**Chapter 15**

**Interlude**

**King of Pirates**

“*The pirates are the scum of the seven seas. There are no laws they respect save their own. They do not care whether you serve an Emperor or a God, only the amount of wealth your ship transports into its hull. They will rape women, plunder everything they want, and sail away leaving nothing but ruins, the cries of broken families, and untold devastation.*

*In an age of hypocrisy and betrayal, I find their honesty absolutely admirable*.”

Words attributed to Perseus Jackson, authenticity never confirmed.

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

Annabeth, like the majority of Quester Demigoddesses of New Byzantium, knew the Barrack Poseidon had built for his children was bigger inside than the outside boundaries and the laws of physics should have made possible.

The children of Athena had known it for a long time, and knew the power from Zeus’ brother was definitely at play here. By using advanced physics and no small amount of gold, in recent years they had copied it partially to increase the available space while keeping the outside appearance the same.

What she had not known, however, was that the Barrack of Poseidon had a large and exquisite underground basement too.

In hindsight, she should have thought about it. Most of the waters from the fountains and the little pools was returned to the ocean where it had come from, but the rest?

The rest, she knew now, was going below...where other water-themed activities between walls of blue-white mosaic and statues of maritime ornamentation were hidden from view.

Many of these things were perfectly functional and efficient, of this the daughter of Athena had no doubt.

But the water was also used to make sure the ultra-modern computer room remained at a fresh and pleasant temperature.

“How the hell did you manage to gain ten Vulcan X-MAXFORGE-4000 computers, Jackson?” The grey-eyed Demigoddess asked bewildered. “My brothers were still trying to buy one last month!”

Trying and failing, it went without saying. Olympian bureaucracy and technology protection laws were the bane of many Demigods, even if they only wanted these computers for playing video games.

“Oh, it wasn’t that difficult. After our past disagreements, the Amazons were ready to forget little mistakes provided I had plenty of Drachmas to spend. So I did. I don’t even know why they were so surprised to see me back. This ‘Amazon firm’ they created has formidable potential, be it on the divine and the non-divine spheres.”

“Wait a minute...” Annabeth Chase tried to think as fast as she could. “The Amazons are the owners of Amazon?”

“Err...yes?” Perseus looked at her like it was evidence itself, and for once...the irritating Demigod wasn’t completely wrong. “You didn’t think that the firm would have found a name like this if it wasn’t done by one by them? If they weren’t, it would have fallen in the God of Merchants, Trade, and Thieves’ portfolio.”

Yes, he had...a point. Amazon should be something Hermes would have launched a hostile takeover against years ago...unless it was the idea of a group with a long arm and interesting connections.

The Amazons qualified. Those fierce female warriors were deadly, be it on the battlefield or whatever they decided to focus their minds upon.

“Aren’t they going to suffer, though? I mean, the God of War is their patron, and he is prisoner...”

“Astute remark, oh daughter of Athena.” The child of the Earthshaker smirked. “To be honest, I don’t think my apologies are the reason they accepted to trade with me again. I had...some things that the proud Amazons could use as insurance should a certain God never return to sit on his bloody throne.”

The smile quickly disappeared and an expression of contrariety replaced it.

“A pity their Queen is so unreliable. The lieutenants are fine, but she is a problem. I will have to take care of this in the near future once the Sea of Monsters’ affair is no longer at the order of the day. Password: Irritant did nothing wrong.”

Without warning, a near-transparent wall that Annabeth hadn’t even noticed slide from left to right, allowing Perseus and she to use the small blue-red stairs which was the only way to access the computer room.

And as the machines were all online and showing a familiar Roman warship, the audacity of Jackson’s schemes once more struck her poor brain like a mace of celestial bronze during one of the capture-the-flag games.

“You wanted the Vulcan X-MAXFORGE-4000 machines because they had sufficient power and technology to control long-range drones.”

“That’s what I like about you, Amanda. When you aren’t busy pretending to be a spider in a human body, you have enough brains to arrive easily to the good conclusions. Yes, that’s exactly why I bought those extremely expensive pieces of technology.”

Annabeth scowled, being forcefully reminded that Perseus Jackson was utterly crazy.

“My name is Annabeth Chase, seaweed brain,” the daughter of Athena hissed between her teeth before considering the words said mad boy one by one. “The drones...they weren’t sold from Amazon stocks.”

“They weren’t.” The confirmation was immediate. “My sister, for all her limitations, has...interesting friends. The drones are underwater and purpose-built for all sea-based observation and information-gathering. Behold the SHARK X-02 long-range autonomous drones.”

Annabeth nodded in appreciation...before opening her mouth again to understand something that was illogical.

“If these drones are capable as you imply...why are they all monitoring the same ship? And why are two of the computers not functioning?”

