**Chapter 17**

**The Sea of Monsters**

*It is said every Quest story must start with the humble beginning of the heroes, so let’s do exactly that.*

*Our Captain is utterly insane.*

*Perseus Jackson is the craziest and most infuriating Demigod to ever live, and believe me the competition is normally hard in that regard.*

*But there has never been a hero or anyone coming from New Byzantium that can contest him the title of ‘King of Madness’. It’s impossible. He tries to taunt the Fates at least ten times a day, and no, the fact he named our ship the* Inevitable Doom *doesn’t count.*

*From the moment we sailed away from the city, it has been a succession of mad deeds. When we aren’t busy fighting giant sea monsters that this super-yacht always seem to race towards to, our crazy leader is busy leading us in ‘special acquisition operations’.*

*Officially, it’s to replenish the ammunition we use against the sea monsters.*

*Personally, I just think the son of Poseidon loves to pillage and steal. Especially when certain institutions and depots were indirectly financed by several members of the Olympian Council, but since they were under the guard of various monstrous parties, our Questers can attack it without any overt retaliation.*

*What did I want to say? Oh, yes, there are incidents every day. I’m pretty sure we sunk at least five boats belonging to various criminal organisations in the Caribbean. The Cuban military forces must have put us on their list of most wanted enemies, because the Gods only know how the Mist covered our grand theft there.*

*I will not speak of Panama. What happened there will stay a secret. Believe me, ignorance is bliss. Let just say we used the Canal to reach the Pacific Ocean, and only a few monsters of no importance died. The Panama Canal is still operational, I must insist. It was not exactly a given when Jackson revealed his latest crazy move.*

*Fortunately, after that particularly episode which will haunt me until I die, the incidents have decreased. It’s not because our crazy Captain has developed a sense of sanity; it’s just that in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, it’s difficult to do anything else but fight sea monsters. Of course, a certain Demigod insists now we must kill some things bigger than this super-yacht with nothing but swords and our natural skills. Officially, it’s to save ammunition. I think personally it’s just to torture us, and ensure we have permanently an urge to murder him.*

*As I said the raiding operations have almost ceased. But all is not well. The Huntresses of Artemis do not try to pretend they’re here for anything but killing us if we make a step in the wrong direction. Unsurprisingly, the actions of Jackson have not improved their mood. Also unsurprisingly, the Huntresses being forced to coexist on a ship where many Demigods are male offends their irrational hatred of everything that is not a girl.*

*The miraculous thing is that no one has died yet. Yes, no one has perished. Not even this crazy penguin that is always found playing with explosives before throwing them in the maw of the nearest sea monster he can find.*

*I have a feeling this isn’t going to last.*

*Mother, why did I accept to join a Great Quest again? I feel I am becoming mad...again.*

*Okay, enough about the recent events.*

*I am Annabeth Chase, daughter of Athena, Navigator of the* Inevitable Doom*, officer of a Great Quest whose goals are in the realm of the divine.*

*We are approaching the entrance of the Sea of Monsters.*

**21 November 2006, somewhere in the Pacific Ocean, not far from the Solomon Islands**

When the plans had been drawn for his flagship, Perseus’ first decision for the operations room – a fancy name for the room that would gather his war councils, he was sure everyone would agree – had been to insist it would include an aquarium.

No, it was not for the decoration. Although the effect was incredibly good, if he said so himself.

The aquarium was here so that with a single push on a red button, he could wield an incredible quantity of water with his hydrokinesis, while his ‘guests’ believed him disarmed and inoffensive.

So far, this creation wasn’t used. So far.

Given the insubordinate glares most of the Huntresses gave him as he entered the operations room, the former Tyrant felt this was going to change today.

“Good morning, officers and non-officers of the Suicide Squad!” He said brightly.

“Captain,” Ethan Nakamura drawled, “it is three in the afternoon!”

“Don’t be pedantic, my treacherous lieutenant!” the son of Poseidon grinned. “It must be morning *somewhere*. Accuracy in everything is a dangerous problem we must strive to fight against.”

And if you believed it was sheer nonsense...well, you were right.

“Anyway. I’ve summoned all of you here to tell you how we are going to enter the Sea of Monsters tomorrow. This is-”

“We all know how we are going to enter the Sea!” One of the Huntresses barked. “We will go through the Scylla-Charybdis Strait, and teach these two monsters a lesson they won’t forget!”

Perseus made his smile disappear. He could tolerate having his monologues interrupted, but the manner of it and the arrogance of Artemis’ servant was a problem best strangled before it grew uncontrollable.

“Name?” The Huntresses looked a lot like each other, with their braided hair and their identical hunting attires.

“Eudoxia.”

“Eudoxia...” for once he decided not to mangle the name, just to make his point clear. “Are you the Captain of this Great Quest?”

“Err...no?”

“I’m so glad to hear it,” if they couldn’t notice his sarcasm, those near-immortal girls were a lost cause, “I was beginning to have concerns this was developing into something ugly. There is an ugly word for usurpation of authority when you’re on a ship...*mutiny*, I believe it is called.”

“We are not going to obey your orders! You are an odious-“

Mere seconds, and he was already forced to use the red button. How predictable.

“What is...arrgh!”

A second later, Eudoxia the Huntress was strangled by a respectable tentacle of water, and everyone was far more respectful.

“Jackson! Stop this immediately!” The Huntress-in-Chief had, of course, seized her bow, and was ready to shoot an arrow between his eyes. “Eeeek!”

That was the natural reaction when his hydrokinesis disarmed her. To prevent other problems, the other Huntresses lost bows, arrows, and a rather impressive quantity of weapons while the water pressed against their throats.

“We are going to make things clear,” the leader of the Great Quest began in a tone that was deliberately devoid of any jokes, pranks, and bad puns. “*I* am the Captain of this ship, and the commanding officer of this expedition. You might have thought that because I was lenient for the first part of this journey, I was going to tolerate blatant insubordination. I am going to be blunt: you’d better change your mind, or the first thing I will do where you are concerned will be to throw you into the closest monster’s maw I find. Am I clear?”

The water stopped strangling them, though he didn’t send it back to the aquarium.

“Yes! Yes, you are very clear!” Judging by the panic in Eudoxia’s voice, one at least had received the message.

Unfortunately her appointed leader had not.

“I am the second of this expedition, granted authority by Artemis Herself!” Phoebe snarled, and her expression was honestly...disturbing. She really was a lost daughter of Eris, Goddess of Discord, no matter what she said. “You will not-“

Water began to strangle her again, though since all the other Huntresses were far more obedient, Perseus didn’t resume the suffocation in their cases.

“You are useless as a second.” Bluntness had its uses, and today seemed a good day to deliver as many punches as he could. “I have a sorceress to complement my hydrokinesis and alter slightly the weather. I have another sorceress to maim and torture every monster I come across. I have a heroic and a treacherous lieutenant to man the various stations and make sure I haven’t forgotten anything of importance. I have a Navigator, a Helmsman, an Engineer, a Healer-Musician and many other important roles filled. Guess what? *Your party of nine is fulfilling none of these essential roles*.”

He clicked his fingers, mimicked a strangulation motion, and at last the eyes of the Huntress widened. Yes, she was finally realising that no matter how bothersome explaining her death would be, there was a point where all the blessings of Artemis wouldn’t protect her from him.

A few seconds later, he stopped the hydrokinesis strangulation, and the Chief Huntress collapsed, unconscious.

“Here is what going to happen. Bianca di Angelo, by virtue of being the most powerful Demigod and Demigoddess after myself, is going to be the second of this expedition, beginning right now. The third mate will be Lou Ellen Blackstone, the fourth is Ethan Nakamura, and the fifth is Luke Castellan. Unless I gather the crew here to change it, it is how it will stand.”

“It is...we aren’t going to...we don’t like listening to orders coming from...men.”

“That’s too bad,” Perseus was almost to the point of commiserating with them, how tragically sad...oh wait, he wasn’t. “But personally I don’t like having you aboard my ship in the first place, and I’m controlling myself to not drown you into the Pacific Ocean. So we are going to tolerate each other...agreed?”

“Err...”

That was almost worth a good joke. Perseus sighed, and returned the water to the aquarium before falling in his comfortable Captain’s chair.

“Now that little matter is settled, it is my greatest pleasure to say we aren’t going to use the Scylla-Charybdis strait and meet my lovely family any time soon.” Many blinked in surprise. Truly many heroes of today were abysmal failures when it came to mythology. “Yes, Charybdis was my half-sister, before she was transformed into a monster. As for Scylla, she’s my half-brother’s daughter, making me her uncle...at least from a genealogical point of view.”

