**Chapter 21**

**You Only Live Twice**

*With the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that Perseus informed the enemy commander of Operation Doom Whale because the Triumvirate couldn’t do anything to counter it.*

*Not with the forces that had been stationed on ‘Pear Island’ to prevent us from claiming the Golden Fleece.*

*And even if those forces had been sufficient by themselves, the monsters and their allies did not have a madman anywhere near their leadership positions.*

*Since it required another crazy person to anticipate the moves of our insane leader, the operation was largely decided the moment the Dreadnought* Musashi *sank.*

*All the risks taken by the Suicide Squad happened well before the first shot was fired. Once everything proceeded to Jackson’s plan, the defeat of the Triumvirate in this phase was near-certain.*

*Clearly, the same thing couldn’t be said of Operation Zombie. First of all, it couldn’t escape any attentive observer that unlike Doom Whale, the enemy wasn’t given the operation name or any clue. Hell, most of the Suicide Squad wasn’t in the know either. The surprise effect had to be total.*

*It wasn’t difficult to guess why, though. One of the main reasons was undoubtedly the psychological blow Perseus hammered the enemy with. The mortal defenders of the Golden Fleece were in the process of watching a real nightmare with Moby Dick obliterating their fleet. At this point, one of the few things they could latch to in order to keep their calm was that no matter what happened on sea, their land fortifications were intact.*

*Battleships, ironclads, and galleons may have been sunk, but the trenches, the minefields, and the kill-zones waited, indomitable and unvanquished. With the artillery on dominant positions that ensured a murderous kill-ratio for any attacker, the strategists of the other side had no doubt made the same calculations a child of Athena could make: it would take tens of thousands of Demigods to overwhelm this heavily fortified defensive system, and it couldn’t be done without suffering thousands of casualties in the process.*

*Since the Suicide Squad began the day with fewer than one hundred members total, the outcome shouldn’t have been in doubt.*

*But when the undead iguana army was revealed...all of the Triumvirate calculations – and mine too – were thrown out of the window.*

*Attrition doesn’t mean anything if you have indeed an army of thousands of beings, and that army is entirely expendable.*

*Or in Jackson’s own words, if you’re a Necromancer, the world is your blasphemous undead oyster. And yes, before you ask, our crazy son of Poseidon seemed to have stolen the quote from a guy named Sorcerous.*

*Still, I can’t say he was wrong.*

*The Triumvirate was not prepared for a horde of zombies. They hadn’t been given a clue of what had really happened in the Forge of All Perils, and even if they had, neither Perseus Jackson nor Bianca di Angelo had really used Necromancy on such a scale before this battle.*

*Surprise was thus total. Panic rapidly spread. It didn’t help them that given the circumstances, the Guardian couldn’t intervene. Yes, sometimes the Ancient Laws end up making some lives miserable besides Demigods’ and Demigoddesses’.*

*The monsters, skeletons, pirates, automatons and other warriors that were waiting between the black beach and the artillery redoubts of the dominant heights were given no time to prepare or to discuss a strategy.*

*The undead army was unleashed, and if it wasn’t stopped, the reptiles raised from a watery grave would eliminate all resistance before trying to storm this evil copy of my mother’s Parthenon.*

*Many of our elders at camp say that we must live our lives to the fullest, because we only have one life.*

*With this battle, the Suicide Squad proved it wrong. Your body, if not your soul, could definitely live twice...*

Extract from the Chapter 4 of *Seas of Madness: Chronicles of the Suicide Squad Volume 2* by Annabeth Chase, daughter of Athena

**14 December 2006, Command Bunker of the Second Defence Line, ‘Pear Island’**

For approximately ten seconds, Praetor Lucius Vorenus was paralysed.

Half of his brain screamed to him that it was utterly impossible. That Demigods, no matter how crazy or powerful, could not raise an army from the grave and throw it against his defences.

The other half whispered that it was completely possible...and that with this undead army, everything he commanded was about to perish.

By the time Lucius was able to control his astonishment and the freezing it had spread in his veins, the first ‘beach trench’ had been overran.

This was bad, for while the first lines had always supposed to be conceded to the enemy, they were not supposed to fall so fast.

And there was worse to come.

There was a magical pulse of midnight colour engulfing the trench, and when it ended, the pirates who had just perished began to rise once more.

One glance could tell you their allegiance had changed.

And second after second, the Triumvirate Praetor saw more pirates join the reptilian army. Not from the trench, this time.

No, in this instance, the thousands of dead men were emerging from the bay where their fleet had just been annihilated.

“We just didn’t offer him the possibility of destroying our fleet in a single battle...” Lucius Vorenus was not squeamish, but suddenly, he felt a powerful urge to vomit. The veteran officer hadn’t been proud of some things he had done, but...it was horrible. “We just gave that little bastard thousands of troops for his own offensive.”

Some part of him, the more ruthless part, agreed the idea was a strategic masterstroke. The other part was disgusted and horrified.

One thing the two parts of his mind could agree upon, however: everything that had been prepared to defend the island...it was not worth the ink or the paper that had been used to write them.

Letting the enemy advance and bleed upon each layer of the defence was no longer an option.

“TELL THE ARTILLERY TO FIRE AT ONCE! FIRE! FIRE AT WILL! KILL THEM BEFORE THEY CAN ADVANCE ANY FURTHER!”

“Easy to say,” the Teumessian Kit replied next to him, “far more difficult to do! This isn’t a mindless horde, look at how the corpses are clearing the minefields!”

Lucius could only grit his teeth, because his monster subordinate was right.

After overwhelming the first trench by virtue of numbers, the...the army of the non-living had decided to continue its advance...but they weren’t moving like a horde for this general assault. Instead they were advancing in four fast columns. That way, only the reptile or the pirate leading the progression was blowing up on a landmine, and the others were following into the demined path.

It was something few soldiers, no matter the era, would have willingly obeyed.

But these ‘soldiers’ were dead, and as such they didn’t care about their losses. As the artillery at last began to pour shells upon the animated bodies of the non-living, Lucius could see the minefields were cleared incredibly quickly. Or at least the four ‘lanes’ in it were rapidly cleaned up.

A second trench on the black sands was reached, and this time, the pirates and all the beings able to think for themselves abandoned it without a fight. The automatons and the skeletons didn’t...for all the good it did.

“The artillery isn’t doing them enough damage! The shockwaves have killed many on impact, but shrapnel on the bodies isn’t doing them anything!”

“By the bowels of-“

The worst part was that it was logical. His ammunition stores were made to kill Demigods and other mortals having some divine legacy flowing in their blood. But most of it was totally unsuitable to fight the dead. It was going to cripple them, tear limbs apart, bleed them...but what do the dead care for-

“MISSILES! MISSILES INCOMING!”

“Seal the Bunker!”

The island itself seemed to shake as explosions arrived nearby.

“That,” Lucius coughed as smoke began to arrive to his nose, “wasn’t the corpses’ doing...”

“No...that was the two warships of the enemy!”

“They outrange us that badly?”

How much had he underestimated this infernal son of Poseidon?

Then again, how could he have known? One of the ships had just appeared after they left the volcanic Forge, and the mega-yacht had never shown missile-launching capabilities.

“Retaliate,” Lucius Vorenus ordered, knowing deep in his guts that was exactly what the enemy wanted. “A third of the guns are to try to disable these ships! We can’t endure a bombardment like this one for long!”

As if the enemy agreed with him, more explosions shook the underground fortifications, and the screams of the dying began to fill the air.

“But the tides of dead are still coming! Two-thirds of the guns won’t be enough!”

“It will have to be!” the Praetor barked. “Now do your duty...and kill me these bastards! I don’t care if it’s the first or second time they have lost their lives, kill them!”

**14 December 2006, Armoured Super-Mega-Yacht *Inevitable Doom***

Perseus lowered his spyglass while grinning, as over three-quarters of the beach had now been conquered by his undead iguana army.

Since in addition to this the bone construct made from Drakonic remains had managed to provide a ramp so that his ‘zombies’ reached the heights in a far easier manner, everything was so far proceeding according to the plan.

“You know, my treacherous lieutenant, I was pleasantly surprised that in several pieces of literature, there is something very similar to what existed in my former life. You can’t thwart stage one indeed...”

Ethan Nakamura grunted.

“It is possible to thwart the first stage of a plan, Jackson,” the son of Nemesis retorted. “It’s just that your plans are so unpredictable they don’t have any idea what sort of madness you’re going to unleash next. Seriously, an entire undead army...what’s next? You will send a tsunami to drown them?”

“Nothing so impressive I’m afraid,” the former Tyrant shook his head, “let me remind you that we need the Golden Fleece, whatever my plans to obtain it are. I don’t think collapsing this island into the sea and losing the healing artefact would amuse Olympus.”

“That’s...that’s a good point.”

In the distance, hundreds of guns fired, an unending rumble of destruction and despair. The Triumvirate gunners were really firing everything they had to stop the iguanas and the pirates raised against them. At first they had tried their luck against the *Inevitable Doom* and the *Second Chance*, but they had gotten wiser after a couple of volleys.

“And to properly answer your question...now that Operation Zombie has given us a beachhead, cleaned up several lanes into the minefields, and is making sure the enemy is very busy dealing with our undead auxiliaries...it is time for the Suicide Squad to earn its pay. You will take command of the force that will land, Ethan. I can’t give you Bianca and Lou Ellen, I need them here, but you can have the thirty-two Legionnaires and most of the *Inevitable Doom*’s crew.”

“WHAT?” For all her mortality, a certain ex-Goddess certainly had powerful lungs. “Jackson! You’re not serious!”

“I assure you, Antigone,” the green-eyed Demigod said calmly, not bothering turning his head, “I am deadly serious.”

“But...the iguanas...all those...those zombies...”

“We have already lost more than four thousand of them fighting their way across the beach.” The evidence was all around the battlefield...and it was very literal, this time. “The artillery of the enemy is busy killing hundreds more. Operation Zombie has achieved its goal, which was to inflict considerable damage on the second defensive line, enough damage that the Suicide Squad could finish it. It was never supposed to be enough by itself. I would have loved to achieve that kind of success, really, but unless the enemy commander was completely incompetent, it was always an unlikely proposition.”

He could feel the hot glare of the former Queen of the Gods trying to pierce his neck...fortunately, ‘Antigone’ didn’t have that kind of power anymore.

“Suggestions, oh glorious and mad leader?”

