There was a titanic explosion.

A sun was born again.

Most reddish lights faltered and died.

For five seconds, darkness claimed the submarine base.

Then the lights flickered back on.

The Destroyer...the Destroyer had fallen. On the pier where the final assault had taken place, there was only a derelict shapeless form of silver metal.

And Leo Valdez, or rather the adult variant of Hercules who had taken his place, raised his hands in triumph and roared, burning in an inferno of flames.

“VICTORY!”

“I can’t believe it...he beat the Destroyer...” Annabeth mumbled.

“With some help,” Michael added.

“VICTORY! I WON! I AM-“

A second later, one hundred water jets hit him from every direction.

“STOP IT! STOP THAT! I FEEL...I feel...”

The towering giant the son of Hephaestus had become began to decrease in size, the mass of muscles faltering. The raging flames were extinguished.

It took one minute of continuous water projection, but when it was over, Leo Valdez was back to his ‘normal’ and unimpressive appearance. He was completely naked too.

“I don’t feel so well,” the fire-wielding Demigod announced weakly as the water bombardment stopped.

And then he collapsed.

“To date, I will notice that only Jackson has managed to utter sentences about invincibility without being smacked down for the audacity of challenging Fate,” Luke noted drily.

“Okay, we have to decide our next course of action.” Michael sighed in relief. After all, they were alive. They were all alive. They were-

“You could surrender,” the two Amazons had left their hideout. Just as they did it, the gates barring the way to C.C’s Spa opened again loudly and thunderously. The opening revealed a small army of other Amazons, armed like hoplites, and marching in a formation that reminded him a lot the march of the Roman Legions of New Constantinople.

“I think, my fellow Questers, that the time has come to negotiate?”

“Shut up, bard.”

Michael Yew scowled. Truly Jackson had done him no favour by giving him the least praised job of the entire Suicide Squad...if one excepted the Gallowborne, of course.

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

“Jackson, where by the Pit are we running to?”

“Stop asking ridiculous questions, Grant, and run!”

“I’ve been doing nothing but that in the last hour!”

“*Intruders detected on the second level of the eastern wing. Intruders detected on the second level of the eastern wing. All witches and spa employees have the duty to apprehend the intruders*!”

“We turn on the left! JUMP!”

Richard and Dakota jumped by reflex. And it was happy they did, for the huge green carnivorous plant waiting for them was certainly no illusion this time.

“What by the Pit is this place?” the son of Hercules asked. “Damn it, why did you send the sorceresses away? We would have badly required their help here!”

“They have their own missions,” Perseus Jackson retorted between the moments he breathed out. There was no exhaustion on his face, but there was certainly sweat and his pace was slowly decreasing. “And it would have been a really bad idea for the girls to be here with us.”

“Why?”

Seven or eight magical spells were hurled at them, and Dakota, being the slowest of their trio, barely avoided them.

“You’re about to see! Turn on the right now!”

Richard obeyed the command, and found himself descending a new series of stairs like if his life depended on it, which was certainly the case.

In passing, his mind acknowledged the surroundings were far more...girly than what he had seen before. The walls were no longer white cream or blue-green, the sun-and-sea paintings were absent, instead what had replaced them was a pink-red colour. It dominated everything, and accompanying it were various extravagant objects and artworks of golden colour.

In fact, Richard was ready to bet the things were entirely made of gold, be they necklaces or watches.

And after the stairs and the exhibits was an enormous alley leading to great pink-gold doors.

“Here we are, the VIP Suite Number Three. Whatever you think from now on, keep your mind clear, be very polite, and let me speak.”

There was a cavalcade behind them making clear the witches in C.C’s service would not be long in finding where they had gone. The son of Poseidon didn’t bother knocking at the door.

He merely pushed the pink-golden doors, and entered like he owned the suite.

Richard at first coughed while following him...it was...perfume, right?

This was a powerful scent!

Five more steps, and it was a different smell which assaulted his senses.

Three more steps, and the muscular abruptly stopped.

For yes, Jackson had not lied, it was one of the VIP suites of the spa. Albeit given the divine owner, it should not be surprising that what C.C called a ‘suite’, most Demigods would call a ‘private palace the size of a building with multiple levels and highly luxurious accommodations’.

That was more or less understandable, by the way.

What was far more embarrassing was that there were a lot of nymphs and other female elemental spirits watching them now...and since most of them were blatantly naked and in the midst of...passionate actions, it felt like that they had interrupted an all-female orgy.

There was one more cloud of pink perfume, and one of the women who had been almost hidden inside a large pool came out, and her glare was certainly murderous...as was the pink aura of power shrouding her.

“**Give me a reason why I shouldn’t transform you into ashes and disperse them into the jungles of this island, Demigods**.”

Perseus Jackson...curtsied?

“Lady Lesbos, forgive the rude intrusion at this untimely hour, but my dear sister Rhode and the Lady of the Doves commanded me to deliver you their letters in person.”

What?

He was...what? Jackson had to be bluffing...no way...how could he even know a specific Goddess would be here?

But the two envelopes that were delivered to the pink-haired Goddess certainly looked very real.

“**Hmm**...” the letters were opened, and while the immortal woman gave them a mere glance, it appeared enough for her purposes. “**Very well, it seems you are telling the truth, Demigod. But there are other methods to contact me**.”

“You have been enjoying the delights of C.C’s Spa and Resorts for many years, my Lady.” The son of Poseidon replied smoothly, all the while Grant did his best to just look at his feet and ignore...ignore everything. He really, really didn’t want to be changed into a girl, after all. “And since the methods to communicate in a conventional way with you were impossible, other alternatives had to be found.”