“I was more worried, to be honest,” Douglas Smith asked for permission to speak and received it, “by the fact we aren’t going to go through the Strait. It is hardly a safe entrance, but from what the rumours tell, the Clashing Rocks are way, way worse.”

“The rumours in that particular case are more likely true,” the son of Poseidon admitted candidly. “I haven’t tried them myself, but some witnesses described them as a field of meteors impacting the sea at irregular intervals. If one hits your ship, it’s over. So yes, the Strait mentioned previously is the safest entrance, as hard as it is to believe. The little problem is that the fleet of the Triumvirate is waiting for us behind them.”

“And you know this...how?” the Huntress who had some common physical traits with Drew Tanaka asked.

“I’m so glad you asked, my dear. They are here, because I sent them a message professing my eternal friendship...and that I was going to fight Charybdis and Scylla tomorrow before entering the Sea of Monsters.”

“YOU WHAT?”

It was good he had placed the Huntresses’ weapons out of range while they struggled, otherwise they would have attacked.

“No need to scream,” Perseus complained. “I am sure you heard me the first time.”

“Why...why would do something so stupid?” This time it wasn’t a Huntress who tried to insult him, it was Bella Medina, the daughter of Scotus.

“I did it because I had to be sure they would be in a location where I am able to monitor them by long-range drones.” He explained slowly as he was speaking to a dim-witted girl. “And since I have no intention to use the Strait in the short-term, I lost absolutely nothing. All I had to do was to keep a course letting the Triumvirate a course for the Scylla-Charybdis Strait was increasingly likely, and let their assumptions do the rest.”

“If you really know where the fleet is, we might be able to ambush it.” Richard Grant wasn’t salivating, but he was not exactly hiding his eagerness to slaughter the soldiers of Cleopatra and her lover.

“We might. But alas, no matter how much of this fleet we destroy, it is incredibly likely it won’t be a decisive engagement. It will force us to expend too much ammunition while running a high amount of risk. Remember that while the Triumvirate can afford dozens of ships sunk, we have only the *Inevitable Doom*. If our ship sinks, it’s nearly game over. The enemy, alas, can build new warships thanks to its temporary control of Forge MP-42.”

“We will have to fight them, sooner or later,” the son of Hercules grumbled, crossing his arms in a belligerent manner.

“True. But it will be later. I want the battle to be unfair for them when it will finally begin.”

“But...” Fergus Cook was visibly lost. “If we aren’t using the Scylla-Charybdis Strait, and we aren’t trying to survive the Clashing Rocks, how in the name of Olympus will we enter the Sea of Monsters? There are only two entrances, Jackson!”

“This is indeed the truth.”

The former Tyrant grinned largely, savouring the surprise he was about to spring on some simple souls.

“That’s why tomorrow, we are going to create a third entrance...just to prove it can be done.”

**22 November 2006, outer approaches of the Sea of Monsters**

“This isn’t going to work, Jackson.”

Hera wished she was more confident when she said it...or that the son of Poseidon paid any attention to what she had just voiced. Because so far, Jackson was ignoring her. The mad Demigod was tinkering with a sort of strange dodecahedron-shaped cage. The object would have been big enough to imprison a small bird, and she had no idea what was the purpose of this device.

“On the contrary, it will.”

Well, she had received an answer, at last...

“No one has ever created additional entrances in millennia. It’s impossible.”

“Are we supposed to pretend that the Gods can’t add entrances when and where they want?”

The former Goddess frowned. As always, it was difficult to say if Perseus Jackson was well- informed or asking disturbing questions in the hope she made a mistake.

“Fine. Yes, the Council of Olympus can in theory create additional entrances.”

And just like that, Hera knew she had fallen into this trap...for the son of Poseidon had begun to grin like someone had announced him his birthday had come early.

“No, they can’t. Or rather, the Council can give the order to add an entrance...and it remains to be seen if it will be obeyed.”

The Lightning Thief arrived at this moment and placed an enormous emerald in the dodecahedron-shaped cage. The sounds to open and to close it confirmed that the ‘cage’ was made of some metal. The priceless gemstone, however, was covered in magically enchanted glyphs, and was certainly no normal object.

“This is ridiculous.”

“No, what is ridiculous is that depriving you of your Godhood removed a lot of your memories and your knowledge gained when you were a Goddess, Antigone.” Hera grimaced. She hated that name. “In your opinion, how can the Sea of Monsters have ‘entrances’ since it is not land-locked anywhere?”

“A system of enchanted barriers, obviously.”

To her relief, this time Perseus Jackson didn’t mock her.

“The Sea of Monsters’ maximal size is limited by them, yes. But it is not enough.”

“Not enough?”

“Dear Antigone, while one Immortal Sorceress is now unable to leave the Labyrinth, there are two others at large, and one of them happens to be inside the Sea of Monsters. She’s not particularly fond of Olympus either. Being a powerful sorceress, it would have been child’s play for her to begin to dismantle the barriers enchantment per enchantment in the last centuries. Yet she did not do it. Why?”

“Because we offered her something she wanted?”

Judging by the expression of pity, it was definitely the wrong answer...

“No, Antigone. The Immortal Sorceresses didn’t act because it would have been pointless. There are barriers and magic separating the Sea of Monsters from the rest of the oceans and seas of this world. But what is really making the separation permanent is the divine translocation erected long before Columbus sailed to the ‘West Indies’.”

“Divine what?”

“In simple terms, think of it as a multiple layer like an onion.” The son of Poseidon explained. “The Sea of Monsters is the core of the onion, and the first magical barriers are the outer layer. But somewhere between the layers of the barrier, there is a bigger layer that is absolutely impassable...unless you use the two ‘holes’ that are the Scylla-Charybdis Strait or the Clashing Rocks.”

“And what, pray tell, did the Gods did to make a realm impossible to sail through?” One of the Huntresses asked arrogantly.

Something flashed in Hera’s mind. Images of green light, dark shadows, and shrieking souls.

“Hell.”

Perseus nodded in answer to her whisper.

“So your memories can return given the proper stimulus. Yes, that’s correct.”

“Is it a joke?”

“No, no it isn’t. Your Dreadful Majesty? It is time.”

The Lightning Thief gave a glare to the black-haired boy, before whispering six words of power....and suddenly the green crystal began to act as a beacon of green light.

Which was very, very good, for in the next seconds, the sunny weather disappeared, replaced by dark clouds. The ocean around them, so calm mere minutes ago, was beginning to be shaken by dark waves. But the most dangerous pressure was definitely coming from above their heads...thunder rumbled in the distance.

The light of the emerald increased in range and luminosity nevertheless, and a few seconds later, it began to illuminate...a wall that had so far remained invisible.

No, not a wall. It was too fluctuant, too changing for that.

It was the first barrier erected around the Sea of Monsters.

It was incredibly impressive in conception and magical power...but it was not pleasant to look at. The barrier was shimmering with dark and green lights, and Hera’s best guess was that the green was coming from the beacon the daughter of Hades was powering.

“They are not going to like it at all!”

“That’s really too bad!” And unfortunately, Perseus Jackson was clearly amused by the storm and the disaster he had attracted upon their heads. “This Great Quest has just begun, and many journeys stand unexplored. My dear sorceress lieutenant! The lanterns are ready?”

“Ready,” Lou Ellen had arrived next to her without being noticed, though Hera figured there were other more important things to worry about. “We will be able to bind them in a minute or so. You’ve really landed us into a new suicidal Quest, didn’t you?”

“This is not my fault!” The boy wearing a horrible orange T-shirt insisted with a large grin on his face.

Thunder shook the world, ever closer.

“THIS IS AN AGE OF PIRATES!” The Captain of the Inevitable Doom shouted to the heavens. “REJOICE! FOR THE AGE OF WONDERS IS NOT DEAD! REJOICE! FOR NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE! **REND**!”

There was a monumental explosion.

There were shrieks and the sound of thunder.

Reality seemed to screech, and after a couple of seconds, an enormous fissure began to appear in the barrier....before it grew in size with every heartbeat. In about ten seconds or so, it was no longer a fissure, but a full-scale breach in the barrier.

Ten more seconds, and there was a big rift forming, big enough for something as large as the mega-yacht to get through without issue.