“More respect for my extraordinary person?” the son of Poseidon tried. Alas, the answer was rude and not worth commenting upon. “Okay. My suggestion is that the Suicide Assault Force advance divided into two sub-groups. That will leave you more empty lanes across the minefields if you have to change the axis on the left. My advice is to keep the Romans into a large armoured fist, with Elvis Knight in charge. Anne Bonny is needed aboard the *Second Chance* anyway. In the mean time, you take overall command with the second ‘fist’, and place Clarisse in the vanguard. She has received something that will be very useful to fight your way for the defences. As for the penguins...they should be busy stocking up on grenades and other explosives to clear the trenches. I would say there will be tactical benefits of other people imitating them...”

“Duly noted.” The son of Nemesis curtly replied.

Perseus Jackson grinned...and then turned around to see the Suicide Squad mustering on his mega-yacht’s deck.

“Despite the laziness of our dear Antigone here-“

“HEY!” The reaction was eminently predictable. “DON’T THINK-“

“It is time for war,” the leader of the Great Quest continued, ignoring her loud outburst. “Operation Zombie destroyed a significant part of the second defensive line, but we need to deploy a significant number of Legionnaires on the heights and silence their artillery. That’s your priority goal.”

“And the city behind it?” Luke asked. “I doubt the monsters hiding within are going to let us get away with it.”

“That why the Huntresses are going to take up sniper positions on the heights as fast possible,” Perseus turned to look at the last loyal servants of Artemis. “As the core of the opposition is including Lycanthropes and Teumessian Kits, I suppose there won’t be any reluctance to accomplish that mission?”

For once, there was none...there was in fact some vindictiveness and bloodthirst in their eyes. After several days spent leashing the hatred they felt for him and many other ‘males’ in their hearts, the Huntresses really needed a target. The ‘allies’ of the Triumvirate had just been volunteered to be it.

If they weren’t his enemies, Perseus would almost pity them...almost.

“Clarisse and Asterius will be in the vanguard of the assault against this third defensive line, for reasons that will become obvious once they do.” The former Tyrant spoke as loud as he could to make sure the crew of the *Second Chance* and its unruly Legionnaires heard him perfectly. “Once again, I suggest everyone who will fight there to stock up some long-range weapons. Kits of the Teumessian Fox are notoriously tricky to deal with at close-quarters...and I don’t have any antidote to the curse of Lycanthropy.”

Naturally, many people turned towards Clarisse after that, wondering why he was so eager to risk her and not the rest of the Suicide Squad.

Well, they could continue wondering for a short while...

“I note,” Ethan returned, armed to the teeth and with penguins carrying grenade launchers in tow, “that you didn’t mention the *fourth* defensive line.”

“Yes, I didn’t.”

Perseus summoned a jug of fruit juice, drank it completely while listening to the sounds of furious fighting and artillery bombardment in the distance.

“I didn’t,” the leader of the Suicide Squad grinned maliciously, “because it is not your job to deal with that. This will be Drew’s job, once she will have recovered, along with some assistance specially required for the task ahead.”

“But,” Annabeth Chase, daughter of Athena, predictably intervened, “this temple is a grave insult against-“

“**No**.”

Using Charmspeak for something like that could feel like a waste, but Perseus knew better.

It was not time to take any chances.

“**Let me be clear**,” the son of the Master of Atlantis proclaimed while boosting the power of his voice, “**when the enemies defending the third line of defences will have been vanquished, your role is over. Under no circumstances are you to advance further than the last houses of the currently monster-crowded settlement. You don’t climb the stairs leading higher on the slopes of the mountain; you don’t rush towards the Dark Parthenon, you don’t pursue the monsters and the Legionnaires if they happen to retreat in that direction**.”

“But...*why*?”

The daughter of Athena seemed so...miserable that Perseus had not even the heart to make a joke about it.

“Because the Guardian of the Golden Fleece will kill you. It is his temple, and between the entrance and the altar where the Golden Fleece undoubtedly await...not even an Olympian can save you.”

The grey eyes hesitated...and then acceptance arrived in them. Good. It would be a shame to lose the strategist-oriented Demigoddess in an easily avoided trap.

“I hope everyone understands perfectly this order,” repetitions were particularly boring, but this time it was really worth insisting. “Don’t go near that temple. The Guardian is something beyond your strength, and you will ruin a well-honed plan I have to limit our casualties if you do. Oh, and if you disobey and happen to survive the consequences of your stupidity, I swear I will crucify you or order something an extremely unpleasant demise just to reward your stupidity. Any questions? No? Then go to war! FOR OPERATION ZOMBIE AND THE SUICIDE SQUAD!”

Should one day Catherine Foundling arrive into this world, he would have to really thank her for giving her so many brilliant ideas...

**14 December 2006, the Trenches of the Second Defence Line, ‘Pear Island’**

While they ran across the devastated beach, Elvis Knight had murmured several praises for the Gods who had believed Perseus Jackson was the Demigod who had the greatest chances to accomplish this Quest.

The succession of trenches, the kill-zones, and all the devilish surprises that had awaited them before the ‘zombie troops’ stormed them...they could have stopped an entire Legion. No, let’s be honest, they would have stopped an entire Legion, if they had managed to bring one for a D-Day style of operation.

And given the size of the fleet Jackson had destroyed with the help of Moby Dick – controlled of course by a daughter of Aphrodite of all people – it wasn’t at all certain a Legion could have fought its way across the enemy warships.

In fact, there were high chances they would have perished in the attempt.

“Ha! KABOOM!”

KABOOM!

“Tell this heretic of a penguin to stop!”

“Eustace, shut up!”

In the last days, the loudmouth Legionnaire of course had to make himself an annoyance again.

“I’m just saying-“

“The penguins are cleaning the trenches with their grenade launchers...plus the explosive zombies.”

BOOM!

KABOOM!

Sometimes, Elvis mused as they hid in a trench filled with corpses of iguanas and other mutilated monsters, you could only wonder what was going to be left of this island once the battle was over.

The beach had been a photo for ‘devastation incarnate’, but the heights were a lunar wasteland, reminiscent of World War One’s battlefields.

“We press on,” Elvis Knight told Arthur, who had just stabbed a skeletal abomination – this one not created by the Suicide Squad, thanks the Gods.

“Even with the explosive zombies? I wonder how they managed to stuff so much ammunition inside to generate those explosions...”

“I don’t think we really want to know, Decurion.”

KABOOM!

“Into the next trench!”

They attacked, and given how uneven the terrain was, doing it in heavy armour was absolutely not easy.

But they didn’t have the choice. The enemy artillery was diminished, yes, but not fully suppressed, for all the missiles and other lethal ammunition the warships were sending at them.

Meaning they had to do it the hard way and-

“My arm! My arm!”

“Chuck is wounded!”

“Protect him! Medic!”

It would have been a lot better to have a son of Apollo or Asclepius, but Jackson had been unwilling to risk the former and the latter. As such they had to do with what they had...

“Into the next trench! Fast!”

“But Chuck is-“

“I know! But you have to move him! Otherwise we will all be wounded, and it won’t help anyone! EUSTACE! What do you think you’re doing? Dispersed formation, I told you!”

Thankfully, they managed to transport the wounded Legionnaire into the trench, right as the howitzers and the rocket-launchers of the enemy thundered again.

“Chuck needs to be evacuated,” their battle-medic told Elvis. “Or he’s going to lose his arm.”

“Well, that’s easy...we can’t.”

The attack across the beach had happened as the guns of the Triumvirate were busy with the zombies. Now sending more men – and it would have to be a minimum of four – back to the ship was tantamount to suicide as long as the enemy wasn’t destroyed.

“Yes! We must attack! We must claim the Golden Fleece, for the glory of Rome!”

It didn’t reassure Elvis that there were many grunts and sounds of approval.

“Shut up, Eustace. We have our orders, and so far, those have led us to victory.”

The more time passed, the more the Knight scion wondered if the last Bragg heir was not a symptom of the problems which had plagued the entire First Cohort of the Twelfth Legion.

“Victory for the *Greeks*, you mean,” someone muttered behind him.

The Centurion thought it best to pretend his ears had not heard *that*.

“Two men stay with Chuck, providing him as much medical help as we can. The rest, with me! We have four more positions to clear, and we aren’t going to be seen as slow by the Minotaur!”

**14 December 2006, Armoured Super-Mega-Yacht *Inevitable Doom***

Lou Ellen had rarely seen the daughter of Hades show any sign of fatigue, but there was no denying she showed a few now.

Of course, if she had tried to do the same thing, the daughter of Hecate knew she would not look so healthy. Assuming she managed to do it in the first place...at the beginning of the undead tide, there must have been more than thirty thousand corpses thrown against the Triumvirate defenders.

“Nine out of ten of the ‘zombies’ you wanted me to unleash have been eliminated,” Bianca di Angelo reported.

“It is completely fine,” Perseus shrugged. “They played their role anyway.” The red button was pushed one more time, and a missile took flight, rushing to deliver more devastation upon the elevated fortifications of ‘Peach Island’.

Lou Ellen cleared her throat.

“I suppose this role consisted of storming the entire second line of defences and inflicting as much damage as physically possible upon all the assets and soldiers of the Triumvirate.”

“Yes,” the son of Poseidon confirmed.

Well, the blonde sorceress was going to acknowledge it was a very successful plan.

The island...everything from the black sands of its beach to the steep hills above them had been on the receiving end of tons upon tons of explosives.

There were corpses and bones everywhere. There were broken and melted weapons, from machine guns to authentic spears.

It was a tapestry of ruin, with depots burning and more explosions being triggered as crippled zombies continued here and there to throw themselves on unexploded landmines.

Naturally, the biggest explosions were in the last bunkers and bastions of the second defensive line.

“Congratulations, I suppose. The Triumvirate leadership has evacuated the entire line of defence to take refuge into the settlement behind it.”

“Yes,” the Lightning Thief commented with a distinct lack of enthusiasm, perhaps due to exhaustion “and I will note that while their losses on the beach were pretty much total, they managed to save quite a few battalions from the fighting on the heights, while stopping and annihilating the undead iguanas and other forces I raised from the grave.”

The son of Poseidon didn’t seem bothered by it.

“This was indeed part of my plan.”

“Really?” If Bianca di Angelo tried to be more sarcastic, she was going to be able to shred armours by the power of her voice alone...

“Really,” Perseus repeated smugly, “the chances of killing the defenders to the last when they had other lines of defences were always slim. If they had the time, and the Legionnaires and their hired mercenaries had it, they would take the chance to withdraw to a more defensible line, one where they would no longer have to deal with our ‘special suicide zombie squad’. This is really intelligent, when you think about it. The second phase has lost the effect of surprise, and in many ways they saved the elite troops that were stationed here: Lycanthropes, Teumessian Kits, and of course Triumvirate Legionnaires.”