The Goddess seemed to find the excuse acceptable. It had to be, because they were not changed into a guinea pig or transformed into female versions of themselves.

“**Very well**,” the Greek Goddess murmured, “**I am going to**-“

“THEY ARE HERE! CATCH THEM!”

A small army of spa employees and Amazon warriors stormed the suite. They immediately paused, of course, as they contemplated the...the orgy and everything Jackson was responsible for.

“**Everyone seems to find an interest in intruding in my suite without an invitation tonight, I see**,” Lesbos commented frostily.

One of the witches-employees immediately bent the knee.

“Lady Lesbos, please forgive us! We were pursuing these dangerous Demigods, and when we saw them invading your private wing, we feared the worse for your guests and your...your friends and companions!”

“My lovers, girl,” this time a shadow of amusement returned in the voice of the Goddess. “Yes, I can forgive this. And besides, these three Demigods had other motives than giving me important couriers. They are yours to arrest.”

Two Amazons cheered.

Richard turned his head, and sighed loudly.

Naturally, a lot of female heads in turn decided to glare at him, which was really intimidating. It made him feel like that time where he had been cornered by these hyena monsters in Africa.

“Not to...err...personally disagree with you, Lady Goddess, ladies...but...are you sure you aren’t making a cardinal mistake?”

“Lady Circe is going to transform you into a guinea pig, male!”

Richard Grant grimaced.

“I was referring to the fact that for a good ten seconds, you have forgotten to watch Perseus Jackson.”

Suddenly, all the women, nymphs, and other beings present in the room realised with wide eyes the son of Poseidon had left an illusion behind to fool them. He was in the mean time busy to examine a large fountain of marble representing grapes and other fruits.

But the fountain, unlike other pools and sections of the suite, was not filled with water.

It was filled with wine.

“Oh come on,” Dakota complained. “Surely we aren’t going to begin this circus all over again!”

“Afraid of something, my drunken lieutenant?” the son of Poseidon of course had to be his usual provocative self. Of course.

“**Get away from this fountain, Perseus Jackson**,” Lesbos ordered. “**You do not know**-“

But it was too late. Clearly, Hydrokinesis was evidently good enough when it came to wield a large quantity of alcoholic drinks.

One click of his fingers, and what had to be three or four barrels of wine struck Dakota McDonald before the son of Bacchus could evade. And then more was sent at Lesbos, the female employees of the spa, and everyone else.

For a couple of seconds, there were only screams of outrage.

Then the screams faded, and there was a new presence.

Dakota advanced...and his S-Suit began to...shift to make it even more indecent than previously thought possible.

The Roman Demigod growled, and the possessed look in his eyes was honestly frightening.

He approached a girl of the spa, one suddenly Richard recognised as a female Legionnaire. Dakota grabbed her like she weighed nothing before carrying her bridal style and vigorously kissing her!

“GRANT! RUN!”

The son of Hercules decided that once again, this was really the best idea of a large number of options.

Richard Grant ran towards the door they had just come from, right as a Goddess summoned five or six women by her side for activities that were definitely of a carnal nature, nymphs threw themselves at Amazons, Amazons tore apart the clothes of witches, and witches proclaimed their love for nymphs.

The warrior did not think he had ever felt so relieved when the pink-gold doors slammed shut. Though it really did nothing to silence the...the screams of passion and other things that he could still hear.

“This is...this is just...this is just madness.”

“Well, I threw enough Mystery Wine around for a Cohort to get insane.”

“Mystery Wine?”

There were more screams and moans...and for once, Perseus Jackson had the good grace to look sheepish.

“Once you drink it, you are strongly reminded of some of the most powerful beverages you’ve ever had the pleasure to drink...for Dakota, one of them is Eleutherian Wine. I’m sure the rumours of our exploits during the First Great Quest were mentioned.”

“Yeah, but...but...” it was the shock, Richard thought. It was the shock. “Most of them were...are followers of Lesbos. They will kill him!”

“Nah, the Amazons have a lot of boy toys, and at least three of the girls who caught up were former Legionnaires, Circe mustn’t have time to brainwash them too much.”

“Jackson, two of them are the Ramirez-Arellano sisters! I remember them now. There are daughters of...of the War Goddess!” Even here, it wouldn’t be very prudent to say ‘Bellona’. “Once the effects of the ‘mystery wine’ end, there will be hell to pay!”

Perseus Jackson smirked.

“No, I’m sure he will be fine!”

“OH, YES!”

Richard was sure his expression had to be...mortified.

“You see? Everything is fine!”

“Jackson, you’re...you’re completely crazy,” the son of Hercules finished weakly.

“But you forget something, my muscular lieutenant! It worked. All the women who pursued us, be they Amazons, employees of the spa, and other female security personnel, they’re all inside this suite ‘entertaining’ Lesbos and her companions. The way is now clear to accomplish our mission.”

And the son of Poseidon began once again to accelerate the pace, not quite running, but certainly unwilling to stay anywhere near the palatial suite.

“The letters...they were authentic?”

“Of course, they were.”

“I thought...Gods...ah, this doesn’t count as direct intervention.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Perseus’ grin was honestly terrifying. “The Master of Olympus really should try to formulate better his directives, it is honestly far too easy get around them.”

**20 December 2006, the entrance leading to the *Eye of Helios***

Perseus examined the small object for several seconds. It had the shape of a golden needle, but of course it was far more than that.

“We’re done here, Grant.”