Jackson grimaced.

“Someone, and no, I don’t know who it was, unleashed a storm against the Roman Expeditionary Force while it was trying to survive in the Scylla-Charybdis Strait. Two drones out of ten were lost there. And when it was over, I realised my programming of the drones wasn’t that good. The eight I have left all followed the same ship.”

Annabeth giggled at the frustrated face of the son of Poseidon.

“So there are things where you are not perfect, oh seaweed brain.” She chuckled for a good minute. “Okay, so you did bring me here to correct the programming of the drones?”

“Among other things.” Perseus crossed his arms.

“Among other things?” Annabeth repeated with an inquisitive stare and raised eyebrows.

Jackson huffed.

“I intended to inform you of these drones, not necessarily today, but...soon enough.” In other words, their leader had wanted to surprise them all with other ‘big surprises’. “But with the turn taken by events in the Sea of Monsters, it’s likely we will need a member of the Suicide Squad constantly to monitor what tragedy will befall the Romans every hour of the day. Since we must train, prepare the equipment and the super-yacht, do plenty of other daily activities, and sleep...there will be a monitoring schedule. You’re only the first to be invited after Antigone.”

Annabeth hated when the Earthshaker’s son brought so many good points in close succession...though there was something she wasn’t pleased about.

“Monitoring schedule? You mean these drones don’t allow us to intervene if the Legionnaires are in danger?”

“The SHARK X-02 drones I deployed to the Sea of Monsters don’t have any armament, be it defensive or offensive.” Oh, that was too bad...”I removed them before sending them on the warships’ trail.”

“WHAT?”

“No need to scream that loud...” the infuriating Demigod complained.

“Do you want to see them all dead? Does it give you pleasure to watch them die one by one?” The daughter of Athena erupted.

“No and no.” Jackson crossed his arms again. “I must confess a certain amount of jubilation watching the degree of unpreparedness of the Legionnaires, but no, I would prefer them to see them alive and humbled. But it’s not that I don’t want to intervene. It is that I can’t.”

The grey-eyed Demigoddess looked at him in confusion.

“There are rules, dear. I love to twist them to my advantage, but they exist. And direct intervention when you aren’t part of the game? That’s a big no-no...and not just because the Master of Olympus would be particularly furious if I did.”

There was...there was nothing she could say against that. By the Pit of Tartarus...he was right.

“Fine...fine. Which warship it is?”

“The *Hispania*,” Perseus Jackson returned to his more normal ‘I am to say something crazy and you can’t do anything about it’ smile. “It was part of the Second Squadron, and as such is manned by Legionnaires of the Third Legio, Third Cohort. The hull itself is a modified Agile-class Minesweeper. Judging by the different views I have of the warship...it did not escape the two monsters unscathed.”

The daughter of Athena wasn’t going to say he was wrong. The acid of Scylla’s maws had created plenty of impressive holes in the metal, and to make it worse, the storm had poured a lot of salted and non-salted water into them. The *Hispania* was low in the water, and if Annabeth had wanted to compared it to an animal, she would have said the Minesweeper was a wounded whale.

She sighed.

“At least they reached an island before receiving more damage. And it looks inhabited by someone who can build proper infrastructure. They will likely be able to repair the damage before sailing away for the Golden Fleece.”

“I’m sorry, Annabeth, but I don’t share your optimism.”

“The bay they have entered has only statues.” The blonde Demigoddess retorted. “Unless those were built by Daedalus to serve as anti-warship batteries, I don’t think those are going to be a problem for battle-hardened Legionnaires. For all their lack of proficiency at sea, the sons of Rome are true terrors as soon the ground stopped rolling.”

“Point granted.” Perseus Jackson nodded. “But I’m afraid you mistook my words. Those statues...I don’t think they are weapons or built by Daedalus in the first place. *I don’t think there were statues in the first place*.”

Annabeth stared in incomprehension at first. Of course, there were statues! And then Jackson ordered one of the drones to use all the power of its ultra-sophisticated camera...and she was given the opportunity to watch how good the sculptor had been at transforming a block of marble into something that looked the horrified expression of a middle-aged man in Renaissance military uniform.

“I will ask again: do you think those are statues?”

Annabeth felt as if her blood had frozen in her veins.

“The High Priestess of my mother...”

“Yes. This island must be her lair.”

“Tell the Romans to get out! Tell them to get out and flee this island!”

“I can’t.” For once, the Demigod seemed genuinely unhappy. “By all the treacheries I did commit and will do in an uncertain future, I swear to you I can’t.”

“It is...it is...”

“It is a triumph bad of luck.” The leader of the Suicide Squad finished. “Even I...I wouldn’t try to challenge a monster of that power without months of preparations.”