“You could try to be not so...appreciative of their efforts.”

“Why?” The tone was so cheerful, you would never think there was a battle raging out there...

“Because...oh, never mind.” Bianca shook her head in exasperation. “I suppose we should have it seen coming. Four lines of defences. That means four stages for your little manipulative tricks...”

“Little?” For the first time, Perseus was visibly offended. “I will have you know your Dreadful Majesty, there was nothing little about Moby Dick and this undead zombie army!”

“That you ordered others to do for you...”

“Yes, of course! It’s called delegating...”

“Are you sure it’s not laziness?”

Lou Ellen cleared her throat...again.

It was better to stop this bickering before it got out of control.

“Since it is only a question of minutes before Ethan reports the second defence line of the enemy is gone...would you mind telling us what you call the third part of Annihilation Tide?”

“But of course! This is an operation of deep cunning and subtlety!”

The delighted expression was so horribly gleeful that Lou Ellen knew for sure it was a monumental lie when the last word was uttered.

“I don’t believe you.”

A theatrical sigh followed.

“I was just testing your vigilance...and joking. Fine. It is going to be an exercise of primal brutality. There is going to be unlimited violence and rivers of blood. In a century to come, the descendants’ survivors will shiver hiding in caves at the memory of it.”

Two hands were joined in a false pious pose that could fool no one with a modicum of intelligence.

“Let me explain to you the concept of Operation Berserker.”

**14 December 2006, Novus Lykaion, Third Line of Defence of the Triumvirate forces**

Praetor Lucius Vorenus didn’t remember hating Perseus Jackson before today.

That was no longer the case.

“FELINE! HE IS SENDING US BOMBS REEKING OF PESTIFEROUS FELINE ABOMINATIONS! LET’S KILL HIM, PACK!”

“You will do nothing of the sort!” the Triumvirate commander barked.

Immediately, a lot of wolfish eyes turned towards him. And while the Lycanthropes were still mostly keeping a human appearance, this was not exactly a pleasant sensation. Not with only fifty Legionnaires by his side when there were many, many more times that number around his command post.

Lycaon advanced.

The Roman Legionnaires of his force did their best to not show their revulsion.

The first Lycanthrope was looking like a horrid barbarian adapted to the modern times. His hirsute black mane that you couldn’t really call ‘hair’ was so long it almost reached his backside, and an unkempt black beard swallowed most of his face. Black sunglasses covered his lupine irises.

His nails were black and long...though knowing what Lycaon was, you could call them claws, for this was what they were.

The rest of his attire was, as always with him, weird. Black T-Shirt with some inscription about ‘metalica’ and some lightning theme? It was difficult to be sure, given the dirt. But there was no problem asserting Lycaon was wearing only black clothes, with many parts looking in tatters, as repeated partial transformations had taken their tolls upon the poor garments.

Like all werewolves, he went bare-footed. As the first of the Lycanthropes, he had many, many talismans and other protective baubles around his neck and his forearms.

And of course, as he got closer to him, Lucius could smell him...and verify that yes, baths were optional when you were a Lycanthrope. True, there wasn’t a river on this island, and baths had been counter-indicated with all the traps in the bay, but the ‘Pack’ and its leader must have avoided showers for months...

“My Pack has been insulted.” The old monster growled when he stopped so close Lucius would have no trouble decapitating him with a simple strike of his gladius. “I am going to leave this city and teach him no one does that without paying the price!”

“This is what Perseus Jackson wants!” Goupil hissed some distance away, and instantly Lucius Vorenus knew everything was lost, for the hostility between the two monstrous factions was worsening with every hour. “He wants you to get out of this city and fight his forces! Are you too stupid to realise this?”

“He is running short of missiles,” Lycaon spat on the ground. “And his dead reptiles are no longer there to bleed for him. This time, it will be his Legionnaires who will have to face us! And they aren’t immune to our claws and fangs...who knows there may be a few of them that might be worthy additions to the Pack!”

Dozens of werewolves howled, and this was a frightening song, one of eagerness and animals behaving like humans.

“They are hiding in your ex-fortifications, but not for long! My Pack and I are going to wade in their blood! Don’t stand in my way, Vorenus!”

The Triumvirate Praetor wanted nothing better than to stab Lycaon and restore order. But the Teumessian foxes here were busy finding hide-outs and places far away from the confrontation, and his Legionnaires were too few to deal with so many Lycanthropes.

“You better kill them,” Lucius replied, not giving the beast the pleasure to step aside.

“Oh, we will! My Pack! Are your fangs and claws ready?”

“WE ARE!”

And the lupine monsters all howled, like the beasts they were beside these black-haired and black-coloured clothes.

“THEN ANSWER THE CALL OF THE WILD! MY PACK! TRANSFORM!”

Immediately the followers of Lycaon began to discard their clothes. Male or female, they removed shirts and pants, and whatever underwear, assuming they had any.

They were almost beautiful, the women, with their black lipstick and their muscular lunar skin, while the male seemed like Olympic athletes who had decided to go for the barbarian looks.

What followed was not beautiful at all.

Human skin tore apart, and muscles exploded out of all human proportion, soon covering themselves in black fur.

Claw-like fingers and long black nails became the claws they were always to be.

Enormous fangs revealed themselves, and filled evil maws that had impressed many Roman spectators when they were introduced during the circus games.

Before you could count to ten, the mass of humans had ceased to exist. What was now before them was the Pack, a barbaric army of Lycanthropes.

They were enormous. Standing in a bipedal manner like they did right now, they were so tall that no human could hope to tower over them. They were fur and violence, the cursed followers Lycaon and his troops had converted over their uncountable rampages.

For once someone transformed once into a Lycanthrope, he or she was cursed for eternity to be part of this infernal Pack.

This stood true beyond death: many of these lycanthropes, including their leader, had already been killed several times, and yet they always returned from the Pits like all monsters did.

“KILL!”

“KILL!”

“KILL!”

“FOR ALL THE INSULTS! FOR VENGEANCE! FOR BLOOD! KILL!”

The wolfish howls drowned everything, and the Lycanthropes charged outside of the city.

It was like a flood, a disease flowing out of the third line of defence.

It was a horde of fangs and claws.

By comparison, the dead mini-Drakons and the pirates who had been sent to storm their bunkers had been extremely well-organised.

Lucius turned his eyes on the slopes below, where the enemy had no doubt noticed what was coming for them...and the Praetor blinked.

“What...what are they doing? They are only two...two members of the Suicide Squad ready to repel Lycaon’s Pack?”

One of them needed not to be presented. The Minotaur couldn’t be mistaken for anyone else, with his enormous bull’s head and his extremely massive double axe.

The second looked to be a female warrior with some glyphs that indicated they were facing a child of Ares.

As far as individual valour went, this was not so bad...but individual skill would not save them against more than a thousand Lycanthropes.

It was insanity.

But the Praetor had thought the same before.

So what did the enemy know that he didn’t?

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Clarisse La Rue was not afraid.

The plan was going to work, or it was going to fail.

If it worked, she would win. If it was a disaster, there wouldn’t be time to be afraid.

The daughter of Ares would have preferred to have kept her armour on, though.

Without it, she felt naked, no matter how many clothes she had...and she hadn’t that many.

Jackson had been very clear: it worked far better with bare skin.

And so Clarisse plunged her hands into a blood-filled bucket, the result of her previous kills.

When she removed them from it, predictably, they were crimson red.

In a hurry, she whispered the words of communion, tracing the glyphs everywhere she could on her chest and on her arms.

The howling increased and they came.

The werewolves.

By all the blades of this world, they really reeked.

And they were ugly too.

There was a lethal beauty when it came to the wolves, but these monsters didn’t share it.

“I beseech your strength, indomitable spirit,” Clarisse spoke.

And then she donned the bear cloak.

Instantly, the power of the animal assaulted her.

But Clarisse had been warned. It was a ride, not a fight.

And so she didn’t fight it.

It was a ride.

The bear spirit was a companion.

“We are like the berserkers of old, friend,” the Demigoddess whispered as a tide of wolfish monsters descended from the town to kill them. In a couple of heartbeats, the bear spirit became aware of them and its anger was roused. “Will you help me?”

There was a lot of reluctance...but in the end, approval came.

Now came the hard part.

Clarisse was now going to be shrouded in the berserker aura.

Thanks to the enchantments added to the bear cloak, this meant she had twelve minutes to kill the werewolves.

If she failed, the berserker aura would begin to influence her and change her into a bear.

This was a challenge.

But as she grabbed her axe and launched herself at the tide of monsters, Clarisse knew this was what she desired and had awaited for so many days.

\*\*\*\*

They had done it again.

For a few seconds, Lycaon’s army appeared to be an irresistible force, ready to descend upon their two enemies, who would be torn apart by a sea of fangs.

A second later, it was like a pyre of white-red flames was burning, but it rapidly turned into an immense bear.

It was not a true bear for sure.

It was like...a ghost. No, it was both a burning ghost and a cloak of red energy.

But it was enormous.

It was enormous, and it was like an impenetrable shield for the female human who had donned the bear cloak.

Lucius Vorenus knew what it was, of course.

Every Roman Legionnaire sworn to the Triumvirate had studied the disaster of the Teutoburg Forest.

“Berserker! This is a Berserker! Don’t assault it frontally, you are going to-“

The axe of the female warrior lashed out, and five werewolves rolled, decapitated before they knew what had killed them.

A second later, it was the burning claws of the ‘not-bear’ which struck, and several more lupine beasts were slaughtered.

“-die....”

The Lycanthropes didn’t slow down. Maybe they couldn’t, maybe they thought that their numbers were too big to have something to fear.

If they thought the latter, they were wrong.

There was an axe strike, and then the ‘bear’ attacked.

In mere seconds, the vanguard of Lycaon ceased to exist.

There were parts of meat and fur flying everywhere.

And then the Minotaur slammed into their ranks, double axe first.

The Lycanthropes howled and turned to face this new threat, but the son of Minos was a hurricane of death.

Enormous claws and maws lunged to end the bull-headed monster.

It was to discover there was no flaw in the guard of the Minotaur.

The double axe claimed dozens of lives with every choreography of steel and death.

The bear-cloaked Demigoddess exploited it to increase the ferocity of her own strikes. And unlike the Minotaur, the red-white ‘cloak’ of energy made her more or less invincible.