“What? But you said we were here to acquire super-weapons!”

“Certain types of super-weapons, my dear muscular lieutenant. Emphasis on the ‘certain’. In case you have forgotten, the *Eye of Helios* consists of this entire lighthouse’s machinery, not just the few flames and the miniature sun at the top. I have many talents, but I can’t carry *that*.”

“Then why the hell did we come here?”

“Life-insurance,” the former Tyrant replied smugly. “You may know it by the word of ‘leverage’ too, that said.”

The son of Poseidon descended the stairs of white marble at a steady pace, preparing himself for the dangerous game.

“And what about the others, Jackson, they are...oh, by my father’s trials!”

The exclamation was sonorous, but relatively normal. After all, the white plaza bordered by two small rivers had been empty when they crossed it the first time.

Now they were over three hundred Amazons waiting for them. They had over one hundred sorceresses and other magical practitioners in support behind them.

That, obviously, would have been likely largely a lot of military force to deal with two Demigods.

But there was an irate Goddess too on top of that.

Grant surprised him, though.

“It’s his fault!” the son of Hercules accused.

No, you couldn’t gamble who was scandalously and inaccurately targeted by vile calumnies.

Many Amazons chuckled.

“Grant, you were not supposed to be the treacherous lieutenant for this battle.”

“You have a treacherous lieutenant for every battle you fight?” an Amazon asked, bewildered.

“I have a treacherous lieutenant for every event which matters in a Great Quest,” Perseus replied cheerfully. “It is said that one can’t be betrayed if you don’t trust someone, which is why I surround myself constantly with possible traitors.”

“I was told he was completely crazy,” another Amazon spoke. “But this is-“

“**Enough**,” the voice was magical...as in ‘filled with magic’. Or maybe drowning under the weight of magic? Or maybe soaked in sorcerous power? Yes, it was better. “**Your plans have failed, son of the Earthshaker**.”

If he hadn’t known better, the appearance would have been almost insulting. High-heeled purple shoes. A purple Chinese-styled robe which showed so much flesh it would have made uncountable Demigods drool like idiots. The long black hair, the flawless figure, the long legs...everything Circe showed was seductive, flawless, polished with the help of dozens, maybe hundreds of enchantments.

But the eyes betrayed her.

Circe had the black eyes of Hecate, and no charm or artifice was enough to hide them.

“I hope you didn’t kill all my penguins, Lady Goddess. I happen to be really fond of them.”

Whatever the Immortal Sorceress had thought he would say...this wasn’t it, clearly.

“**Two of them are still alive**.” Ah, it was so nice knowing you, Fergus Cook. He was going to assume the golden penguin had perished, since he was the one who had the biggest suicidal tendencies. “**The Amazons may yet take them as mascots, if I happen to release these cursed Demigods to them**.”

Perseus cackled.

Mascots? Oh, it was too good.

“I’m sorry, but with all the respect I have for you, Goddess, I still need them to accomplish my plans.”

“**Your plans are in ruin, son of the Earthshaker**!” Circe really watched him like a hawk now. “**Your followers did manage to vanquish my Destroyer guarding the submarine base, but they all surrendered, exhausted by the battle**!”

For the first time, Perseus could say he was both unpleasantly surprised...and incredibly impressed.

“A Destroyer,” the green-eyed Demigod said in a deadly serious voice. “You somehow found a way for the God of Forges to give you a Destroyer, despite all the restrictions Olympus placed on such types of weapons?”

“**There was a single unit being tested at Forge MP-42**,” Circe replied with a scowl.

Ah yes, that explained why it was possible, as well as her anger. The unit the Suicide Squad had destroyed wouldn’t be replaced anytime soon.

“My apologies for the trouble,” Perseus answered honestly. “If I had known the Destroyer was there, I wouldn’t have sent any officer of the Suicide Squad inside the submarine base. I would have sent the Gallowborne.”

“**Do you really think I care about your apologies, son of the Earthshaker**?” Circe’s expression was really...well, the rumours of her hatred towards male in general were not that exaggerated.

“With the benefit of hindsight...no. But it is only polite to apologise. Especially because I’m afraid I’m going to blackmail you.”

Many Amazons laughed wildly.

Even Circe seemed to find his words funny and worthy of a cruel smile.

“**You have nothing to blackmail me with, Perseus Jackson**.”

That sounded like a real challenge, all right.

So he removed a certain golden needle-shaped object from his pocket.

The hiss of anger proved that this part of the plan was definitely successful, at least.

“Judging by your expression, Lady Circe, I can conclude you have recognised the stabiliser of your super-weapon’s targeting array. Without it, you can still fire the *Eye of Helios*, but you definitely can’t aim it at anything in an accurate fashion. You will fry half of the Sea of Monsters first.”

“**True**,” the Immortal Sorceress agreed, “**but I can still take it from your smoking corpse. I don’t think it will take too long. I would say...five minutes, and that’s a generous estimate**.”

And then the sounds Perseus had waited for arrived to his ears.

This resonated like thunder on the plaza.

But thunder was not a weather allowed to exist near C.C’s Spa and Resort.

And thunder was not accompanied by the familiar sound of cannonballs in the air.

“You may not have five minutes.” Perseus gave her a calm expression.

“**What exactly did you do**?”

“I am a wanted man, these days, Circe.” Perseus grinned. “It is entirely possible the pirate fleet which for a mysterious reason thought to find me here is attacking this island in the hope they can take my head, and thus win their liberty. The Triumvirate promised to remove their slave collars and a large sum of Drachmas: those are powerful motivators.”