“Are you mad?” Hera asked. “If the dead can leave-

“Dear Antigone, give me a little credit. I have only struck the protections hindering our glorious *Inevitable Doom* from sailing into the outer layer of the Sea of Monsters. I have not struck the magical foundations keeping the dead trapped inside the Rich One’s realm.”

Hera could only gape at him in shock. How powerful was he to do something like that...and with so much precision? It was no small feat for a God already...

“Bianca! You will take the helm, so bind yourself to a lantern first.”

“You really intend to sail through that?”

“It will not be my first hell cruise,” Perseus Jackson said with a fake modesty, “and I intend it to not be the last. Hmm...something is missing.”

“What?”

“Yes! How could I be so forgetful? This new entrance deserves a name!”

They were in the middle of an enormous storm summoned by Zeus, about to sail into Hades’ realm...and he was worried about a name?

“I WILL KILL YOU!”

“Yes, yes, later...ah, I found it. This new entrance will be called *Hell’s Reach*!”

**22 November 2006, Hell’s Reach, the third entrance of the Sea of Monsters, mortal side**

If someone asked him and he was forced to answer honestly, Perseus would have to admit Zeus had reacted far faster than his worst-case guesses had planned for.

Despite the name of ‘Suicide Squad’ he had chosen for his ‘Heroic Quests’, the former Tyrant wasn’t that suicidal. He had firmly intended for the ‘third entrance’ to stabilise before sailing the *Inevitable Doom* through it.

The God of the Skies had robbed him of that option. Staying outside the Sea of Monsters was no longer safe; given the size of the waves created, it was not a question of *if*, but of *when* the Master of Olympus would successfully sink their ship and drown them.

“Luke! Everyone is bound to a lantern?”

“Everyone is bound,” the son of Hermes replied, showing his right arm, which was chained to the old-fashioned glass container created by the Demigoddess who had been Dread Empress Triumphant. “You didn’t tell us what they were doing-“

“Later! First let me check...my dear sorceress lieutenant! The engine room, we forgot Amigo!” A good thing he had made a rapid count of all Questers...

Thankfully, the daughter of Hecate was fast, and a few seconds later, the son of Hephaestus was dragged out of his lair of oil and metal, and bound to a lantern.

Just as the *Inevitable Doom* passed the threshold of Hell’s Reach.

Immediately, darkness engulfed them.

Not the kind of ‘storm obscuring the sky’ they had encountered minutes ago. True darkness.

For all the perilous situations he had countered before, Perseus had to acknowledge there was something...unnerving about it.

Fortunately, between the lanterns and the crystal-beacon illuminating it, there was enough light for all the crew to continue its duties without colliding into each other.

“We are in the realm of the Underworld?” Luke Castellan asked as he went to give Bianca di Angelo the compass-artefact she needed to steer a course in this starless night.

“We are.”

“It doesn’t look like...the places we visited when...when we invaded it for the First Great Quest.”

“It doesn’t.”

The son of Hermes predictably, smirked at his curt answers. Unfortunately, the Lightning Thief serving as his helmsman didn’t.

“Jackson,” the daughter of Hades didn’t growl, but she was not far from it. “Explain.”

“Right.” He cleared his throat for the effect. “If all things had gone according to plan, and a certain number of Gods had not monitored our progress so closely, I would not have used my strength with so little precision. It was always my plan to create a third entrance; the lanterns and the other protections you were bound to give you a solid magical shield against the influence of this realm, as long as we don’t stay here for long.”

“That doesn’t explain why we are in this eternal darkness.” Bianca replied stubbornly. “Nor why it doesn’t look the Underworld I am familiar with.”

“To answer the former, the darkness is just a layer, like everything else.” The hydrokinesis-wielder said with a shrug. “As for the latter, this was what I was trying to explain. When I used *Rend*, I created an entrance to the Sea of Monsters, and it happens to pierce the veil separating reality before going through Hell. But magic is something both wondrous and terrifying...it doesn’t have to be the Underworld we were familiar with.”

“What are you saying?”

Perseus chose to not answer immediately. Instead he just stared at something that could be seen in the distance...and it could be best summed-up as fire. A lot of fire.

“It looks...it looks like a volcano.” Dakota said weakly as he climbed to join them. “Please tell me I am dreaming...”

“If it’s a dream...or a nightmare...we are all in it together.” Luke told him, in a tone that failed to be reassuring. “At least we can still sail around it. And...what in the name of Olympus? There are mountains of ice on the right!”

“Well,” Perseus lightly drawled, “hell has truly frozen over. I have a feeling all the oaths of the world above are going to need big changes.”

Deep inside, he was smiling. The Hell they were watching of their own eyes now was evidently not in the present, but of the future. Whether it was the *true future* or merely a possibility among many remained to be determined, of course.

As their course remained incredibly fast, all the glory of it was revealed in a few minutes. On their left, there was a volcanic heartland, with a mega-volcano dominating a spectacle of magma and dark rocks. The entire landscape seemed to be merging obsidian and fire into something both titanic and fiery. On the flanks of the volcano, a gigantic black fortress was built, and here too, it seemed to have merged with the lava flowing from the caldera in a sea of fire and molten rock.

On the right, as his heroic lieutenant had justly said, there was ice. A lot of ice. Icebergs were detaching themselves from the pack ice when they were on the shore, much like lava generated a great turmoil when it touched the water...but overall, there was an endless sea of ice, dominated by a gigantic mountain that was so high you felt tiny and insignificant. The summit of this peak was hidden from view, as snow fell over a certain altitude...but for all the lack of visibility, it was not enough to hide that there was a second black fortress there.

“The Sea...Jackson, this is truly the Sea we-“

“Don’t say her name here,” Perseus said seriously, “please. We are...well, in a situation where it’s better to not attract any kind of attention. Please.”

Saying ‘please’ twice apparently was enough to convince the son of Hermes this was something he didn’t want to risk.

“The lanterns...they are not just protections, aren’t they? They are making us invisible?”

“No,” Bianca said regretfully. “I wished I could have done that...but this is not within my power. It just made us insignificant in the eyes of everything that matters in this realm. And Perseus...you will have a lot of questions to answer for once we’re out of here.”

“Agreed,” a lot of the Questers would do their best to forget it the moment they were past this obstacle, but not the former Dread Empress. Her attempt to become the Goddess of this very realm was too recent, too fresh. “And happily, I can feel the second breach I made. A few more minutes, I think...”

The former Tyrant did not sigh in relief when the obsidian arch materialised from nowhere in front of them. Today, he wasn’t going to taunt the Fates in this manner.

He studied it attentively, however. The timeless journey they had made had clearly been enough to stabilise the breach and Hades had had time to build a black triumphal arch to mark the threshold on this side.

The green-black veil separating the realm from the dead from the world of the living had not changed...and he wasn’t going to complain.

“Get us out of this realm.”

“Yes, Captain.”

For all his efforts to remain calm, the moment his skin was warmed by the sun once more...Perseus began to cackle maniacally.

**25 November 2006, Hell’s Reach, the third entrance of the Sea of Monsters, Sea of Monsters’ side**

Bianca waited for every lantern to be back in their protection boxes and the agitation to decrease before searching for Perseus.

As everyone soon opened a bottle of their favourite drink to celebrate their survival, the daughter of Hades judged the opportunity to have a conversation was good.

She found him near the top of the yacht, right next to the voluminous antennas and radars that had been installed to observe everything around the *Inevitable Doom*.

“You didn’t tell me the Underworld would look like that in the future.”

The son of Poseidon lowered his spyglass, and for a few seconds seemed content to enjoy the sun and the near-paradise weather.

They were in the Sea of Monsters, but the cloudless sky and the warm temperatures were near-identical to those they had enjoyed before Zeus’ tantrum tried to sink them.

“What you saw...it is a possible future.”

“A future you are trying to push us towards to.”

“A possible future,” the Demigod repeated before grimacing, “keep in mind that we saw a few things, but the realm of your father is very big.”

“But-“

“And what we saw was frustratingly incomplete,” he continued speaking disregarding her interruption. “The lanterns protected us from the influence of the Underworld, but they also limited our vision to a fraction of what we should have been able to watch. We were the lucky ones...or the unfortunate ones, depending on our perspective. Many of our companions couldn’t see the dark citadels at all.”

“Are you saying that before I now have a clue about your true plans?” Bianca felt a flicker of amusement...and received a shrug in return.

“I am saying this to give you the truth, my dear hellish lieutenant: I don’t know if my plans will be successful...and if they are successful, I don’t know I will get what I want in the bargain. If this is the future that await us, yes, it will mean our chances to survive this Great Quest are really good. But if it is only a *possible* future, then it means nothing.”