“What are you waiting for?” Lucius screamed to the Teumessian Kits. “Fire your long-range weapons, you have to-“

A silver arrow took one of the foxy monsters straight in his right eye, and the Roman Praetor gaped.

“What by the Senate-“

More silver arrows rained upon the last reserve at his disposal, and each struck with deadly precision.

Each projectile killed one fox, and this literally annihilated all willingness they might have had to rescue the Lycanthropes.

The veteran turned...and saw that in a few seconds, the battle was gone from one-sided onslaught to one-sided butchery...except it was the out-numbered enemy which was massacring the black-furred lupine monsters.

“HOOOOOWWWWWLLLL!”

The howling was powerful, desperate.

An immense form towered over the other werewolves.

It was Lycaon.

It was Lycaon, and the sire of the Lycanthropes attacked with all his strength, attacking from behind the Berserker girl, and delivering a series of properly titanic blows.

But the protection granted by the Berserk aura merely flickered.

It did not fail. It did not diminish in intensity.

The Demigoddess was as ferocious as ever.

Something Lycaon could confirm a heartbeat later, as her axe went to lodge itself into his maw, and continuing its course afterwards.

Lucius Vorenus didn’t like Lycaon. No one did.

But the Praetor nonetheless winced, because his demise here was really an ugly one.

The Lycanthropes howled and tried to avenge their sire-leader.

They joined him in death quite quickly.

And suddenly, Lucius felt the ranks of Lycaon’s Pack falter.

There was confusion and no small amount of fear.

The Berserker girl and the Minotaur were certain of their strength.

The Lycanthropes were not so sure anymore.

And as was predictable in cases like those...this was when armies broke.

“RETREAT! RETURN INTO THE CITY! RETURN BEFORE-“

“FLEE! WE MUST FLEE! ABANDON THIS ISLAND!”

The Teumessian monsters began to scream their willingness to abandon the battlefield.

The Lycanthropes began to break.

More missiles came screaming at the line of defence, and suddenly, all discipline collapsed. Triumvirate and monsters alike were abandoning the battlefield.

And with them fleeing, the Triumvirate had lost the war for the Golden Fleece.

**14 December 2006, former Triumvirate Bunker of the Second Defence Line**

“We won.”

The tone employed by Luke Castellan was filled with amazement and astonishment in equal measure.

Ethan wasn’t going to blame him. Despite everything, standing in the biggest square of the ruined town with no enemy in sight, it was difficult to grasp the enormity of the Suicide Squad’s victory.

“We won,” the son of Nemesis agreed. “And we did it with reasonable losses.”

The last part was especially important, because it had always been the critical point in the Sea of Monsters, and the issue which had worried many members of the Suicide Squad after the fatalities were counted after Perseus slew the Drakon.

“We would still benefit from taking the Golden Fleece, though.” Annabeth remarked by Luke’s side. “We have three non-Legionnaire wounded, Nick Coleman, Antigone, and...Fergus the Golden Penguin. The first two are mostly fine, just exhausted with large scratches, but Fergus took a large wound to his fin.”

“That’s because he charged into the trenches like a berserker,” Ethan retorted, before realising what he had just said. “No offence, Clarisse.”

“No offence taken, Nakamura,” the daughter of Ares grunted in amusement, who had just removed her bear cloak and was now pouring buckets of water upon her body to clean from all the Lycan viscera and blood she had been splashed with. “And you shouldn’t look at me like that! One might believe you aren’t interested in girls like me...”

“Sorry La Rue, but you’re not my type.” Ethan rolled his eyes.

“And what is your type, by the way? Boys or girls?”

“I will tell you when I discover it,” he replied truthfully.

This was one of the flaws of being sired by Nemesis, he knew. You were so consumed by your need for vengeance you often lost the ability to love on your path. Those who managed to escape this fate generally only loved a few key persons in a manner that could be considered amorous...Ethan was still unsure on whose side of this divide he fell into.

“Do you have any explanation why the monsters don’t disappear into golden dust?” He asked the daughter of Ares who tried to look half-presentable by donning again clothes and armour. “I don’t believe I would have said it before today, but I miss that part.”

The smells, in particular, were particularly horrible.

Between the ‘berserker rampage’ of Clarisse – supported by Asterius the Minotaur, of course – and the warships’ bombardment, there were largely over three thousand corpses lying near or into the Greek-themed settlement.

“No.” Clarisse shook her head. “Well, Jackson told me it was going to get bloody, but I thought he was dramatic.”

“Formidable,” Ethan said sarcastically.

It was not going to be fun getting an answer from the insane leader of the Suicide Squad...

Elvis Knight arrived as he contemplated the dream of strangling a certain son of Poseidon for his mysteries and capricious whims.

The Roman Centurion’s armour was dented in several parts, but he himself looked mostly fine.

“Victory,” the Legionnaire veteran said.

“Victory,” Ethan repeated with a nod. “We have three wounded, two of them light. How bad on your side?”

“Five,” Elvis Knight grimaced. “Curtis, Xander and Kyle will just need a couple of days to recover, but I’m worried about Chuck and Tim. Unless we heal them with the Golden Fleece, Chuck is likely going to lose his sword arm, and Tim will lose both legs.”

Ethan gave a grim expression. This was not good news for sure. True, this was a far lighter casualty list than any reasonable commander might have hoped for, but this was cold comfort for the wounded Demigods that were suffering as they spoke.

“We are going to do our best,” the son of Nemesis assured the Roman officer. “I informed Jackson minutes ago that he could proceed to the fourth phase of his crazy plan, whatever it is. The enemy, meanwhile, has been using hidden transports and some magical spells to evacuate its surviving troops by the cliffs, despite the extreme difficulty of doing so. Only a few minor platoons have withdrawn towards the dark temple. Thus our orders are to finish the remnants of the Triumvirate forces which are hiding inside the city, and wait for Jackson’s signal. Our part in this battle is almost over.”

“That’s good news,” Elvis Knight’s sigh seemed entirely genuine as he removed his helmet. “These surprises...they were a bit too much for my mind, Nakamura.”

“I would tell you it gets easier the longer you stay in the Suicide Squad,” the Greek officer replied drily, “but that would be a lie.”

Ethan caught a jug thrown by Dakota and emptied it without checking what was in it first. As it happened, it was near-freezing water, but it felt absolutely divine after this long and bloody fight for the trenches and the redoubts.

His black eyes looked upwards, towards the stairs of black marble leading to the abominable temple, wondering what sort of madness had seized the ‘Guardian’ – or anyone, really – to build something so massive in the middle of a Zone Mortalis where no one would come to admire it.

After a couple of seconds, Ethan realised he didn’t want to know this answer.

His eyes fell to the highest part of the road just above his head...and Ethan blinked.

There were Roman Legionnaires there, and they were all-

“Centurion Knight!” The son of Nemesis barked. “Your troops are climbing the high road!”

“WHAT?” The expression of shock convinced Ethan that the officer of the Twelfth Legion was caught as much by surprise by this as he was. “No...what they are thinking? They told me they were going to search for a source of drinkable water and...Eustace, you...you...backstabber!”

An instant later, Jade was on his right, and as she did, the air grew colder.

The blue-white spear in the hands of the former Huntress changed and became a unique longbow combining snowflakes and Drakonic carvings into its ice structure.

“Do you want me to kill them for this treachery?”

Ethan raised an eyebrow. It was a good reminder that Jade was not sworn to Artemis anymore, but pledging herself to Khione had not turned her into a timid and fragile flower.

And besides, she had a point.

As the Legionnaires began to use the dark stairs to reach the Dark Parthenon, Ethan knew that their actions were completely premeditated. Given the orders Jackson had given, this was indeed treachery...and mutiny. By all rights, these imbeciles deserved death.

“No,” he answered at last. Jade gave him an expression of disapproval, though Elvis Knight remained...hesitant and conflicted. “There are about twenty of them, and you won’t be able to kill all of them before they reach the summit and the temple, meaning the original plan is ruined no matter what I order.”

Jade grimaced.

“I understand. It’s just-“

“That these imbeciles are ruining a very good plan just because they feel entitled to a precious victory? Yes. Yes, I fell like you do.”

It had just taken mere seconds for victory to taste like ashes.

“Luke, please inform Jackson. Tell him twenty Legionnaires have disobeyed his orders...and that we are able to see firsthand how true his warnings about the Guardian of the Golden Fleece were.”

**14 December 2006, the Dark Parthenon, Fourth and Last Line of Defence of the Golden Fleece**

Eustace Bragg shouted in triumph as the last enemies perished under their blades.

“He told us it was going to be our death, Legionnaires! He told us the Guardian would kill us! Well, where is the Guardian now? Where is this great and mighty enemy hiding? Tell me, Legionnaires, what do you see?”

“NOTHING!”

“Nothing,” Eustace repeated in approval. “And that’s because this unbelievably powerful Guardian doesn’t exist! Otherwise it would already have intervened when his armies were smashed apart! Now all that remains to do is to claim the Golden Fleece! Onwards to victory!”

“VICTORY! LEGIO FULMINATA AND ROME!”

“ROMA INVICTA!”

Eustace took the lead, and on his footsteps nineteen Legionnaires entered the Dark Parthenon, and oh how it had been delicious to see so many Greeks grit their teeth at the huge insult the enemy had just handed them.

Immediately past the columns, it began to get colder...which was a relief, really. They had all donned their full armours, and the Sea of Monsters was really hot, though there had been some wind. Nonetheless, cold was good.

And it wasn’t like the enemy could use the darkness to hide its armies. Not only there were enough torches to provide all the illumination they needed, but the armies supposed to defend this temple didn’t exist anymore!

“Err...Eustace?”

“Yes, Scott?”

“Err...I’m not an architect, but isn’t this temple way bigger inside than it is on the outside? Because we have walked one hundred metres, and I’m sure we should have reached at least the altar...”

“Err...yes. But that’s not a big surprise, right? I mean, they couldn’t use it like the Greeks did, right? They had to use some sorcery...they must have added some witchery tricks along the way, right?”

Most of his Legionnaires, the loyal and the true, whispered in agreement.

They continued their walk...and suddenly, the refreshing cold was gone.

It was beginning to be...hot. Humid and hot. There was something in the air that hadn’t been there before. It was...like it was trying to lunge you into a kind of torpor. It tried to make you numb.

But they were Legionnaires. They were stronger than this weak artifice!

But the temperatures really didn’t diminish.

It was really beginning to be warmer than it had been outside.

Eustace began to sweat. He was sweating a lot now.

Each step seemed more difficult than the previous one. And there was sulphur...sulphur was assaulting their senses.