The former Tyrant could now see the calculations play in the black eyes; Circe was strangely similar to Lou Ellen, her mortal half-sister, in that regard. She knew what he had engineered. Most of the Amazons were out of position; the Destroyer was gone, and the *Eye of Helios* couldn’t fire. A lot of ammunition had been expended, the submarines most certainly couldn’t sail out with the undersea gates severely damaged.

In general, this was the moment where he would have gloated.

But Circe could still choose to incinerate him; thus the tragic need to show a reasonable face to the end.

“**What do you want...Perseus Jackson**?”

Well, it was neat progress. Circe had even called him by his name!

“Isn’t it evident, my Lady? I want to surrender.”

\*\*\*\*

Her mother, her sisters, and her allies were going to gloat.

Circe had been warned to not underestimate Perseus Jackson, and it seemed that despite all the warnings given, she had done exactly that.

It was tempting, oh so tempting to incinerate Perseus Jackson and avenge the strategic defeat while scattering his ashes in the wind.

But it would exhaust her.

And now that the Immortal Sorceress extended her presence beyond the spa, she could feel twenty-two warships, all filled with pirates and other scum of the seas.

Conventional war wasn’t her specialty; when she wanted to win, she isolated the weak and the lone sailors, or she trapped them with cursed food and drinks.

It was likely she would win in the end, she was a Goddess after all. But her spa would be ravaged by war. The reputation of her establishment would sink, assuming she could even keep it open. Everyone would know that for the first time in several centuries, she had to relocate her activities elsewhere. And that was assuming Olympus wouldn’t try to make her pay for allying with the Triumvirate.

“And the terms of your...surrender?” It was hard to stay calm and not snarl the words.

Defeated parties should not have the power to decide the terms of how bad they lost.

Alas, Circe was beginning to understand that ‘victory’ and ‘defeat’ were very relative terms when it came to the son of Poseidon.

And killing him would likely make Atlantis very unhappy with her.

“I want the terms of the Achaia Convention to apply to every member of the Suicide Squad, with Oath on the Styx and all the formalities.”

Of course, he did. This ancient piece of diplomacy gave off very, very generous conditions to prisoners of war...so generous really that many Gods and Titans had joked that those it was applied to should be called ‘honoured guests’, not prisoners.

“This sounds reasonable.” Circe admitted. “But the expenses of the prisoners will not be paid by my treasury. Olympus will pay the bill alongside your ransom, or it will be the Suicide Squad’s duty to cover the expenses.”

“Agreed.” Perseus Jackson nodded surprisingly quickly. “Although I must insist the tariffs are reasonable. We’re hardly divine VIPs, after all.”

If anything, the rational argument annoyed her even more.

Perhaps because she wanted an excuse.

No, the Immortal Sorceress had to be honest.

She did want an excuse to resume the fight.

Her pride had been humbled, her security system had been crippled, and her measures had proven insufficient because she had completely underestimated the goals and the ambition of the son of Poseidon.

But the pirate ships were firing again, and coming ever closer to her island.

The magical protections would not last very long against such a large bombardment.

“There is still the matter of Suite Number Three to talk about.”

“Cut the supply of Mystery Wine and other exotic substances,” the green-eyed Demigod shrugged. “I’m sure the madness aura of my drunken lieutenant will fade after that, putting an end to the orgy. And if it does not, sheer exhaustion eventually will.”

“True.”

Circe swore the Oath.

Perseus Jackson threw her the object he had stolen from the *Eye of Helios*.

It was only once she had teleported atop the lighthouse where her father’s greatest weapon that she realised her mistake.

The Goddess of Illusions and Magical Transformations had been in such hurry that she hadn’t waited for the mad Demigod to surrender.

Damn it.

Now...well, there was nothing she could do for the next seconds.

But the pirates and their ships would make excellent replacement targets for her wrath.

**20 December 2006, approaches of C.C’s Spa and Resort**

The nightly spectacle was one that he would remember for a very long time.

Hundreds of cannons roared, and their fire illuminated the Sea of Monsters almost like they were under daylight, despite it being close to midnight.

Add the special rockets to make sure the galleons and all other warships had a splendid way to aim their guns, and you wouldn’t have believed they were close to midnight.

Thomas Cavendish, sole and only master of the *White Desire*, Admiral of the Cavendish Pirates, smiled coldly as one by one, the sorcery protecting the island faltered and died.

“Well,” the pirate once called ‘the Navigator’ lowered his spyglass to speak to his second, “it looked like your guess was right, Hammond.”

“They may try to lure us in, Captain.”

“No,” Thomas shook his head, “it’s been one hour we’ve been within the range of the *Eye of Helios*. C.C waited so long to destroy the Roman carrier because she wanted to recruit the female Legionnaires and brainwash her with her...her perversions. There was no need for her to wait with us. No, Hammond, if the *Eye of Helios* doesn’t fire, it is because it can’t. The assault of the Suicide Squad must have seriously damaged it, or the women operating it are too busy fighting for their very lives.”

“Powerful reasoning, Captain.” His second spoke. “Maybe I just said it because it was too good to be true...and it gives us an opportunity to seize the riches Blackbeard so nicely negotiated on our behalf!”

“That’s certainly something I will not regret,” the Captain of the *White Desire* smirked. “I don’t like Blackbeard.”

“Captain...” the Paymaster of the *White Desire* chuckled, “I don’t think that anyone save Blackbeard likes Blackbeard. His crew doesn’t like him...they are simply too terrified to disobey his commands. When you sail on the *Queen Anne’s Revenge*, not every slave is in chains.”