“I...I see.”

It all depended whether the future was in flux, and how much Hell could change with a crazy son of Poseidon’s using all his intelligence to cause drastic alterations to the status quo.

“I will tell you in all confidence that one of the changes that might lead to such a future will come soon.”

“Thanks for the confidence.”

Perseus chuckled.

“You would recognise it anyway...and I don’t think you will be the only one.”

It didn’t do anything good to her curiosity, to be sure. But after months spent listening to his monologues, Bianca could recognise when she wasn’t going to obtain more secrets and revelations.

Thus the Demigoddess judged good to change the subject of the conversation.

“The Master of Olympus is becoming a real problem.”

“Yes. This tyrannical God has no respect for my creativity.”

Bianca had a sudden urge to facepalm.

“He will try to kill us, Perseus.”

“Well, he won’t as long as we’re cruising in the Sea of Monsters.” The son of Poseidon cheekily retorted. “If he tries to intervene here...I think all the powerhouses, beginning with a certain Titaness, will smack him for his insolence. It would also break a lot of very, very Ancient Laws, the kind no one, not even the Master of Olympus, wants to break without excellent reasons.”

“And when we will leave the Zone Mortalis? Assuming we ever do, that is.”

“Assuming we ever do, I will have found by then a way to regain our diplomatic immunity.”

The daughter of Hades blinked before...letting a small chuckle escape her lips.

“You really believe it is possible to achieve some kind of...detente? The Thunder God is getting more and more paranoiac!”

“Is it paranoia if the enemies are really there, sharpening their weapons?”

Evidently, seen like that...

“Anyway. Diplomatic immunity is not the only arrow to my bow, if you forgive my Huntress metaphor. There are multiple resources in the Sea of Monsters, and Olympus has very little influence there. If there is no truce once this Great Over is over...well, I believe we will have no choice but to train like proper villains and make sure that when we leave the Zone Mortalis in several years, we will be able to challenge them on our own.”

“This will take a long time.” Her father’s overwhelming strength had told her clearly how big the gap was between a major deity and she.

“The Sea of Monsters is separated from the world for a reason.”

Bianca turned her head to look at the breach in the magical barriers...and the black triumphal arch delimiting it was clearly showing a multitude of screaming faces and dead skulls.

“Good point. The entrance...we have nothing to seal it with.”

“I know. That said, I don’t think many will take the risk once a few adventurers try to follow on our steps.”

“The lanterns weren’t that difficult to make.” The Demigoddess who had stolen the Master Bolt argued back.

“I think you underestimate your talent,” Perseus complimented her. “But assuming for a single second you don’t, I have been forced to use half a dozen powerful artefacts tied to my compass to guide you between the two exit points. My beacon-crystal also increased the potency of the lanterns and the various enchantments we used to hide our presence. Not to mention the *Inevitable Doom* is hardly a normal ship...”

“You specifically built it to survive this kind of challenge, didn’t you?”

“Guilty as charged.”

Bianca didn’t laugh...not when she had suddenly a good idea what would happen to any ‘adventurers’ that tried to use this new ‘third entrance’.

Now that Perseus had mentioned everything that had been used...it was clear Hell’s Reach was not easier to cross than the Clashing Rocks or the Straits where Scylla and Charybdis awaited.

In fact, it gave far worse chances of survival if you weren’t adequately prepared.

The prospect brought an expression of concern over her face...and Perseus in the mean time had drawn a small compass, protected by a very common metallic box.

Bianca had the time to note that the compass was extremely weird...instead of giving the north, the main needle seemed to turn in every direction before choosing one.

“Well, I believe I have a course for the *Inevitable Doom*.”

That quickly? Something was definitely fishy...

“And the Triumvirate fleet?”

“They are patrolling behind the Scylla-Charybdis Strait, about one day of navigation away. By the time they realise how we entered the Sea of Monsters, we will be far away-“

About a kilometre away, there was a gigantic geyser...as if a new maritime volcano had been born.

But it was not a volcano.

The masts came first, and faster than she could say it, there was an honest commerce raider straight out of the Sailing Age racing towards them. The black flag hoisted by the main mast was a clear indicator of its allegiance.

“Pirates,” Bianca growled. “It seems not everyone fell for your diversion gambit, Perseus.”

“Yes, my dear sorceress...but I swear to you, they are going to regret it. SUICIDE SQUAD! ENEMY SHIP AHOY! PREPARE THE SHIP-KILLER WEAPONS!”

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Naturally, having surprise on its side, the enemy pirate ship was the first to fire.

Unfortunately for him, the *Inevitable Doom* was far more armoured than its white mega-yacht’s innocent appearance suggested.

The cannonballs that fired were unable to scratch the pain of his flagship, and that was when the enchantments failed to return the projectiles directly to the sender.

“Blackbeard’s ship is kind of impressive.” Ethan Nakamura commented lightly. “I watched it in video, of course, but this submarine mode is really something.”

“Indeed. Except this is not Blackbeard.”

“Really?”

“Blackbeard’s ship is the *Queen Anne’s Revenge*. This sailing warship is called the *Chrysaor’s Legend*.”

“Oh...you mean the submarine mode is copied by all the pirate ships of the Sea of Monsters?”

“I think,” the son of Poseidon said thoughtfully, “we have to consider this hypothesis seriously.”

“Formidable.”

“It isn’t that bad, my treacherous lieutenant. While it confers to them a significant surprise advantage, the pirates are clearly unable to fire while they are submerged. Moreover, I suspect that the time they can spend in ambush is not infinite. It’s likely this ship plunged the moment we emerged from the gate, and it lied there, waiting for the right moment to sneak upon us.”

A few more pitiful noises echoed, as more cannonballs utterly failed to cause any damage to the *Inevitable Doom*.

“Okay, the joke has lasted long enough. Let’s begin...with the Greek Fire Carronade.”

The green button had his favours, this time.

A secret compartment opened on the flank of his flagship, and Perseus grinned as the significant gun vented its fury.

Five seconds later, the *Chrysaor’s Legend* was transformed into a magnificent pyre of green flames.

“See? This is the definition of an unfair fight if there ever is one, my treacherous lieutenant.”

“You didn’t even give them the opportunity to hear your pleas of eternal friendship, you know.”

“That’s a serious problem.” Perseus nodded sadly, trying to sound truly in pain and removing nonexistent tears. “And to say I have committed fratricide!”

“Fratricide?”

“Well, Chrysaor is Medusa’s whelp, and my father sired him, so he is one unlamented half-brother that-“

An enormous wave rose and half-submerged the *Chrysaor’s Legend*. When the warship of the Golden Age of Piracy became visible again, the Greek Fire had been entirely extinguished.

And then Perseus felt it. The sea...the sea was no more a mere sea.

There was magic and something divine imbuing it. Something incredibly dangerous.

“Counter-order, lieutenant. Put back all the major weapons in storage. Place everything that is too unstable and dangerous under the deck and make sure it isn’t going to move by a single millimetre.”

“I suppose that answers the question if you are responsible for that miraculous wave.”

“My treacherous lieutenant, I know you believe me mad, but I am not going to expend precious ammunition then spare my half-brother just because I want everyone to believe I am crazy.” Perseus paused.

“It seems Chrysaor has a powerful patron.” Once again, the sunny weather disappeared. Clouds gathered, though this time, they were grey and hardly as threatening as the one Zeus had summoned.

It began to rain. Fortunately, it was rather warm...for all the good it did. Given the short distances involved for this battle, the new limited visibility was definitely giving a favourable battlefield to the Chrysaor’s Legend.

“I don’t think she very much cares about Chrysaor.” The waves became ever more violent, and suddenly, two large currents began to collide. “It is a manner to test us.”

“She?”

“My father could do it, but given our opposition and the...power I can feel in the water, I think it is safe to say a certain Sea Titaness is watching us.”

“Ah.”

The weather conditions worsened. In many ways, Perseus felt reinvigorated. The salted smell of the waves was everywhere, bolstering his strength. And the rain was banishing away the exhaustion of having used his abilities to *Rend* the magical barriers of the Sea of Monsters with the help of powerful artefacts.

But the Sea of Monsters was in turmoil.

What was Thethys trying to do? She wasn’t going to sink them, there was really no point to such an illogical action, so what was she trying to achieve?

Clarisse’s scream half a minute later gave him the dreadful answer.

“MAELSTROM! MAELSTROM!”