“The temple...the temple...it is changing...”

“Silence! It is just an illusion.”

It had to be. It could be nothing else but an illusion! This was just a temple!

It was a convincing one, he was going to give credit to whoever had built that. But if they thought that sculpting the pillars into screaming faces was enough to scare him, they didn’t know Eustace Bragg!

But as the columns grew sparser, the murmurs of discontent were spreading, and Eustace had to shout more orders.

The pillars were getting scarcer, but with every step, they were more twisted. On each side of the avenue they were progressing, they were racks of torture devices, and broken corpses were lying in nightmarish pools of black blood.

The illusions showed...it had nothing to do anymore with the Parthenon or any cathedral. There were pits filled with rusted spikes, and the walls had uncountable alcoves where grinning skulls awaited. The torches were burning with black flames, which somehow provided light, but felt unnatural.

Yet they advanced, and at last, they saw the Golden Fleece.

This was enough to dissipate the doubts, and they ran towards it.

But his Legionnaires stopped well before touching the great artefact Lord Jupiter had ordered them to find and return to him.

“More illusions, eh?”

The columns were behind them, and the zone had nothing in common with a temple anymore. It was akin to a gigantic crater...no, not a crater.

If it was just a crater, there wouldn’t be lava.

As impossible as it was, they were into a volcano....an illusion of a volcano, right?

“That is no illusion,” Jeremy grunted after throwing a nearby rock into the vast lake of magma that was taking most of the place. “The precipice and the lava are really there.”

Eustace swallowed, trying to find a repartee, any repartee...but there was little he could say. Little but the obvious.

“There’s a bridge to reach the Golden Fleece.”

The artefact was there, in the middle of the ‘lake’, atop a gigantic column of basalt, waiting for them. And a wooden bridge was the only way to accede it.

“Yes...” Scott curtly replied, “but I don’t think it will be prudent to use it in Legionnaire Armour.”

“Then we don’t,” Eustace commanded. “You, Irvin and Craig, you will cross the bridge while we provide support-“

Only veteran reflexes made sure he raised his shield in time, and Eustace glared at the two black arrows suddenly stuck into it.

“AMBUSH!”

They came from all directions, surging out of the darkness and the dark columns. Some were shadows, others were simply shrieking shades.

But all were armed.

Still, as his gladius easily killed four, Eustace felt his confidence returning. In one minute, they had easily killed fifty, and soon it was just a massacre of bones and vermin.

“Go, Scott! Claim the Fleece! We are going to pulverise these old bone bags waiting for you!”

His friend nodded, already discarding as much heavy equipment as was practical before rushing towards the bridge.

It was good...but the flow of undead increased, and the temperature was hellishly hot. It felt like his lungs were burning. It was...frustrating. The skeletons were so easy to beat, but they were always more coming.

Fortunately, Scott, Irvin and Craig had almost reached the end of the bridge and-

“**Disappointing. I hoped to trap far more of you...but I suppose this paltry sacrifice is enough. By entering my temple, you have challenged me**. **And now...now I can intervene**.”

A gigantic arm rose from the depths of the magma lake before the Legionnaires’ horrified eyes.

It was slow and clumsy.

But it was there.

Scott saw the danger. He ran towards the Golden Fleece, where Irvin and Craig ran in the other direction.

The titanic arm caught his friend while he was about to leave the wooden bridge...smashing into the fragile structure and destroying it.

Irwin and Craig fell screaming into the magma lake, and there was nothing he could do! There was nothing the sons of New Constantinople could do!

The owner of the titanic arm waited until all eyes were focused upon the colossal limb before squeezing slowly the hand which had caught Scott.

Blood ran between the articulations of the enormous fingers.

Eustace felt hatred and loathing burn in his heart and lungs.

“DAMN YOU, MONSTER! DAMN YOU! WHY THIS? YOU CARE NOTHING FOR THE GOLDEN FLEECE!”

Laughter boomed, as hundreds of skeletons withdrew. The undead were now...different. They weren’t made of bones anymore; instead it seemed they had been built with precious metals and...gemstones?

“**On the contrary, *simpleton***,” a second arm rose the magma lake. “**The Golden Fleece allowed me to regain my strength here, the spiritual heart of this island that I transformed into my Home**.”

The head of the monster, when it was revealed, was horror incarnate. It was volcanic rock with plenty of precious metals and gemstones added to it, like the skeletons, but for some reason all the non-black shades seemed to be devoured by infernal flames from the inside...meaning the entire body Eustace could see was looking like it was made of obsidian if you did not look attentively.

“**But I could not get out of this Temple without a challenge**.” An enormous cavity opened, and the legionnaire realised with horror it was a maw. “**Fortunately, your lackeys and yourself, simpleton, have been kind enough to provide said challenge**. **For this invaluable service, I will give you a reward**.”

A reward? Maybe...maybe...maybe his...maybe there had not been three deaths in vain?

“The Golden Fleece?” Eustace Bragg felt his voice croaking.

Magma began to surge out of the lake, and with it came molten rocks and acid.

Jared and Harper disappeared forever as they were too close to the abyss of lava.

And cruel laughter echoed, almost deafening them.

“**You truly are a simpleton, aren’t you, Eustace Bragg? No, I won’t give you the Golden Fleece, miserable worm. You have done nothing but exploiting the successes of others to reach this final challenge. But I am in a happy mood today...and so you will have your reward. I give you exactly thirty seconds of advance before my enforcers pursue you. And I will warn you...those who die in my Home will serve me for all eternity and beyond**.”

Hatred broke, and desperation and fear replaced it.

“RUN!”

“**Yes, run, simpletons. Run to save your miserable lives. Run knowing you have ushered my ascension, the glorious return of Alcyoneus, Bane of Hades. Run and announce my coming**!”

**14 December 2006, Armoured Super-Mega-Yacht *Inevitable Doom***

Perseus snorted when the video from his drone showed him that only five Legionnaires had just stormed out of the Dark Parthenon. The interior of the dark temple was burning behind them, but Perseus knew for sure the mutineers weren’t fleeing from the magma.

And they were five of them left.

Five out of twenty Roman Demigods and Legacies who had entered the lair of the Guardian.

“I believe the words appropriate for this situation are...’I told them to not do it’. Or are they ‘I warned you, you had to find it the hard way’?”

“I believe the former is more appropriate,” Lou Ellen gave him an expression of exasperation as smoke began to appear above the temple’s roof.

“What, my dear sorceress lieutenant?”

“Please tell me you didn’t compel them to enter this cursed place.”

“I used Charmspeak to make sure everyone understood they would die if they decided to ignore my command of staying well away from the temple.” The son of Poseidon said virtuously.

On his left, Bianca di Angelo scoffed.

“Yes, your Dreadful Majesty?”

“If you had really wanted to keep them away from this...this Dark Temple, there were over a dozen methods you could have used.” The Demigoddess who had been Dread Empress Triumphant declared. “And if you feared this would have been too tiring for you, there were many ways to compensate for that. Try again.”

The green-eyed boy placed a hand above his heart.

“But what about the beautiful power of free will?”

Two Demigoddesses stared at him with *very* inquisitive glares of disapproval.

This left Plan E...tell the truth, and be unrepentant about it.

“Fine, fine...I will admit, I made sure they would enter the Dark Parthenon. In fact, yesterday, I contacted Legionnaire Eustace under a fake identity, and I let him believe I was acting per the orders of the Olympian Council. I may have let him believe he was going to earn a king’s ransom if he and his Legionnaire friends were the ones to grab the Golden Fleece before anyone else. In my defence, he really didn’t need much convincing.”

“This is...well-played.” Bianca nodded. “Very well-played.”

“You’re both unredeemable scoundrels,” Lou Ellen glared, and Perseus gave her an innocent look. “Please tell me you didn’t kill them just because they annoyed your tyrannical sensibilities.”

“Lou, please,” the son of Poseidon sighed before giving a glance to the Dark Temple, where magma was beginning to flow out in a powerful river of flames. “If I killed everyone who annoyed me, humans would soon be an endangered species.”

“Then why?”

Perseus breathed out.

“This temple might have looked fine when we arrived, but it isn’t a normal temple at all. It is a gateway to the Guardian’s Domain. Once you step inside, you’re in a realm where the Guardian has you dead to rights. If someone had arrived in time to prevent the Golden Fleece from being brought into its dark depths, all would have been simpler...but alas, there was no one to stop it. The Triumvirate failed or didn’t care enough to act.”

“And since Gods can’t challenge another immortal being without paying the price in case of defeat, you had to send bait into the temple,” the daughter of Hades continued as several pillars began to burn and an earthquake shook the island.

“Yes. To be honest, I would have preferred to be fewer Legionnaires. I thought Elvis Knight would be able to keep control of his men...twenty out of thirty-two mutinying isn’t good at all.”

In pure numerical terms, it was in fact even worse, as five Legionnaires had been wounded badly enough to make desertion an impossibility.

“Your terms when they joined the Suicide Squad angered them,” the Lightning Thief informed him with a sardonic smile. “They were...particularly insulting.”

“My terms had a goal: separate those willing to obey reasonable orders from those who wouldn’t.” The leader of the Suicide Squad shook his head in a false expression of sadness. “I really hope that when we recover other Legionnaires, they will prove more intelligent than this bunch. Of course the estimates shouldn’t have been that high, they decided to accept one Octavian MacArthur among their leadership after all...”

“This is depressingly accurate.” The daughter of Hecate grumbled. “What do you intend to do about the five survivors?”

“Oh, I will-“

The ‘Dark Parthenon’ chose this moment to blow up.

It wasn’t the kind of small explosion provoked by one or two artillery shells, oh no.

It was a deflagration so powerful that his first reaction was to activate the magical shields of the *Inevitable Doom*, before shouting to Anne Bonny to do the same aboard the *Second Chance*.

“I don’t care about the mutineers,” the son of Poseidon told Bianca di Angelo, “but get the rest of the Suicide Squad out of here!”

“As you wish-“

The shockwave hit, and then a second detonation, even more powerful than the first, devastated the island’s summit.

Magmatic rocks were hurled dozens of kilometres away, enough smoke to make suffocate a massive city was expelled at once.

The temple and most of the infrastructure and stairs had instantly been vaporised, and between the remaining rocks, there was something akin to a maw of magma opening up.

The smoke partially covered it up, but Perseus saw it when it emerged.

It was a gigantic arm, made of the volcano’s entrails. Gold, silver, platinum and other incredibly valuable metals had been melted, purified, and forged to create his ‘bones’. To make sure the oil and the magma could act as the enemy’s blood, they had ritually bound thousands upon thousands of gemstones, and then proceeded to sacrifice countless lives.