“That’s certainly something to keep in mind,” Thomas Cavendish agreed.

Especially if this whole operation was successful.

Fortune was always a powerful lure for other pirates, and this hunt was no exception. If they successfully divided the bounty between all the Captains, there was no doubt Blackbeard and other pirates would try to kill them for the golden Drachmas.

“The *Baker’s New Job* and the *Determined Butcher* have taken a good advance, Captain. They’re going to land their assault force before us.”

“Let them think they are the best,” Thomas replied. “Whatever side did win the battle, I doubt the witches of C.C or the Suicide Squad completely exhausted each other. And continue to fire for ten good minutes, I want the defences gone by the time we go ashore.”

The cannons continued to roar and throw hundreds of projectiles.

Some men would have compared it to hell, with the brimstone and the fires they lit into the night, but these men wouldn’t have been sailors.

It was the heart of war, the violence before the plunder.

Thomas Cavendish returned to his spyglass as over a hundred pirates raising cutlasses, muskets and boarding sabres set food on the white sands of C.C’s Spa and Resort.

“What it is, Hammond?”

“Err...Captain, there is a...an orange seagull on your right. It looks like an automaton model...and it has a letter for you.”

The urge was strong to wonder if his second had drunk too much rum when he had his back turned, but the English-born pirate turned his head, and sure enough, there was indeed an automaton looking like a seagull, a thing of wheels, pistons and other metallic parts.

And when he moved, the letter quickly fell into his right hand.

Thomas opened it, wondering if C.C was going to do the smart thing and flee while giving him a lot of women so his men could have their funs and-

Thomas froze while reading the first words.

*Captain Thomas Cavendish,*

*My name is Perseus Jackson. You may have heard of me since I entered this Zone Mortalis.*

*As I am a truly pacifist and gentle soul, I want to swear you my eternal friendship.*

“Not a chance, your head is worth far too much to-“

But after a large blank space, more words magically appeared on the paper.

*Now that you have refused it, I regret to inform you, dear friend, that despite my long-lived benevolence, my plans and yours are going to have some coexistence issues.*

*You see, in order to accomplish my objectives, I may have been, against my will I assure you, to negotiate the surrender of the Suicide Squad to Lady Circe. This is not a decision I made lightly, let me assure you.*

“Bastard,” Thomas had to reassess his entire strategy. The Immortal Sorceress and her pets were certainly not as exhausted as they should have been if the Demigods had gone down fighting. “It was-“

*Of course, the moment you will read this letter, it will have been at least twenty seconds since I will have returned the targeting array’s key piece of a certain super-weapon to Circe. Since I estimate the Goddess of this island will need approximately thirty seconds to return it to its proper place and rearm the* Eye of Helios*, I suppose that when you will read these words, the first laser shot will arrive to destroy your vanguard.*

A new sun was born.

There was no other way to describe it.

And as the sun chased away the night, the *Baker’s New Job* exploded, killing all the crew which had not yet landed. Then the antique weapon went on to fire on the *Determined Butcher*. The third, fourth, and fifth shots were for the pirates who had stepped foot on the beach.

“I HATE YOU PERSEUS JACKSON!” Thomas Cavendish screamed with all his heart, before fear replaced hatred in his heart. The *Eye of Helios* was active. The Eye of Helios was active, and his ships were all above an underwater minefield. They had removed enough of the traps to get through them by sailing above them, but they couldn’t use their submarine capabilities. And if they couldn’t...

“TURN US AROUND!” The Master of the *White Desire* screamed. “TURN US AROUND, THIS BATTLE IS LOST!”

The small sun fired again, and this time Thomas Cavendish’s entire world disappeared into an inferno.

**20 December 2006, the plaza leading to the *Eye of Helios***

It hadn’t been easy to prepare a sleeping spell of that magnitude.

But Bianca was very satisfied: while she’d not been the target, even a Goddess in the heart of her Domain had not sensed it in a passive state.

And once she was gone to rearm her super-weapon, it had been time to sleep for nearly four hundred women.

Naturally, Perseus Jackson and Richard Grant had run away to complete the next part of a completely insane plan.

Naturally.

Bianca, on the other hand, waited for her return.

A good part of her had been eagerly awaiting it. And not just because she wanted to prove Perseus’ predictions could turn out to be as wrong as anyone else’s.

Above them, the *Eye of Helios* finally stopped firing.

There had been, what, more than fifty strikes?

It must have been a massive slaughter.

And then there was a flash of purple light.

She was back.

The daughter of Hades was a bit annoyed there wasn’t even an expression of annoyance on the Immortal Sorceress’ face.

“**So this is what you were preparing, Lightning Thief**.”

“I bet you didn’t sense me.”

“**I wasn’t looking for you**.” Circe sighed. “**Since there were only two Demigods and two Demigoddesses unaccounted for, I suppose this irritant son of the Earthshaker is racing to reach the daughter of the Goddess of Agriculture who was missing, if I’m not mistaken. No doubt this annoying plan required one of my weapons that have other purposes beyond military capabilities**.”

Bianca saw no good reason to lie at this point.

“Yes.”

“**I’m really beginning to understand why the imbecile in charge of Olympus finds you so annoying**.” The Goddess’ appearance began to change. The hair became longer and took an intensity of additional blackness that they looked like tendrils of the Night itself. The purple robe was replaced by a black gown no proper witch would have refused. Talismans and eldritch necklaces were summoned into existence. Black boots replaced the high heels. “**I will only ask you once: surrender immediately, and I will not give you a painful lesson before taking you as my prisoner**.”