**25 November 2006, the Maelstrom, Sea of Monsters**

Annabeth had heard the Sea of Monsters was filled with extremely dangerous monsters and that every day brought new enemies, but come on!

Their arrival wasn’t one hour-old...and they were sent a damned Maelstrom!

“Change tack!” She ordered Dakota. The son of Bacchus had been given the helm by the Lightning Thief before this new calamity arrived upon them. “Change tack! Stay as far as the vortex as you can!”

“No!”

Annabeth turned her head...and gasped.

She didn’t know how the son of Poseidon had done it in so little time, but he had completely changed his attire.

There was now a large pirate tricorn upon his head. The small ‘saboteur-penguin’ was on his left shoulder, observing the enemy ship with a spyglass. An outrageously decorated coat screaming ‘pirate!’ had been thrown over his orange T-Shirt, and martial boots had replaced his summer sandals.

“Captain, we can’t get closer! This is madness!”

“Out of the question! The Titaness is trying to test us, not kill us! Forwards! We are going to accelerate, and pulverise the *Chrysaor’s Legend* in a splendid pursuit that will be sung for eternity!”

“I am not going to do that!” Dakota shouted, evidently wishing he was drunk here and now.

“Then I’m taking the helm!” Perseus joyously proclaimed, pushing the Roman Quester. “Hang on to something, Questers of the Suicide Squad! We have journeyed to hell, and now death itself is here to remind us how life must be lived!”

The formidable engines of the *Inevitable Doom* roared, and Annabeth...well, she obeyed the order. She tried to hand on to something, which happened to be the edges of the command post below.

At the same time, the daughter of Athena tried to not look at the gigantic vortex that was threatening to swallow them all.

“This is madness!” Dakota moaned.

“Yeah...we’re going to overtake the enemy...if we don’t fall into the Maelstrom...”

The crew of the *Chrysaor’s Legend* appeared to have been as surprised as she was by Jackson’s suicidal strategy. Worse for them, the *Inevitable Doom* was far faster, even under these stormy and rainy conditions.

“PREPARE THE PROW CANNONS!”

One day, Annabeth would find out how many dangerous weapons were hidden from view inside this ship. Because she hadn’t been aware the three machine guns and old-fashioned medial cannons had been aboard.

But apparently, Leo Valdez and Ethan Nakamura were and-

“FIRE! FIRE AT WILL!”

The universe became a song of explosions and madness.

Several shots missed, but the majority didn’t.

The enemy ship was engulfed with explosions, and a lot of wood and debris were thrown into the air...along with several members of the crew, which were clearly not humans at all.

“Dolphins?”

“Bipedal dolphins!” Perseus cackled while correcting the course of their ship, showing no strain all despite the sheer strength it required to stand here, as unlike them, he was confronting directly the fury of the wind, the rain, and the waves. “They were pirates once, but they made the disastrous mistake of trying to rob a certain God of Wine, and were transformed into dolphins for this fatal mistake! I think it was intended as a sign they should give up piracy!”

Well, it had clearly backfired then. The ship they were fighting against had an enormous pirate flag hoisted on his main mast...

“FIRE! FIRE AT WILL!”

This was a massacre. There was no other word for it. The *Inevitable Doom* was more or less invulnerable to the weapons of the *Chrysaor’s Legend*, and the dolphins were falling one by one into the maelstrom each time the blast of a weapon sent them flying.

And of course as it was a pursuit, the pirate ship could only fire its stern-mounted weapons...which were limited to a couple of cannons and some kind of magic-launched flamethrower. The latter in these conditions – Annabeth was pretty sure the rain had a magical component – was useless, and the former were the next best thing to it.

The enemy Captain must have acknowledged all of this, for the sailing vessel tried to alter his course and immediately change his strategy. Of course, they were so close now that it was nearly impossible to not figure what the bipedal dolphins were up to...

“They are going to try to board us!”

“Grant! Take the helm!” Perseus ordered the son of Hercules.

“We prepare to repel them?”

“By all the storms of this Sea, no! We are going to board them and take their ship for ourselves! My pirate career must begin with something that will respect all the splendid traditions of the Golden Age!”

“THERE IS NO NEED TO DO THAT!”

“COURAGE, SCOUNDRELS AND DEMIGODS! THIS IS WHAT IT MEANS TO LIVE A GREAT QUEST!”

The Maelstrom’s vortex was an eye of madness, and rain and waves continued to transform the sea into something hellishly dangerous...but Annabeth feared this was only the lesser danger compared to the madman that was their Captain.

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Chrysaor had not thought it would be easy to board this ridiculously tough super-yacht...but the risk was worth the trouble. In a cannon fight, his ship would lose one hundred times out of one hundred. He had to change the rules of the engagement...and that was then that arrows began to rain, killing several of his crewmates.

“INCOMING!”

One of his pirates didn’t evade quickly enough, and found himself impaled on an enormous red spear coursing with electricity.

The real threat, however, was not coming from them. The equivalent of a barrel of water smashed into him, and his hydrokinesis, for the first time in centuries, failed him.

A desperate parry saved his neck, and when he tried to use a rope to stand up, some cursed magic propelled him straight at the height of the fixed topsail. Only a lifetime of extreme battles saved him from a fall into the maelstrom.

Of course, his enemy was relentless. By the time he had managed to find his balance, Chrysaor found the enemy finishing his climb of the main mast, and drawing a large sabre. This was infuriating...and so were the grenades exploding below them.

“I am going to sell you as a slave once I win,” the son of Medusa swore.

“That would not be very nice...aren’t we *family*?”

Chrysaor studied the arrogant Demigod in front of him. The clothes were ridiculous and an insult to any self-respecting pirate, but the black hair and the green eyes were unfortunately very familiar. Suddenly, the reason his hydrokinesis had failed him at the worst moment possible was revealed.

“You are a son of Poseidon,” Chrysaor conceded. Denying it would be completely stupid, and he wasn’t that foolish. “But you are not *family*. You are like the others. You are a hero. I am a villain! I am destined to be the King of Pirates!”

“No, brother,” his enemy retorted and Chrysaor grimaced as their sabres clashed and the other Demigod revealed himself phenomenally strong, “I am a villain too...and if the only way to challenge Olympus is to conquer that Sea...then-“

“Do not mock me!”

Ten thousand duels he had fought, and all of them had ended with his victory. He was a swordsman with no rivals.

And so he attacked, for all the fact he was many feet above the upper deck of the *Chrysaor’s Legend*, for all that there was a maelstrom raging, for all the rain making everything wet and slippery.

“Mocking you? But I am not mocking you, oh Captain of Dolphins! I am the leader of the Suicide Squad! Didn’t you hear my recent exploits?”

“I heard of you,” Chrysaor hissed, “one more of the so-called ‘rebellious heroes’ that come out from time to time. You are like the rest! When you will be proposed immortality, you will kneel before the Master of Olympus! You will prostrate yourself like the rest!”

“No. I will not.”

Their sabres clashed. Feint, parry, attack, counter-attack. Many times their weapons were locked in a silent but violent struggle, as his beloved ship swayed and danced at the edge of the maelstrom.

“Lie!”

“If I am to become an immortal, it will be by my own actions, and no one else’s, Chrysaor.”

“Madness...”

“Why? The Triumvirate Caesars and their wives have this ambition, why not imitate them? You serve them, and you don’t try to use their ambition for your own purposes?”

“I DO NOT SERVE THEM! I DO NOT SERVE ANYONE! I ONLY OBEY THE LAW OF THE WINDS AND THE SEAS! I AM THE TRUE KING OF PIRATES!”

“No...that’s one of the titles I’m about to take for myself.”

Chrysaor screamed in rage and attacked with all the ferocity he had in him, eager to kill this arrogant claimant.

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Clarisse was sure of two things.

This battle was glorious.

And the two Captains were truly ridiculous in their costumes.

At least the daughter of Ares was certain Jackson had disguised himself as a pirate because he found it fun.

The other Captain, with his mask of gold and his flashy golden armour, may not think he was disguised.

Clarisse killed two more dolphin pirates before Jackson sent his enemy crashing on the deck below.

Normally, this should have killed him, but the golden-masked moron was ‘lucky’ enough to fall upon one of his own crewmates...who didn’t look so good after taking such a weight upon his head.

“Son of Poseidon or not, I will drown you for that!”

Clarisse eliminated one more enemy, and tried to go after this loudmouth...but more pirates revealed themselves, abandoning the gun deck below her feet to repel their counter-boarding.