Beings like that had been given many names in the past.

“**TREMBLE! TREMBLE OLYMPIANS, FOR I LIVE ONCE MORE! PRAISE GAEA**!”

Magma soared to the sky, and the island shook, struck by eight powerful earthquakes in close succession.

Many things nearby, including a mutineer who had been too slow running away, were incinerated.

The lava began to descend upon the town, erasing all traces of the previous carnage.

“**TREMBLE BEFORE MY MIGHT**!”

And then the Guardian began to rise out of the abyss, and despite all the lore he had read, Perseus had to admit...it was a bit smaller than the Drakon.

“**I. AM. BACK**!”

And a colossal explosion followed the words, one which projected a vast quantity of magma and other projectiles all around.

Fortunately, it was a tantrum, not a true attack.

“Meh. I give him only a seven for the entrance. I could have done it better.”

Lou Ellen began to laugh hysterically.

“A seven...ha! ha! Ha! Of course...a seven...”

“I think I broke her,” Perseus commented idly.

“I think you broke a lot of Demigods’ sanity today,” Bianca retorted. “Is this...this *Gigantes* who I think it is?”

“If you think it is Alcyoneus, self-proclaimed Bane of Hades, dark son of the Earth Mother, Eldest of the Elder Giants...then you are right.”

Perseus turned towards Michael Yew. Predictably, the son of Apollo stood there, paralysed in fear.

“Return with Drew immediately. The next phase of the plan must be activated at once.”

**14 December 2006, the Ruins of the Dark Parthenon, Fourth and Last Line of Defence of the Golden Fleece**

There were days when you wanted to strangle Perseus Jackson even if it was the last thing you ever did in your life.

And then there was her day.

The son of Poseidon had teleported her using a ridiculous ‘magical lamp’ in front of an Elder Giant.

Yeah, it was that bad.

There was some good news. Before sending her away from the *Inevitable Doom*, the leader of the Suicide Squad had poured an elixir tasting like pear juice in her throat, and the pain had vanished.

It wasn’t agony that dominated her thoughts like it had done for the last hours.

For that, the daughter of Aphrodite was thankful...though she had not forgotten the pain the symbiote was giving her was Jackson’s fault, and no one else’s.

And unfortunately, the good news ended there.

Drew had arrived on top of what certainly looked like a newborn volcano, but promised to be infinitely worse.

Everything was devastation and ruin around her.

The stones were covered in dirt and dust; there were incinerated corpses everywhere.

It was a tragedy of sulphur and soot; a massive lava flow was descending down the slopes.

Like many members of the Suicide Squad, the Demigoddess had wondered why Jackson had never made any intention to claim this island as a fortress of some sorts or to conquer it for another use.

Now she had her answer...as did everyone else. The insane Demigod had never told them any plans where this island was concerned because there were none.

Everything was going to perish in fire and lava soon enough.

Really, if she had not absorbed the metallic symbiotes inside her and became a living weapon, Drew was sure the infernal environment around her would be her death.

The ground was made of burning ashes, the air was suffocating even for her metallic lungs, and there were regular bombardments of rocks from above.

It was simply incredible, the daughter of Aphrodite mused, that she could survive something like that.

But she did.

The Telekhines’ work was certainly not to be underestimated.

Unfortunately, it was also killing her.

No one had told her how much time she had left, but Drew knew deep inside that if she failed, she wouldn’t see another dawn.

She had to take the Golden Fleece and use its power to stabilise the union between metal symbiote and her body.

Seeing the situation under positively light, she could see the legendary Fleece some distance away.

It had been stuck atop a rocky outcrop, a golden light surrounded by darkness.

The very bad news was that there was a gigantic opponent between the Fleece and she, and it wasn’t an exaggeration.

“**Excellent, a new challenger**!” the evil voice boomed in a sound that seemed to be a combination of a thousand innocent souls shrieking in agony. “**I was waiting for you, daughter of Hades**!”

Wait, what?

“**Your father should not have sent you alone, but he can be forgiven for his arrogance! You, the powerful Lightning Thief against his Bane! He may entertain delusions that I am going to limit my blows and wait until he makes his grand entrance**!”

Drew exploded in laughter. As much as she wanted to kill Perseus Jackson here and now, she had to admit the infuriating bastard had once more turned the plans of all their enemies into an ungodly chaotic mess.

“My name, Giant, is Drew Tanaka, daughter of Aphrodite.”

“**WHAT?**”

Drew smiled largely.

“**THIS IS OUTRAGEOUS! JACKSON! SPAWN OF POSEIDON! YOU PROMISED IN YOUR LETTERS A WORTHY OPPONENT! HOW DARE YOU LIE TO ME, FILTHY SPECIMEN OF ALGAE? I WAS PROMISED A LEGENDARY DUEL AND YOU SEND TO ME A WEAK SPAWN OF THE WHORE OF OLYMPUS**?”

Alcyoneus, Bane of Hades, or whoever this Giant was...Drew was going to murder him.

Drew mustered all her strength, and summoned the metallic being part of her.

She jumped as her arms and her entire body became blades.

She became a weapon of pure destruction.

And a second before impact, Drew *Spoke*.

“**BLEED**.”

Her blades struck deeply into the left knee of the giant, and a heartbeat later, Drew was doused into a cascade of black ichor.

Immediately, she felt her strength increase, and this realisation wasn’t wasted.

Drew struck. And she struck again.

She jumped and she struck.

And Alcyoneus, self-proclaimed of Hades, *screamed*.

“**EEEEENOOOUGGGHHHH**!”

Everything exploded. Spikes entirely made of gemstones raised to impale her.

The Elder Giant thundered and raged, and a lake of boiling gold was summoned into existence.

Countless curses were hurled at her.

The air had burned before, but now it seemed the incarnation of fire.

Drew didn’t see what the decisive blow was, but at some point, there was something she didn’t evade.

The Demigoddess was thrown around and smashed into the ruins of the city.

The symbiotes were trying to erase the damage, but it was not the problem anymore.

Pain, more pain than the world should allow to exist, was paralysing her.

And the Giant was coming, in his hands an immense spear of onyx and obsidian promising nothing but death.

“**I AM GOING TO PUNISH YOU FOR THAT, DAUGHTER OF A WHORE. THEN I WILL TURN YOU INTO MY SLAVE. YOU WILL REVEAL ME ALL THE SECRETS OF THIS METAL ARTIFICE, SO I CAN MAKE AN ARMY WITH YOUR METAL-CHANGING ABILITIES. YOU WILL ALL BE DEAD AND MADE OF MY ESSENCE. YOU WILL BE METAL AND FLESH. YOU WILL BE THE FIRST OF A NEW RACE OF SERVANTS**!”

“Never,” Drew spat liquid silver before the pain made her shiver in agony.

“**I don’t think I gave you a choice, slave**.” The cruel eyes of darkness stared at her, and this odious presence made her feel unclean and in dire need of ten showers. “**But at least you did fight, and thus you are granted**-“

And then a spear of flowers and wood descended from the heavens, and Alcyoneus screamed again as the improbable weapon found its mark: the right eye of the Giant.

“**This girl is my Champion**,” the blonde-haired Goddess suddenly was next to her, and as she helped her stand on her feet, the pain receded. “**You aren’t going to touch her**.”

“**Persephone**,” there was enough astonishment in the Elder Giant’s voice to fill an ocean, it was clear as day. But surprise was soon replaced by arrogance and malice, it was obvious even on this crude parody of a human face. “**Hades! I thank you for offering me your former wife! Don’t think it will save you when I will besiege your Fortress and sack your realm...but I appreciate the gift**!”

There was a flash of light, and suddenly, half of the self-proclaimed Bane of Hades’ right hand was missing.

Drew laughed again.

“If I were you, giant idiot, I wouldn’t be worried about the Lord of the Underworld. I would be more worried about what we are going to do to you.”

**14 December 2006, Armoured Super-Mega-Yacht *Inevitable Doom***

It was a fight straight out of the tales of legend.

The island was changing itself into a spectacle of volcanic apocalypse, and in the middle of this, the Goddess Persephone fought on a winged chariot, with Drew Tanaka – or rather the mass of blades and metal which vaguely looked like the daughter of Aphrodite – fighting an Eldar Giant largely over fifty metres in height.

The duo of Goddess and Demigoddess weren’t joking. At least four times per minutes, they were hurting deeply the Giant, spilling enough black ichor to fill swimming pools of it.

They were dancing around the gigantic monster, and delivering blow after blow.

But it wasn’t enough.

The wounds of Alcyoneus were regenerating nearly instantly.

And each time the Eldest Giant was using its strength to devastate its surroundings, Drew Tanaka and Persephone were taking damage. They were forced to slow down and go on the defensive.

They had to avoid explosions of magma and the very island turning against them.

It was not their fault.

Annabeth felt sure the duo was fighting as best as they could.

And if any member of the Suicide Squad was there with them, the daughter of Athena was sure they would have died long before that. The ‘Khione X-Suits’ weren’t protecting them against magma and hellishly hot temperatures after all.

In fact, most of what had been the third and fourth defensive lines on this island were gone, utterly wiped out as if they had never existed.

“Jackson, they are going to lose,” the grey-eyed Demigoddess told the leader of the Suicide Squad...who for some reason had donned a straw hat, a flower shirt, and was currently sipping a pineapple juice while basking in a lounge chair. “What the hell are you doing, anyway?”

“Calm your Owlishness! The sun is really too hot to exhaust yourself this early in the afternoon!”

A hundred metres away, an enormous meteor smashed into the bay, creating untold devastation in its wake.

As for the sun...it was disappearing behind the clouds of smoke generated by the volcano.

If there was a moment to not do a sun bath, it was certainly now.

Translation: Perseus Jackson was trying to suffer from a fever of craziness...again.

“**AND NOW, VICTORY IS MINE**!”

Annabeth grimaced as she saw the chariot of Persephone had just been smashed, and now the Goddess was in free fall.

And no, it wasn’t a feint or something to convince the enemy to lower his guard.

As for Drew, she seemed still active...until a colossal explosion of magma and rocks projected her away.

“**FOOLISH GIRLS**!” The Giant gloated. “**THIS ISLAND IS NOW MY HOME! HERE, I AM INVINCIBLE**!”

“OBJECTION!”

This was the voice of Perseus...and suddenly, Annabeth saw that the son of Poseidon had disappeared from his lounge chair.