“You assume,” the former Dread Empress smiled, “that you are going to win. Perseus was confident of your victory, but I don’t share his opinion on the matter. Shall we dance, oh Goddess of Traps and Guinea Pigs?”

Circe clicked her fingers.

In the blink of an eye, over a thousand magical circles appeared in the sky above her, all shining with black energy. Millions of glyphs painted the sky in incantations that were old when the Roman Empire of this world was young. Clockworks entirely made of lethal spells and blazing enchanted swords were conjured.

“Oh...”

“**As you have yourself admitted, I am a Goddess of Magical Traps and Transformations**,” the daughter of Hecate bared her teeth. “**I call this combination the ‘Vortex of Nemesis’, in honour of one a vengeful Goddess I greatly admire. Don’t fall too fast, Lightning Thief**.”

There was a second click of fingers.

Bianca summoned everything she had to parry the overwhelming attack of sorcery and madness.

It wasn’t enough.

**The last minutes of 20 December 2006, the Temple of Sands, somewhere inside the true C.C’s Spa and Resort**

Miranda really tried to not show her dismay when she saw only Perseus Jackson and Richard Grant had managed to reach her.

“You’re the only two left?”

“I take it Lou Ellen didn’t arrive.” The son of Poseidon, as always, had a gift to not answer certain questions.

“No, she didn’t.”

“Then her mother must have directly intervened.” The leader of the Suicide Squad said simply.

“I’m sorry, what?”

“The Titaness of Magic is one of the powerful VIPs this island never refuses. Circe is never going to deny her mother, not when it offers a large amount of support which keeps Olympus from attacking this island.”

“Jackson,” Richard complained, “we aren’t supposed to say her name out loud-“

Terrifying explosions of night-coloured magic suddenly came into existence near the centre of the island.

“I don’t think it really matters anymore.” Perseus said in a disabused tone. “The Spa Mistress is busy giving her former Dread Majesty a lesson of humility that is alas really necessary. Now let’s move on. The duel, if we can call this one-sided punishment that, is not going to last very long.”

“You let the Lightning Thief fight a Goddess alone?”

“I warned her, but Bianca was confident she could win.” Perseus gave a last grimace as he looked at a terrible explosion, and began to walk towards the inner sections of the Temple. “Hopefully she will get a bit more humble from the experience.”

“When you spoke of defeat,” Miranda said, “I really thought you were joking.”

Richard Grant grunted in agreement.

“I’m sorry, but I’m only a Demigod.” The green-eyed Demigod paused. “I could have razed the spa with long-range missiles, of course, given enough time. But then the Titaness of Magic would have cursed me for a decade, and we would have to deal with the wrath of Circe for the rest of our lives, and probably some years beyond that.”

The next few seconds were spent in complete silence, as they walked between large columns of yellow marble.

“I hope you won’t expect us to duel an irate deity to give you the few minutes in order to accomplish an even more ridiculous plan.”

“I’m not stupid, Miranda.” Perseus grinned. “When the Goddess will ask you to lower your weapons, you do it, and then your surrender immediately. Circe is bound by the Achaia Convention now, risking your lives by that point would be just idiotic.”

That was a bit reassuring, yes, she wasn’t going to lie.

“Besides, what would a delay matter right now? It serves no strategic or tactical purpose. Do you feel it, my friends? The darkness approaches. The clash which will decide the awakening of the two new daughters of the Earth Mother is a question of mere minutes. Olympus is beginning to acknowledge the signs. Their attention will turn away from the massacre done by the *Eye of Helios*.”

Richard’s expression became angrier, it went without saying.

“Next you’re going to say everything was part of your plan.”

“Not everything no,” the son of Poseidon shook his head. “Casualties and fatalities, alas, will be far higher than my pessimistic estimates allowed for. But if we can’t count on Olympian support to open a breach in the walls of Forge MP-42, we need something that will give us victory. We need an asset which will give us the definite edge we lack at present.”

“And this weapon is?”

Perseus didn’t answer the son of Hercules’ query, instead he entered the altar chamber of the Temple.

Miranda had expected a lot of things. It may have been rows after rows of weapons, like the Questers had been tempted with before challenging the Ice Drakon. It may have been a magical statute a God or a Goddess would do everything to keep in pristine state. It may have been countless magical engines of great destruction created by Circe.

It was none of that.

There were no statues, no gold, no treasures, and certainly nothing which could be described as a weapon.

“Jackson, are you sure we’re in the right place?” asked the tallest member of the half-divine trio.

“Of course, my most muscular lieutenant. The weapon is right there, straight in front of you.”

“Jackson, that’s a big urn...or a jar! I don’t know what word best applies, I admit.”

And no, Miranda wasn’t exaggerating. It was a very big urn, or a very big jar.

As they got close to it, however, there was a particular sinister detail revealed: the object was chained. Yes, there were true chains of metal, all of which felt enchanted, and were there to make sure the artefact didn’t move by a centimetre.

“I call it the ‘Sand Jar’.” Perseus frowned. “I don’t know the real name of course, but mine has a certain simplicity, I will admit.”

“Yes, what does it do?”

Evidently, this was the wrong question to ask, because the infernal smirk of a certain Demigod grew bigger.

“Isn’t it evident, my most muscular lieutenant? It is a big jar filled with sand.”

“I thought you were the one saying we lacked the time for the jokes,” Miranda reminded him tersely.