“Die, vile man!”

But whereas Clarisse couldn’t charge this enemy, one of the Huntresses had no such problem...since the daughter of Ares was busy distracting the dolphins, the enemy Captain had no bodyguard left save the one had wounded by his fall.

The Huntress had a short blade, it was far longer than a dagger, but way too small to be considered a bastard sword.

There was nothing wrong with her attack. It was fast, accurate, and went for the neck of the enemy.

Reacting with a speed that was properly inhuman, the golden-masked pirate grabbed his sabre, parried the attack, and impaled the Huntress with his melee weapon.

“JUDITH!”

Clarisse killed one more dolphin, but she didn’t try to rush in...there was nothing more she could do. The daughter of Ares could recognise a flawless strike when she was one. The Huntress had received a blade in her heart; no Demigod could survive that without immediate divine assistance.

“The first kill of the day!” the golden bastard laughed while raising his sword. “Pirates! Kill them! Kill them for they dare standing between I and-“

A blade slashed, and the sword arm was suddenly separated from its owner.

“Damn you, son of Poseidon! Damn the-“

Dozens of ropes moved like as many snakes, and one of them began to strangle the murderous pirate, while the others disarmed him and began to tow it to the base of the great mast.

Clarisse impaled her last enemy, the dolphin going down in an explosion of gore.

And suddenly, it was over.

The deck was covered with the corpses of countless dolphin warriors, along with one Huntress. Two of her fellow man-haters ran to help her, but Clarisse could tell it was too late.

The rain was...wait, the rain had stopped falling.

And the waves...they were suddenly far smaller than they were a few seconds ago...

“Jackson!”

“Yes, the Maelstrom is losing its strength. It seems...” the son of Poseidon made a large grimace as he looked at the bloodbath they had made. “It seems the Titaness considers we have won this trial fair and square.”

**25 November 2006, approaches of Hell’s Reach, Sea of Monsters**

The good news was that this battle had been a relatively easy win.

It was hard to rejoice, however, with a Huntress crying as she embraced the lifeless body of her friend and Chrysaor gloating like the corpses of all his dolphins’ crewmate.

“Jackson! Jackson, please...”

Damn it, he was supposed to be a Tyrant and a villain, situations like that weren’t for him...

“I can’t do anything,” the son of Poseidon admitted soberly. “She passed away...and I have no power over the dead.”

And in the unlikely case he did have such a power, Perseus would not be crazy enough to do something like that. This was the kind of thing that Hades and his right hand Thanatos hated above all.

But he wasn’t going to say it aloud to a Huntress in mourning...the girl was already experiencing enough pain as it was.

“Clarisse,” the leader of the Suicide Squad murmured as the daughter of Ares came to stand by his side. “Would you mind preparing one of this ship’s pinnaces?”

“A funeral pyre?” The spear-wielding Demigoddess understood fast.

“Yes. We can’t stay here and the *Inevitable Doom* has no morgue.” Arguably the last point was a major oversight on his part. “We will have to give her the funeral here and there, and depart before the Triumvirate fleet sends its squadrons here.”

“They will send squadrons here?”

“A maelstrom and the sheer amount of power used in this battle were not exactly discreet.” Perseus reminded her. “And the Egyptian Queen and her forces are not stupid. I haven’t had the time to calculate how long we stayed in Hell, but I’m sure it has been more than the few minutes we experienced. If they don’t see us trying to break through the Strait, they are going to reason logically and think we found another way to enter the Sea of Monsters. And they will be entirely correct.”

The *Inevitable Doom* went to position itself by the side of the heavily damaged *Chrysaor’s Legend*, and numerous Huntresses jumped aboard.

That much Perseus had expected.

What he didn’t expect – and he would truthfully admit it left him in shock – was the slap the Huntress-in-chief gave her crying subordinate.

“Stop shaming us in front of the odious male, Jade!”

“Judith is dead, Phoebe!”

“There is no death, there is only the Goddess! Remember your oaths!”

There was a second slap.

And near-immediately, the blood-covered Huntress wasn’t crying anymore.

Of course, the expression of hatred she gave her nominal superior wasn’t...well, maybe it was some progress, but he doubted this was something Artemis wanted.

“Enough,” the son of Poseidon caught the hand of Phoebe before she could strike the other Huntress again and the situation went out of control. “Jade, Clarisse is going to prepare a pinnace for the funeral pyre of your friend. Feel free to cut as many fins and heads of the Dolphins as you want in addition to plenty of Drachmas.”

“I want her murderer’s head!” The grieving Huntress shouted...and Chrysaor suddenly stopped cackling.

“You can’t. If you do that, you will be cursed.”

“Indeed!” The son of Medusa laughed harder after his warning. “My existence is worth a thousand of your whore of a Goddess!”

The more Chrysaor spoke, the more Perseus felt disgusted by his existence...now he had to use his voice to stop several furious Huntresses...

“**Phoebe and every Huntress save Jade, you are ordered to return to the *Inevitable Doom* immediately without killing anyone**.” It was one of these moments where he really wanted to sigh and show a tired expression. But he couldn’t. Most of Artemis’ servants would have interpreted it as a sign of weakness. “Ethan.”

“Yes, oh Lord of Craziness?”

“It’s Captain-Lord of Craziness for you,” the former Tyrant answered jovially. “I have not had the time to inspect what my dear half-brother stashed in terms of loot under our feet. Please find out if there’s something worth our time here.”

“I will check. If there are dolphins hiding-“

“You kill them. Cursed by our dear Director D or not, they’ve made their choice.”

Ethan took Drew, Michael, and Miranda with him and disappeared in the entrails of the Chrysaor’s Legend, and Perseus Jackson returned his attention to the son of Medusa...though most of it had remained on Chrysaor since the battle was over.

His enemy was way too dangerous to not keep an eye on him at all times...one dead Huntress had paid it of her life because she didn’t understand that.

“Slavery, eh?”

“This is one of the oldest professions in the world!” Truly his father had sired some real monsters over the last millennia...

“It is also one of the least respectable,” Perseus shook his head. “I won’t ask you if your dolphin crewmates thought it was admirable, obviously they did.”

“We are *pirates*.” And now he was speaking to him like he was a child. Yeah, Chrysaor was doing himself no favour here...

“I’m more and more in the mood to change the definition of *pirate* then,” then Perseus struck without warning...not that Chrysaor could do much to stop him. A second later, the golden mask was in his hands.

And the face that was revealed-

“BWHAHAHAHA!” He couldn’t help it; he laughed. “BWHAHAHAHA! So this was what you wanted to hide!”

“I order you to stop laughing!”

If anything, this convinced Perseus to laugh harder and louder.

Chrysaor...there was no way to say otherwise...Chrysaor was *beautiful*.

His hair were cut a bit too short, and evidently the battle had made sure he was quite dirty, but his visage...well, from what Perseus could see, the divine lineage was there, the grey eyes and the-

Wait a minute. Perseus knew those grey eyes...and the jaw and many other details...

“Medusa is your mother.”

“Yes, thank you for repeating what everyone knows!” Chrysaor mocked him again.

“And the Protector of Athens is your grandmother.”

The pirate was suddenly left speechless.

“How do you...how did you...”

“I’ve seen her appear under several appearances,” Perseus said. “But the grey eyes are quite distinctive.”

But damn, Athena had not done things half-way. It wasn’t just her High Priestess she had cursed for all eternity when she caught her fornicating with Poseidon...it was her daughter too.

At least it explained why the Gorgon was so powerful. As a child of Athena, she must have been quite a threat, and since a lot of curses removed mortal weaknesses...yes, a very challenging enemy.

“You understand why I keep my mask, then.”

KABOOM!

“No, I don’t.” Perseus answered honestly, wondering what his saboteur penguin had found to justify this explosion. “Your face is your face. If you were disfigured and wanted to hide it, I would understand...but while you have some serious masculine charm, well...”

His words weren’t appreciated. At all. Chrysaor uttered a litany of impressive curses, some of them he had never heard before.

And he had to invest a lot of strength to make sure the ropes and the other restraint didn’t break.

“My treacherous lieutenant?” the son of Nemesis was back, but Perseus kept his eyes and his power focused on his half-brother.

“There’s a magical vault in the Captain’s cabin. Rico blew it up, and we found out it is filled with gold Drachmas. We didn’t have exactly the time to count, but the private vault’s capacity was magically expanded for a reason. My best guess is several million Drachmas, along with several priceless artefacts.”