He wasn’t anywhere in sight...but suddenly, the Giant’s triumphal expression seemed to have frozen.

Annabeth sighed.

“Of course this was his plan all along...”

**14 December 2006, the Ruins of the Dark Parthenon, former Fourth and Last Line of Defence of the Golden Fleece**

It hurt. For all the metal was regenerating her entirely, oh by all the Hellhounds of the Underworld, it hurt.

Pain was now her whole world.

And yet at this moment, Drew was chuckling.

For Perseus had arrived, surfing on a river of magma using an obsidian rock as his surf like it was no big deal.

And yes, his appearance was as outrageous as ever.

This time he had chosen to don a straw hat upon his head, a flower shirt with a swimming short for the rest of the clothes, sandals...and absolutely nothing else.

Alcyoneus, given his stunned expression, had visibly not expected *that*.

But he quickly recovered.

“**You arrive too late, son of Poseidon! I have already defeated the weak morsels you sent against my glorious form and**-“

“The Champion of Justice and Truth is NEVER late!”

The Champion of what and what?

The black colossus’ hellish eyes narrowed.

“**I don’t know what mad game you are playing, insolent sea spawn, but it will not save you! You are on my own island**-“

“FALSE!” The bastard seemed to have too much fun being here and playing his manipulative tricks, honestly. “YOU WILL NOT FOOL ME! JUSTICE WILL TRIUMPH!”

“**And how many Legions have your so-called ‘Justice’ being able to field on that day**?” Alcyoneus mocked him...and it rang like a gigantic *mistake*.

“None!” Perseus grinned, and instantly, Drew knew the Elder Giant was going to regret...everything. “For none are necessary! By the Power invested in me by the Goddess Athena, this island is now given the name ‘Pear Island’ officially. I, the High Champion of Justice, blessed by the Goddess of Wisdom for the duration of twenty-four hours, decree it. And so it was decreed, so it must be!”

Suddenly, it was as if the island...the dark power which had submerged everything vacillated...and vanished.

Alcyoneus’ hilarity stopped abruptly.

“NO! Don’t you dare-“

“Pear Island is a sanctuary for large and small creatures,” Perseus continued, grinning like a maniac – which he was, really. “By the blessings of the Protector of Athens, in time, no less than twelve colonies of owls will find their home here. The rights of all tortoise species to use the beach as their egg hatcheries are formally recognised. And last but not least, we will introduce several goats, just because I feel like it and we need to fight against forest fires in every way that matters. Your arrogant and ridiculous claim that it is your island is thereby...DISCARDED! PEAR ISLAND ISN’T YOUR HOME! Any questions?”

Drew was busy dying with laughter...God, there was so much pain, but at least she would die laughing...

This was why Perseus had insisted to use this ridiculous name all along.

This was...genius.

If Alcyoneus wasn’t on his home island, then most of his invincibility was just vanishing as they speak.

The ‘Bane of Hades’ had just lost everything.

“**THIS IS MY HOME ISLAND**!” Alcyoneus roared, but the power behind it faded pathetically. “**NO! I REFUSE**-“

“JUSTICE WILL TRIUMPH!” It would not have been so ridiculous if a certain son of Poseidon didn’t use his straw hat as a parody of a shield while screaming it. “BY THE POWER OF ORDERLY BUREAUCRACY AND ABSOLUTE JUSTICE, YOU WILL BE COMPELLED!”

“**NOT**,” the Giant growled hatefully, evidently having joined the club of ‘I hate Perseus Jackson’ somewhere in the last minutes, “**IF I KILL YOU HERE AND THERE**.”

“Ah, yes.” Perseus seemed supremely unconcerned by the monster towering above him. “There is just a little problem with that.”

“**AND THIS PROBLEM IS**?”

Ten massive spears went to impale Alcyoneus in the head, and his right arm disintegrated.

“Before challenging another enemy, make sure you have defeated the ones you were already fighting with, moron,” the leader of the Suicide Squad answered with an ‘innocent expression’. “Oh, and the moment I made my bureaucratic proclamation, you lost the protection of your Domain. That’s the thing with invincibility...you have it, until you don’t.”

There was a new explosion, and massive hole created in the chest of the Eldest Giant.

Then Persephone reappeared.

The Goddess...looked like she had been through hell. Her blonde hair were burned or missing. Her armour was cracked and blackened. Most of the protections she wore before had gone missing, and lips, arms, and legs were bleeding golden ichor.

But for the first time, Drew really felt Persephone was a Goddess worth following.

“Finish him, please.” Perseus commented lightly. “We have a few important rituals to do, and it is not going to-“

“**NO! I REFUSE**!” Alcyoneus, somehow, was still standing...which was impressive, given that there were massive holes in his body of gems, black oil-ichor, and corrupted metal. “**I REFUSE TO DIE HERE BY THE BLADES OF A PARVENU OF A GODDESS**!”

“Kill him.”

Persephone struck with hundreds of spears.

“**HEAR MY PRAYER! GAEA**!”

And the world disappeared into a maelstrom of iridescent colours.

**Somewhere both close and far away from the Sea of Monsters...the Primordial Dream of Earth**

This...this wasn’t part of the plan.

They were plunged into the darkness...and then they were...*elsewhere*.

“Perseus? Where are we?”

“Ah, Drew...we seem to have...a big problem. Don’t talk unless she asks you a question.”

They landed.

Or at least it felt like their feet touched ground.

They were...surrounded by roots and old stones.

It was like they were in an abandoned city, one men had left centuries ago, given how much of it had disappeared under the vegetation.

“The pain...the pain, it is gone,” the daughter of Aphrodite murmured, as her appearance returned to a silver-coloured copy of her original body. “Is it-“

“No, it wasn’t part of the plan, we were-“

“Jackson! This is your fault!”

Three Legionnaires stormed out of the darkness, though the leading one immediately had his feet stumbling against the large roots. It was very satisfying to see him fall, Perseus had to admit.

“Legionnaire Eustace Bragg, Jeremy Clark, and Helmut Veers,” the leader of the Suicide Squad enunciated the name of the three mutineers. “I see you survived the devastation.”

They must have had a lot of luck, because given how bad it had been on the island for a good hour.

“Why are we here, Jackson?”

The son of Poseidon rolled his green eyes.

“We are all here because we were in Alcyoneus’ Domain before it was subsumed into something far vaster, far more mysterious, and far...*primordial*.” Perseus peered in the distance, and found what he was searching for. “Isn’t that right, oh self-proclaimed Bane of Hades?”

The Giant of gemstones and black stones’ eyes glared at him.

Alcyoneus couldn’t do more, not when his feet seemed to have been immobilised by a sea of roots.

“Lady Persephone, are you with us?”

“**Here!**”

Perseus turned...and winced. The Goddess of Spring was imprisoned in a cage of roots, and her wounded appearance did not invite to any optimism.

“Perseus,” Drew insisted, “I don’t understand where-“

The former Tyrant felt the power surging too close to comfort.

It was...primal and dangerous.

Damn it.

“We are in the Domain of the Earth Mother...the Domain where she is dreaming. Alcyoneus, in his madness and vainglorious desire to avoid defeat, brought us here. And now...now *kneel*, immediately.”

Perseus obeyed his own advice, naturally. There were times to play the idiot and give plenty of jokes.

This was not one of those times.

Not when facing a being that could erase you from reality with a click of her fingers.

When she arrived, it was as if she had always been here.

She was feminine. She was...just looking at her avatar was...too much.

Perseus had only a glimpse of her lips. Perfect. Perfect shape, perfect shade, perfect...too perfect. The rest...the rest was *too much*.

“**Mother**!” Alcyoneus rejoiced. “**I have called you**-“

“***Silence***.”

The sound was both opera symphony and the thunderous sound of an avalanche.

The rift Alcyoneus was using to speak simply...disappeared. It was removed from reality. Oh that wasn’t good at all...

“***I was having the most pleasant dream***,” the perfect lips spoke, “***when I was disturbed by the whining of something I once called one of my children. Praises and prayers...and I saw calamitous whining upon the precipice of defeat. Son of the Seas, give me the truth***.”

“Hey!” Of course one of the Legionnaires couldn’t shut down his damn mouth. “You can’t-“

The Legionnaire, Helmut, Perseus believed, exploded and sprayed his Roman comrades into a shower of gore.

“***Not you***,” the Avatar of the Earth Mother, Gaea Herself, spoke.

Perseus cleared his throat.

There wouldn’t be any second chance there.

“Alcyoneus was weak.”

And he stopped breathing afterwards.

“***Yes, he is. Continue***.”

“You gave them the power to be the instruments of your vengeance against Olympus, but Alcyoneus and his brothers squandered it. They failed in their rebellion, and so far, their first attempt to assault Olympus was the most successful one in more than three millennia.”

He wasn’t going to play any jokes, this wasn’t the time. Here and now, it was better to let actions, or the lack of them, speak for themselves.

“Your children the Gigantes will not be able to topple Zeus from his throne and usher the Age you want. But I will.”

The Avatar advanced and touched his cheek.

It was both like fire and silk had decided to torture and caress him at the same time.

“***I saw you in my dreams changing the Underworld, great-grandchild. You are the one that one of my first children is so interested in. You are...different***.”

His only hope was that it was the good kind of different, otherwise...

The Avatar left to materialise in front of the self-proclaimed Bane of Hades.

“***Alcyoneus. Stop whining, and be convincing***.”

“**This insolent Demigod deserves a long and painful death, mother! Look what happened because of his actions! He broke every promise**-“

“***In that case, you should have made him swear on the Styx***,” Gaea acidly remarked.

And just like that, Alcyoneus was silenced again. If the situation hadn’t been so delicate, Perseus would have cackled.

The Eldest Giant had really completely missed the points Gaea wanted to hear. The Primordial of Earth wanted words of strength, be it physical or mental. She didn’t want to hear excuses or childish tantrums.

Then the Avatar disappeared again.

To reappear before Persephone’s cage.

“**Great Earth Mother**,” the daughter of Demeter bowed, her fear evident in her eyes and behaviour.

“***Oh, child***,” Gaea whispered, “***you have changed so much since the last time I dreamed about you***.”

The Goddess of Spring didn’t answer, because...well, what was there to answer, really?

“***I feel your emotions for my grandchild of darkness. The question is...what you are you ready to lose to be with him again? To rule by his side? To feel the Hells sing with your essence***?”

“**I fought this battle, didn’t I**?” Persephone said a bit defiantly.

“***You did. My son bears the marks of your fury***.”