“There’s always time for good puns,” was the depressing and predictable answer the daughter of Demeter received. “But fine, it is not just a big jar filled with sand. There is sand inside, of course. But it is no mere sand. It is the essence of a powerful being.”

“I’ve a very bad feeling,” Richard Grant growled. “Don’t tell me your marvellous plan is to release the demon of the sands in the middle of this island so that you can improve your surrender terms!”

Perseus sighed.

“I will seriously have to create a cardboard with a ‘don’t be ridiculous’ message. No, this is not my plan. First and above all, the Achaia Convention is pretty much the best terms we will ever get from Circe. Releasing an apocalyptic weapon to destroy her island is pretty much a guarantee our surrender would not be accepted, or that unpleasant loopholes for our detention would be considered. Secondly, the Sand Jar does not contain the essence of a demon.”

“Really?”

“No,” the smile was a model of smugness if there ever was one, “this Sand Jar is the prison of the *Drakon of Sands*.”

It said quite something that without coordinating in the least, Miranda and Richard took immediately two steps back.

“You told us you didn’t know where to find the two other Primordial Drakons!” the accusation of the son of Hercules was not long in coming.

“It is not a Primordial Drakon, just one of the most powerful and killable member of its species.” Perseus declared calmly. “I will have you know this is also the one I am quasi-certain to beat on my own. Sand is powerful, but not against my Hydrokinesis.”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand.” Miranda tried, very, very hard to not sound afraid. “If you can beat this Drakon, when what’s the point of trying to use this Sand Jar?”

“This is indeed a good question.”

Perseus continued to advance towards the Sand Jar, stopping a mere half-metre away from it. Without warning, the artefact began to shake and try to escape its chains, but the enchantments and the metal held, though the energy of the thing was definitely not reassuring.

“But there is a better one. What kind of being can defeat a Titan one-on-one?” The leader of the Suicide Squad did not leave them more than a couple of seconds to think about it. “The list is frankly very limited. There are the Primordials, of course, and then there are the Titans. As the former are far too dangerous to be ever considered, this means we need a Titan or a Titaness on our side.”

The son of the Earthshaker moved his arm in direction of the Sand Jar, but refrained to touch it.

“In the damaged chronicles of the Titan Age I was able to recover, the tales were formal the Sand Drakon was the messenger and the ferryman of the Titaness of Drakons. No matter how many obstacles stood in the way, the Drakon could indeed bring allies and enemies to the Titaness...a rare power, but not that surprising, given that the Drakon was in all likelihood the most powerful *female* Drakon.”

“Then what are we waiting for? Sever the chains and-“

“This isn’t that simple, Grant. When I say the essence of the Drakon, or the Drakoness, I suppose, I’m not familiar with male/female Drakon designations. Anyway, the essence of the Sand Drakon has been imprisoned in this Sand Jar. The body was destroyed, along with much of its ancient identity. Therefore, it will need a new host.”

“You want us to be possessed by a Drakon? No way, by the Pit!”

“Not you, Grant,” Miranda whispered. “Me. It’s why you gave me the metal ivy, didn’t you? It will allow me to have a measure of control immediately over the Sand Drakon.”

“It was one of the possible plans I left open for later Great Quests,” Perseus agreed, though there was no smile on his face. “But the choice is up to you, Miranda.”

“Really?” she couldn’t stop the ironic drawl from being uttered by her lips.

“Yes, really. In many ways, it is something on the level Jade and Drew accepted when they accepted to become Champions of their respective Goddesses. Unlike that time, however, the blessing doubles as a curse. The identity of the Drakon is very much destroyed, but its powers and primal instincts are still there. You will stop sleeping. It will constantly tempt you with the power of the sands. And it will not stop until you will master said powers for good.”

“The flowers of the desert grow strong,” Miranda didn’t know where the words had come from, only that they were true. “Or they die.”

“Indeed.”

Miranda thought it over.

It was very much a choice she hoped she would never have to do.

Yet so far, this Great Quest had been a series of mad deeds. It had told her over and over that she was weak. Metallic ivy or no, Miranda was weak.

It may not be tomorrow, but one day, she would be as powerless as the Gallowborne had been when the enemies of the Suicide came. It was that or she fled to the safety of New Byzantium and never participated in any Great Quest again.

 What a choice to make when you were just a teenager.

She nodded.

“Very well, I will do it.”

“Good.” Perseus drew his sword from his scabbard, and in one large strike cut the first chain. The blow was so powerful it felt like a thunder strike.

There was a second blow. A third flawless move broke one more chain.

Miranda continued to walk forwards, feeling the darkness at her back. The daughter of Demeter didn’t need to look to know Circe had arrived.

At last the last chain was destroyed. Sand began to pour from the Sand Jar, though there was no opening, it came out from fissures on the container’s surface.

“**It will be permanent, daughter of Ivy and Earth**.” A Goddess called, but her voice seemed incredibly distant. “**Sorcery may be able to end the Possession, but not without killing you**.”

“I accept the risk.”

Jackson muttered something that felt like six words of curse and the Temple of Sands trembled.

The Sand Jar exploded.

An ocean of sand submerged her.

It felt awfully painful.

But suddenly, there were skills that suddenly became part of her mind. Skills that had never been hers.

Miranda could open a gate to the Titaness.

And so the new Possessed Demigoddess did it before pain paralysed her.

**21 December 2006, somewhere far, far away from C.C’s Spa and Resort, technically not even part of the Sea of Monsters**

Perseus sighed in relief when he stepped through out of the sand portal.