“This is my treasure!” Chrysaor snarled, madness dancing in his grey eyes.

“No, this is my loot.” Perseus countered with a smile. “Excellent, my treacherous lieutenant! Transfer the vault to the *Inevitable Doom*, please. Anything else of note?”

“As a matter of fact, yes.” Ethan Nakamura grimaced. “We found plenty of chains and human corpses in the hull. The dolphins and their masters are truly monsters. On the good days, they are among the slavers of the Sea of Monsters. On the bad days...they tend to...to...oh curse it.”

Perseus could imagine what had happened on this ship for centuries, yes. And it was awful. Did it count as cannibalism if the pirates were transformed into dolphins? Yes, yes it did. As for the rest...no wonder the ship stank like carrion.

“You are really a murderous bastard, Chrysaor.”

“I am the King of Pirates, son of Poseidon!” When he had been sired, clearly Poseidon and Medusa had not given him any sense of good and evil. “And remember your own words, you can’t kill me.”

But the pirate really made it tempting...Perseus would gladly let the Huntresses of Artemis tear him apart, limb by limb, and listen to his screams.

The problem was that the curse that would fall upon their Great Quest would make sure it was not worth it.

Perseus sighed...and threw a Drachma overboard.

“Iris, of Goddess of the Rainbow, please accept this humble offering.”

There was a slight breeze, a wave larger than the small ones which were now the norm as the Maelstrom had disappeared...and suddenly, the Queen of the Seas was there.

“**Perseus Jackson**,” Amphitrite had clearly not expected his call nor anyone else’s, for today she had taken the appearance of a mermaid...if the mermaid was covered entirely in black scales, with a trident and a diadem the sole ornaments confirming that yes, she was the Queen of Atlantis, “**and...*Chrysaor***.”

The moment she said his name was the moment Perseus knew one of the punishments he had mind for his pirate of half-brother was going to be approved. Still, there were forms to respect.

“Yes, Lady Amphitrite. As you can see, I have captured him. Knowing the laws of Atlantis forbid fratricide, I made this call so I could ascertain what kind of punishment I could hand out.”

“This is outrageous!” Chrysaor shouted. “It is this worm that deserves to be punished! He dared-“

The son of Medusa immediately screamed in pain...that was what happened when you had a sea urchin materialising in your mouth.

“**Fratricide is indeed forbidden...and before you interpret the laws of the seas creatively, no, no one is authorised to kill him without being targeted in return by the Lord of Atlantis’ curse**.” It was something that, evidently, was not Amphitrite’s idea. Maybe his father was sparing Chrysaor in memory of the Medusa he loved?

“I was thinking about transforming him into a dolphin...a dolphin with one fin, of course.” It was not going to be easy, but with Lou Ellen and Bianca to help him, it was doable.

“**No**,” Amphitrite said darkly. “**He deserves far worse. I can taste the evil he did there. Chrysaor...you were cruel before, but clearly you have gone too far**. **Perseus Jackson. Your followers and yourself are to return to your ship. You have done well to bring him to my attention. I am going to deal with this problem myself**.”

Okay...he wasn’t going to discuss with a Goddess whose anger had been roused. Clearly, the crimes of today had not come out of nowhere, and the Goddess had already some heavy grudge against the son of Medusa...a grudge which was far more important than her husband fornicating with a daughter of Athena.

Everyone evacuated promptly the damaged *Chrysaor’s Legend* by the improvised boardwalk Leo had created to link the two ships, and once pinnaces, loot, a lifeless body of a Huntress and everything of importance were safely aboard, the improvised bridge was withdrawn too.

“Take us away,” he ordered after he was sure everyone was aboard, dead or alive. “I don’t think we want to-“

“**Did you really believe you fooled me? I know you were involved in her disappearance! Now you are going to pay**!”

“Jackson, what is she-“

The *Chrysaor’s Legend*...the ship seemed suddenly...darker. The sails had not been white so far, but suddenly, they were a dark grey, which became closer to black every second. The wooden hull was covering itself with seashells and algae, but everything was black and ugly.

Various crustaceans were emerging from the sea, but all of them were dark and...twisted.

The leader of the Suicide Squad grabbed his spyglass and pointed it in direction of the great mast. He blinked in surprise.

Chrysaor’s severed arm had been replaced by...was it the mutated pincer of a crab?

One part of his right leg was missing too, and unless he was really wrong, Amphitrite had severed it herself...and now something scaly was growing from the stump. Something that couldn’t be called a ‘leg’.

But the most terrifying punishment was the face.

Poseidon’s wife had cursed him so that his divine-blessed visage was merging with a golden octopi. Having held the golden mask of Chrysaor in his hands, the insult couldn’t be more obvious.

“**Every entrance of the Sea of Monsters need a guardian**,” Amphitrite’s voice resonated everywhere at once, “**and though this one was not created by mortal hands, it will not be the exception to the rule! Chrysaor! As punishment for your crimes, you will be the *ferryman of Hell’s Reach* until I decide you have suffered enough for your countless crimes. And if you do not repent, you will stay there for all eternity**.”

The Sea of Monsters began to drag the Chrysaor’s Legend towards the dark arch leading to the Underworld...and before the three-masted warship disappeared, everyone could clearly hear the screams of its Captain pleading for a salvation that would never come.

There were a lot of bubbles near the Inevitable Doom for a few minutes...and then the Sea of Monsters returned to its falsely idyllic weather.

“Jackson?” the Emperor Penguin asked.

“Yes, my penguin lieutenant?”

“Your stepmother is hellishly scary.”

This was...incredibly accurate.

“Yes,” the son of Poseidon agreed, “yes, she is.”

**26 November 2006, the Sea of Monsters**

“Did you know your stepmother was going to do that?” Lou Ellen asked.

“Why is everyone calling her my stepmother suddenly?” The son of Poseidon answered her question by another question...and with a pout on his face.

“Well, you seem to be on good terms with her.”

“We had several Iris-blessed exchanges...but counting this one, it should be...seven?”

“So few?” the daughter of Hecate was honestly surprised. “I thought it was far more than that.”

“No. Unlike my divine half-sister, I’ve not met her in person, and the messages and communications have been *very professional*.”

Lou Ellen Blackstone chuckled.

“The great leader of the Suicide Squad is incredibly respectful with the Goddess of the Seas when he is throwing bad jokes with the rest of the Pantheon. Will wonders never cease?”

This was sufficient to make Perseus pout again.

“I will remind you, my dear sorceress lieutenant, that unlike many Gods, my ‘stepmother’, as you called her, is capable of negating entirely my Hydrokinesis if she so wishes. And while she is less powerful than a true Titaness, she could make my life a true tragedy if I decide to live anywhere near a large quantity of water.”

“Ah...a good point,” she admitted.

For several minutes, they watched the pyre-pinnace burn in the distance. With what Amphitrite had done to Chrysaor, everyone had supported the idea of placing as much distance as they could between the ‘Hell’s Reach entrance’ and the *Inevitable Doom*. Now that over twenty hours had passed, they had stopped to give Judith the Huntress a true funeral ceremony.

Lou Ellen didn’t like funerals. Her father had died when she was young, and since then, she had them in horror. But this one was admittedly worse. The blonde-haired sorceress wasn’t going to say she had liked Judith. She didn’t know her. The Huntresses had done their best to stay as far as possible from the rest of the Suicide Squad while they sailed for the Sea of Monsters; good luck trying to establish a relationship with someone in these conditions.

Despite that, it was clear most of the non-Huntresses Questers cared more about Judith’s death than her fellow Huntresses did – Jade was the sole exception to this rule.

To say it raised disturbing questions about what the Hunt had become across the millennia was a minor understatement.

“There were already legends of cursed ships doomed to sail on tormented seas for all eternity,” Perseus sighed, proving at this instant he couldn’t read thoughts. “I think some of them are going to return in strength outside of this Zone Mortalis. What?”

“Oh...nothing. To be honest, I had already dismissed your slaver of half-brother from my mind. I was more concerned about the...emotions of the Huntresses. Or rather, the dreadful lack of emotions they showed when one of their own perished.”

“They have emotions, they just try to not show them to us.”

“You give them far more credit than I or Judith’s friend does.”

Perseus Jackson grimaced.