It was as if black velvet gloves were touching the Goddess, and where they did, all the clothes and protections remaining of Persephone, turned to dust, leaving her naked before her great-grandmother.

“***But it is not enough***,” the voice of Gaea might seem gentle enough, but it was merging the implacability of a glacier and the ruthlessness of a forest fire. “***If I am to lose a son forever, I want to gain two daughters***.”

The cage disappeared, and the lips of the Primordial approached Persephone...who presented her throat.

Perseus closed his eyes, and there was a moan of pain.

When he reopened them, Gaea’s Avatar was before Alcyoneus once more.

“***By strength and cunning, they defeated you. By stratagem and strength, they trapped you. Now let them take their reward***.”

It was as if earth itself instantly swallowed the Eldest of the Elder Giants...which was not far from the truth, really.

But it was more than that. It felt as if the very fires burning inside Alcyoneus were unleashed against him.

The gemstones and the precious metals which had been essential in giving him its titanic body fell in superb multicoloured cascades.

After what felt like an eternity, only the Heart remained.

A massive heart of black diamonds, which diminished until it held into one hand of Gaea’s.

And with as little warning as there had been before, the Avatar of the Primordial was in front of him.

“***I am interested by your words, great-grandchild. You have given me very pleasant dreams. But I want you to prove your worth in person***.” The heart of black diamond was presented before his eyes, and the radiant power within it made him unconsciously shiver. “***Give me the sacrifice I need for my daughters***.”

\*\*\*\*

Drew was not going to lie...she had stopped breathing several times during the last minutes...hours...well, since they arrived here.

The Primordial of Earth. The Mother of All. Gaea.

Most of it was a...dreaming flicker, a minor aspect...and it was sufficient to kill an Elder Giant effortlessly.

“***Give me the sacrifice I need for my daughters***.”

The daughter of Aphrodite felt as if her heart stopped beating when Perseus marched towards her.

“Your hand.”

“Perseus, please...”

The sword did drink the blood of her hand, but not too deeply.

It was nothing compared to the pain she had felt before, and yet it hurt something deep inside her soul.

Everything shook and became blurry, though her eyes were able to see the blood, her blood, dripping above the Black Diamond Heart.

The effect was immediate. It was if someone had placed a hand in her rib cage, and began to press.

“United, the Champion and the Goddess faced their enemy. United, the Champion and the Goddess will leave everything behind them.”

It felt...like a ritual.

“***A curious choice. Your sacrifice***?”

Drew tried to stay conscious with all strength...and as such couldn’t even muster a scream when Perseus dragged one Legionnaire in the direction of Gaea and the Heart she held.

“No, Jackson! Please! Not that!”

“Do you remember my promise, Eustace Bragg? Do you remember what I swore to do to all the soldiers who failed to obey my critical order? Let me refresh your memory. I promised crucifixion or a worse demise. Congratulations, you volunteered for the latter.”

The black sword descended, and a throat was severed.

The flow of blood poured into the Heart.

Yes, ‘into’, not ‘onto’, it was like the Heart was drinking the blood.

The Legionnaire’s body fell onto the stones and the root. He was dead before he hit the ground.

Drew raised her eyes.

She watched powerlessly as the Primordial approached Persephone.

Drew screamed with the Goddess as a heart was ripped from her body.

Ichor flowed.

The world became a tempest of pain and darkness.

But for all of that, the daughter of Aphrodite saw the other Heart. It was beautiful and terrible...and it was pushed inside Persephone.

The Goddess...her Goddess didn’t resist, as Gaea embraced her.

The divine daughter of Demeter opened her mouth...and a seed fell into it.

Drew’s back arched violently, and immediately it was as if all the pain was smothered under an ocean of fire.

“***Goddess and Champion, Champion and Goddess...an intriguing idea. And now that the seeds are tied, I can unite you as daughters***.”

Drew began to burn. There was something incredibly powerful burning inside her.

Her body...her skin, she had now scales.

Her body was covering itself into scales.

But somehow...they didn’t look like the ones Jade did have. They did not have this Drakonic feeling-

Persephone cried in pleasure.

A second later, so did Drew.

“***The dream of fire and ice will begin anew. The first of my daughters will reign over the Frost and the Drakons. The second of my daughters will rule over the Magma and the Sirens. No longer the enchanting voices will fly; now they will swim into the fires of my wrath, and they will lead mortals and immortals to a new Age***.”

Drew fell upon her back, and watched as her legs merged.

She felt more powerful than ever, and with every breath, her skin of metal changed a last time to transform from silvery metal to black ‘scales’ made of diamond.

The daughter of Aphrodite fell as the ‘Hell Eggs’ began to materialise for Persephone and she.

“This...this didn’t happen for Jade.”

Perseus was suddenly by her side.

“I have a feeling that it did right now,” the son of Poseidon replied seriously. “The Champion of Khione will be by the side of her Goddess when she will awake.”

*As will you*.

The words went unsaid, but Drew heard them nonetheless.

Magic and fire danced around her vision, and Drew felt her mouth changing, her teeth being replaced by fangs.

“I...I will return...”

“The Squad will wait for you two. Now sleep, you need all your strength.”

Drew closed her eyes, and exhaustion claimed her. Suddenly, everything didn’t seem important anymore. Suddenly...everything could wait, as the pain had stopped.

Drew was safe, and this was her last thought as her Hell Egg closed.

**14 December 2006, the Ruins of Peach Island, the Doom of Alcyoneus, Sea of Monsters**

Perseus breathed out in relief as he crashed back in the Zone Mortalis.

Assuredly, he regretted it a bit immediately. The air was filled with brimstone, sulphur, and of course a lot of smoke.

The former Tyrant breathed in and breathed out again, for all the nasty smells and odours.

He was alive.

“Ha! Ha! Saved! We are saved!”

Perseus’ eyes fell upon the last Legionnaire mutineer.

There had been three survivors before Alcyoneus tried to kill them all in what had to be one of the most reckless and stupid gambits in history...ever.

Seriously, what kind of crazy idiot was willing to call the freaking *Primordial of Earth*, *Gaea* *Herself*?

Perseus knew a considerable number of Suicide Squad members thought him mad, but there was madness, and there was that...this act of gigantic stupidity.

“Thank the Gods! Thank the Gods!”

But Alcyoneus was dead.

Given what had just happened to Persephone and Drew, the son of Poseidon was sure they wouldn’t spill the secret of what just happened to Olympus.

That left only one witness, and the Legionnaire...he was called Jimmy, wasn’t it? No, Jeremy. Well, that left Jeremy as the only problematic witness.

And as the Roman Demigod turned his head towards, him, his expression must have been a mirror for his thoughts, for the mutineer began to beg profusely.

“Jackson, please! I won’t say anything! I won’t say a word of what just happened! I will keep all your secrets!”

“Oh yes...” Perseus Jackson muttered, “you won’t say anything.”

And with one powerful strike, he decapitated the Legionnaire mutineer.

The corpse fell into a lava pool, and began to burn on the spot.

“I could have trusted an officer of the Suicide Squad,” the son of Poseidon said coldly, “but I don’t trust traitors.”

The smell...well, that was really a bad day. Now in addition to sulphur and brimstone, there was the scent of burned flesh.

The ungodly mix was really disgusting.

But it was necessary. If the Legionnaire contacted Olympus, Perseus knew was a dead Demigod. The protocols employed by Zeus to deal with the souls who had been in contact with Gaea were simple enough: death.

Perseus shook his head, and began to climb the slopes of Peach Island.

He would lament about this waste of resources later. Twenty Legionnaires had died, the plan he had for the Underworld was going to need plenty of modifications to account for the influence of Gaea...a lot of things that had never been part of the plan were now harsh realities.

Fortunately, whether his name was Kairos Theodosian or Perseus Jackson, he was prompt to adapt.

Plans, in the end, were more guidelines than life-or-death chains it was forbidden to break.

The old plans had burned to ashes.

It wasn’t a problem.

He would make new ones.

The smoke was temporarily banished by a gust of wind, and Perseus reached the summit.

It was waiting for him here.

The Golden Fleece.

This was really something *divine*.

Nonetheless, since he had done too much to fail at the last moment, the green-eyed Demigod threw several expensive magical powders all around it, so that all possible traps were deactivated.

And finally, he was able to lift it from its vulgar rocky support.

It felt...far lighter than the mass suggested.

“I hope you will not destroy our ears with a monologue,” Bianca di Angelo announced her arrival with the kind of repartee someone like Triumphant would enjoy making.

“I wasn’t about to,” the former Tyrant blatantly lied before asking a more pertinent question. “How long were we gone?”

The dark clouds generated by Alcyoneus’ volcanic explosion made difficult any estimation...assuming it was still the same day.

“Three hours, give or take it.”

“Three hours...”Perseus grimaced. “That’s...problematic.”

“Why?”

Light pierced the darkness and the smoke.

It was powerful.

It was blinding.

It was as if a second sun was just rising above the horizon.

“*The Spear of the Gods*,” the daughter of Hades cursed.

“The flagship of the Triumvirate and Neo Isis herself,” Perseus agreed, “they’re arriving a bit too late for the battle.”

“Will we engage them?”

The son of Poseidon chuckled.

“We’re all exhausted by our trials, and we expended a lot of our arsenal against this island’s defences. We also suffered major manpower losses. Furthermore, we have achieved one of our Quest’s goals here.”

“A simple ‘no’ would have sufficed, you know.”

Perseus Jackson cackled.

“The Golden Fleece now belongs to the Suicide Squad. I am not going to fight a battle here in the name of pride and biting more than I can chow. When I will annihilate the Triumvirate fleet, it will be under my conditions. Mine, and no one else’s.”

The Drakon-Slayer turned his back on the radiant warship still kilometres away from the ruins.

“We let them keep the island?”

“We let them keep the ruins Alcyoneus created, yes. Let the Triumvirate enjoy this victory...or not, I don’t particularly care. The first part of our Second Great Quest is successful.”

**Author’s note**:

For those who wonder, yes, in canon Percy Jackson and co had a Great Quest in ‘easy mode’ to recover the Golden Fleece. In this story, it wasn’t just a few man-eater sheep and a lone Cyclops, the opposition was way stronger...

The Second Great Quest will continue next chapter, with many upheavals and new mad plans. I haven’t decided upon a tentative title yet.

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

*Judith – Huntress of Artemis*

*Kalinda – Huntress of Artemis*

*Eudoxia – Huntress of Artemis*

*Douglas Smith – son of Volturnus*

*Phoebe – Huntress of Artemis, daughter of Eris*

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

**Wall of Dishonour**:

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

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

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