The travel had been unpleasant, but marginally tolerable. He wouldn’t do it every day to be sure.

Still, it had worked. He was really going to have to offer something very nice to Miranda once he returned.

The former Tyrant’s biggest regret with his plan was that he hadn’t been able to truly tell the brown-haired Demigoddess what he expected her to volunteer for. The risk had been too great that someone from Olympus or one Immortal Sorceress would realise what his true plan was. And as such, Perseus could only reveal the last phase at the very last minute.

The leader of the Suicide Squad could only hope Miranda would be strong enough to resist until he returned.

Abandoning these thoughts for the time being – he couldn’t do anything for or against it for the moment – Perseus looked at his surroundings.

It looked like had arrived to paradise.

If C.C’s Spa and Resort was worth a grade of nine out of ten before the Suicide Squad invaded it, then this was easily worth a ten. The beach he had just set foot upon was pristine; it was the very image of a summer dream. Nearby, the waters were so blue the urge was there to jump in them and swim while laughing gregariously. There were gentle grass-covered hills and olive trees, along with many examples of Mediterranean vegetation.

And the air! The air simply felt divinely good. It felt like sea and fruits. It felt like you could abandon all your sins and all your problems.

The Gods had really created something beautiful. Of course, they had been bound by treaty to do it, but nonetheless they had fulfilled their word.

Perseus gave a last regretful glance to the sea, before slowly making his way to the entrance of the island, whistling an old song that he had learned during his second childhood.

He didn’t have to walk long.

Before he had made fifty steps, the green-eyed Demigod saw a young woman run in his direction.

If her astonished expression was any indication, his arrival had come to a monumental surprise. It was normal, for he had suspected the Gods had warned her before the previous visitors were washed up on the island’s beach.

Where to begin with the girl’s appearance? Her clothes were of a beautiful white colour, and would have been fashionable at Athens when it dominated the diverse cities of Greece. Her hair was a beautiful light brown, a shade which reminded him of caramel sweets. The hair had also been tied into an elaborate braid, and there was a golden headband. It was not a symbol of royalty, but given her natural beauty, it might have been one.

Overall, while the girl did not look very athletic, Perseus was quite confident that looking at her right now, the Amazons and the Huntresses wouldn’t hesitate asking her to join their respective organisations. She was very graceful, and she looked in a good physical shape, very attractive, yet hardly a threat like one represented by Bianca or himself.

The Gods were really disgusting sometimes.

One had to only see the light of hope which had been lit in the girl’s dark eyes to know the cruelty of Olympus.

Fortunately, it ended tonight.

It was night, and yet on this part of the world, the stars were so luminous they had no problem watching each other.

“Welcome stranger, to my island.”

There wasn’t a single trace of power in her voice, and if he had not been so sure of his plan, Perseus would have hesitated.

But he knew better.

“I thank you for the welcome.” The son of Poseidon smiled. “I note you didn’t say ‘welcome to Ogygia’”.

“You...you know?” The voice was musical, and clearly quite shocked.

“Of course, I know. But where are my manners? I am Perseus Jackson, son of the Earthshaker, twice-born, Quester, leader of the infamous Suicide Squad, and heroic villain when I feel like it, which is most of the time. And I have decided, for very selfish reasons, to free you from your prison.”

“No!” The young-looking caramel-haired girl gaped. “No! This is impossible! Only the Gods can free me from this island, and they swore to me when they did it they would keep me here for all eternity!”

“And yes, I am here,” the former Tyrant said. “I didn’t ask for their permission. I used powers that they were too content to pretend they had never existed. By your own words, I have indeed accomplished the impossible.”

Hope was definitely the most powerful blessing and the terrible curse ever given to mortals and immortals, wasn’t it? Perseus could see it in her eyes.

“I need your help. We Demigods need your help, General.”

And Perseus theatrically bent the knee.

“You have the wrong person!” Of course the natural protest came instantly. “I am not the person you seek!”

“Really?” Perseus raised an ironic eyebrow. “Was I mistaken? The old chronicles of the Titanomachy speak of you, my Lady. They speak of your wrath and your might, of elemental wings flying to war. In the halls of the Underworld, they still whisper how you sank half of the island that was to become Crete. “

His fist struck his chest in respectful salute.

“Hail Calypso, daughter of the Sea Titaness and the Endurance Titan, Polemarch of the Titan Grand Host, Lady of Fortitude and Might, First Warden of the Hesperides Garden, Defender of Othrys, Warden of the East...Titaness of the Drakons.”

A small fire began to burn in the human-looking body facing him.

This time, Perseus had really all the attention of the most powerful daughter of Thethys.

“These are old titles. I lost everything, including the power to back them, when we were defeated in the Titanomachy.”

“Yes,” Perseus grinned. “So why we don’t try to change that sad state of affairs?”

**Author’s note**:

Perseus told the Suicide Squad he wanted to acquire a super-weapon...he never developed what kind of weapon he wanted to grab when they sailed for C.C’s Spa and Resort.

The events of the Winter Solstice and Perseus’ adventures on an island cut off from space and time will continue next chapter.

**Suicide Squad - List of Fallen**:

*Judith – Huntress of Artemis*

*Kalinda – Huntress of Artemis*

*Eudoxia – Huntress of Artemis*

*Douglas Smith – son of Volturnus*

*Phoebe – Huntress of Artemis, daughter of Eris*

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

*Gallowborne Division – all seventeen Legionnaires*

*Nick Coleman, son of Quirinus*

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

**Wall of Dishonour**:

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

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

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

**Gallowborne ‘Division’**:

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

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