“While I will admit calling them a lesbian cult or a variation of it was a provocation...the reality is that the Huntresses are a Cult. They are the Cult of the Goddess of the Hunt and Virginity. They live in isolation of the rest of the ‘Demigod society’ which exists at New Byzantium. They spend most of their daily activities hunting monsters or obeying the orders of their Goddess. I have no evidence to advance it, but I seriously think their last contact with a representative of the male sex is a tragedy of some sort that convinces them to join the Hunt. Therefore the next time they will see a boy or a man, be it a Demigod or not, they will have been encouraged for years to see it as an enemy.”

The Captain of the *Inevitable Doom* didn’t say anything about cult teaching and brainwashing to teach young girls the males were the enemy, but he didn’t need to.

“In many ways,” Perseus smiled, a welcome sight for once, “it would have been better if they were the lesbian cult I accused them to be. At least they would truly have love relationships in their ranks. But their Goddess is also the Eternal Virgin. Thus love relationships between two Huntresses have little chance to happen, and when they do, it always ends in tragedy.”

“Yet Jade and Judith seemed to have a deep friendship.”

“They are very recent recruits,” Perseus shook his head. “Jade let it slip they were recruited in the mid-nineties. I think the group leader thought that whatever tragedy befell them before their recruitment was more important when it came to hatred of man than their friendship by itself.”

“Ah.” Lou Ellen had momentarily nothing else to reply.

The pyre and the mortal remains of the Huntress progressively vanished as the wind pushed away the pinnace in flames, before it sank for good in the Sea of Monsters. By now, Judith must have begun her journey towards the realm of Hades. One could only hope the Lord of the Underworld would be merciful when it was time to appoint her Judges.

“Yes, ah,” Perseus turned back and began to march towards the war room. “Let’s return to our Great Quest. We must increase speed once more, I really don’t like this storm front behind us.”

“The Titaness new trial?”

“I dearly hope not...but I can’t confirm or deny it.”

**2 December 2006, Sea of Monsters**

“And here I thought the Labyrinth was the worst Zone Mortalis we Demigods could be sent.” Ethan wasn’t grumbling. He was a son of Nemesis, and grumbling was above him. He was just...asking for an explanation.

“I certainly said no such thing.” The crazy Captain of the *Inevitable Doom* immediately answered with a large grin. “Who could have given you such an incomplete perspective?”

“Who indeed...” Ethan had the urge to strangle a certain son of Poseidon, but not only he doubted his strength was sufficient to achieve it – Chrysaor had clearly shown how outclassed they were when sons of Poseidon clashed – it would likely provide great amusement to Perseus Jackson. “At least this storm is over. Are you really sure we haven’t been cursed? The countless sea monster attacks were taken for granted from the start. The storms, however, were not.”

“It’s true the weather has been a bit...stormy.”

‘A bit’, he said. They had survived an average of three massive storms a day. And these were not small storms. They had not encountered additional maelstroms in the way, but the elements raging against them had included plenty of lightning and skyscraper-high waves.

“If your instruments are right, Captain, it is going to be getting incredibly difficult to find where the Triumvirate is hiding before the Winter Solstice.”

“It is going to be impossible, you mean, my treacherous lieutenant.” Perseus smirked. “But don’t say it to the others. The Huntresses may take it as treacherous defeatism.”

“Err...sure, but it means the utter failure of the Great Quest.”

“It would...if the Triumvirate has something ready for this Winter Solstice. I am increasingly certain they don’t. My best guess is that the capture of the two Gods was done because they could, not because they were ready.”

This made sense...of course, if he was wrong, Zeus’ wrath would be...murderous.

“Let’s hope you are right,” the son of Nemesis looked in all direction and didn’t see much. So far, the weather had been alternating between massive storms and a perfect blue sky that could cook you if you didn’t use high-quality solar cream.

This morning apparently had a novelty...fog.

“But even if you are right, I suppose the preparations for the divine usurpation Olympus fears are ongoing...they must have been ongoing for months, in fact.”

“Quite right, my treacherous lieutenant. In my humble opinion, the ritual is so important it must take place on a very special date, where the sun is on the ascendant.”

“Our Lightning Thief didn’t do that.”

“Well, of course not. She was trying to be the Goddess of Hell. From her point of view, the Winter Solstice was indeed the right time for her ascension. But the Triumvirate duo we are concerned about does not desire to have dominion over the dead. They want to be Gods of the living. Thus the spring equinox and the summer solstices are the best dates for them.”

The wind Ethan felt touching his skin was abnormally cold suddenly, and he shivered unconsciously.

“Assuming you are right...this would give us a few months. Of course, the Sea of Monsters is huge, so even a few months are no victory guarantee.”

“And this is why we need a permanent base in the Sea of Monsters. The Triumvirate must have at least one, the Suicide Squad can’t endure if we have not something to repair our ship and recover after each major battle.”

“We endured the assault of the golden-masked bastard pretty well.” They had lost one Huntress, but in Ethan’s opinion, this wasn’t a great loss...and the Inevitable Doom had emerged without a scratch from the maelstrom and the naval battle.

“I said a major battle. Skirmishes with a single enemy ship don’t count.”

“Oh. Jackson...isn’t it getting a bit cold?”

It was far from freezing, but given that all Demigods were in T-Shirt and other summer clothes, with a tendency for things that could handle rain well and dry very quickly, it was rapidly getting unpleasant.

“It is. This means we must be close to the island I calculated the course of.”

“And what is this-“

The fog vanished like one had pressed a button, and Ethan saw.

It was a huge island.

It wasn’t welcoming at all.

There were some beaches of dark sand, but most of the locations where the island and the Sea of Monsters fought for dominance were clearly tall and dark cliffs.

This place had clearly a volcanic origin.

And past the cliffs, it was covered in snow and ice.

Yes, no wonder it was getting colder.

“Unpack the warm clothes!” The son of Nemesis drawled, and blinked as one Huntress of Artemis passed next to him covered in the fur of what had been at some point a bear-like monster. “Or the furs, if you have them!” He finished.

Jackson, naturally, returned to his favourite activity: grinning.

“Stop that, please.”

“Stop what, my treacherous lieutenant?”

“Stop...you really don’t intend to stop, so why I am wasting my saliva?” Ethan Nakamura sighed. “Why did we try to reach that island, oh dear Crazy Captain? The reason better not be a desire to ski or practise other winter sports.”

“I would not dare,” Perseus said so virtuously that it was necessarily a lie. “Look better, my treacherous lieutenant. There is a lot of snow, yes. But look attentively. There are details you might have missed.”

Ethan gave him an expression of doubt, before giving the island his full attention...and after several seconds, deep towards the large mountain which had to be the heart of this frigid location, there were indeed structures that could not have been shaped by the fury of the elements.

“I see two...they have to be pipes, or some sort of cooling system,” the son of Nemesis acknowledged. “The object barely emerging from the ice on the eastern slope has to be a sort of high furnace.”

Given what Jackson had revealed him a few minutes ago, it didn’t take a genius to arrive to the logical conclusion.

“You want this island to be our headquarters inside the Zone Mortalis?” He asked as Luke threw him his large and warm black coat.

“I do.”

This sounded like a horrible idea...which knowing Jackson, was probably a good reason to di it anyway.

“And does this island have a name?”

“If it has one,” Perseus said cheerfully, “it has been lost to time. And since we are the first to rediscover it...I want to propose a name that will be remembered for centuries.”

“If the name is *Perseus’ Legend*, the Huntresses will kill you, and I will hide the corpse.” Ethan threatened as more and more Demigods left the interior of the watch to see the destination their leader had led them to.

“I would never dare.” The son of the Earthshaker crossed his arms. “I am not my doomed half-brother playing the ferryman, thank you very much. No, the name will be truly remembered, for it will describe nothing but the truth. It will be...**the Forge of All Perils**!”

“WHAT?”

**Author’s note**:

Some Demigods of New Byzantium/Constantinople gambled that the Suicide Squad would not survive their entrance in the Sea of Monsters. Once they will be informed of these events, they will learn their first important lesson: don’t bet against Perseus Jackson and the Suicide Squad. Ever.

There are far less risky manners to lose your money...

Of course, ultimate success is still very far away for the participants of this Great Quest.

Evading the vigilance of various enemies to enter the Sea of Monsters...it was the easy part of this Great Quest.

The difficult parts – and the major battles – begin next chapter.

Oh, and of course:

**Suicide Squad – List of Fallen:**

*Judith – Huntress of Artemis*

Like I hinted previously, not every Demigod will survive this Great Quest.

Other links if you like the Suicide Squad:

ww w .alternate history forum/ threads/ an-impractical-guide-to-godhood-a-percy-jackson-x-a-practical-guide-to-godhood-crossover .513032/

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