**17 September 2006, Sea of Monsters, somewhere near the Solomon Islands**

Leroy Ward felt incredibly happy now that he had left the Hispania behind. His sandals were now touching proper stone, something that wasn’t at risk of sending him barrelling into a sea in fury.

True, the location they had landed was an island, not a proper continent, but it was something that wasn’t at risk of sinking anytime soon.

And after nearly dying twenty times in the last day, this was enough to content a Decurion of the Third Legio.

Leroy had thought they were going to die with the *Hispania*. When the captain of the ship told you he hadn’t the slightest idea where they were sailing, in a storm so violent it took a minor miracle to save the ship...

It had been the beginning of the trials. Legionnaires and auxiliaries alike had been forced to take turns working the pumps, and the stench around them below deck had been nearly unbearable, because when Scylla attacked them, quantities of foul small-size monsters swarmed them.

They weren’t a challenge for a trained Legionnaire to fight, but no matter how quickly you killed them, they released an abominable smell when they bled.

Thus not only the *Hispania* was severely damaged, it also stank like a thousand polecats had been trapped where they usually slept waiting for their shift.

“How is possible the sky is so blue, Decurion? Not two hours ago, it was spitting thunder and the waves were higher than a skyscraper?”

“Who knows?” Leroy shrugged. “The Tribune said before leaving there were rumours of the islands inside the Zone Mortalis having their own climate. Maybe that’s it.”

“I hope not,” Ian, his best friend, told him with a grin. “Because that would mean outside this island, the storm still rages.”

“And as long as it rages, we can’t leave the island....curse it.”

“Well, we could leave,” Ian corrected, stopping his climb of the classical Greek white stairs in order to look at the bay below where the *Hispania* was waiting for their return. “But storm or not, I don’t our poor ship will float for long if we aren’t able to bring it to some shipyard able to repair it.”

“That’s right.” The Decurion cleared his throat before repeating his last command. “So move your armoured backside, Ian. We must find out if there’s someone on this island willing to help us.”

Ten minutes later, Leroy began to regret it. Climbing the stairs had not looked difficult at first; they were Legionnaires, and trained for it. The nine Roman soldiers and himself were between twenty-one and twenty-four years-old. Their first weeks among the Third Legio had involved walking with bags of stones on their backs, and often climbing small mountains. That, according to the Legion’s veterans, was supposed to toughen them up.

And it had.

But despite all their training and wearing only armour and the standard amount of weapons any proud Legionnaire took with him in all circumstances...climbing up the slopes of this bay was really, really exhausting.

The main reason was the heat. The heat and the total lack of wind. Gods, why did the Gods didn’t send a breeze in their direction?

“Decurion? Do you see something?”

“No! I don’t see anything! I don’t smell anything save a loud Legionnaire on my heels!”

Five men of the Third Legio laughed. The others were too busy trying to keep up his pace to do so.

“Okay, I deserved that. But you know you have-“

“I am a son of Pales, yes.” For those who didn’t know, Pales was the Roman God of shepherds, flock, and livestock. As such, it gave Leroy the ability to sense well before anyone when sheep and other animals domesticated by mankind were present – the ones which were used like the sheep for their meat and wool anyway. “And no, I have felt no sign there are sheep on this island. Or a cow. Or anything a shepherd would want to live with on a daily basis.”

They continued moving away from the *Hispania*, and with each step taken, a bit of the enthusiasm the Legionnaires had in them when finding salvation in this bay diminished.

Leroy wanted to say something, shout something to boost their spirits...but the truth was simple: aside from those realistic statues positioned at regular intervals around the bay, there was no one here.

The island looked abandoned.

Just as he was about to order a break, the slope became less abrupt...and they finally arrived at the top of the heights dominating the bay. As if materialised by the capricious whims of a Goddess, a splendid villa materialised barely two hundred metres away, on one of rare flat areas the island must have.

“Wow! Nice house! Decurion, do you think-“

“Let’s go find out.”

They did not have to walk long to have the answer if the villa was abandoned or not.

Within seconds of the enormous house being discovered – seriously, you could have a family of ten living inside that kind of thing without problem – the door opened and a woman walked out.

She was...strange.

Okay, it was not a critic...New Constantinople was filled with weirdness. When you had Bacchus as a figure of authority, you couldn’t exactly throw stones around.

But still...the woman’s sense of fashion was...weird.

The day’s temperature was incredibly hot, at the risk of saying the obvious. The grass on both sides of the white path which had led them there was incredibly green, but given the sweat on his skin...it felt like they were in summer, and not a cold one.

Yet the woman had a black veil covering the entirety of her hair, to the point not a single one could be seen.

Large and enormous sunglasses were hiding her eyes and a large red scarf was going from her neck to where her mouth should be...so yeah, they didn’t see her lips too.

One might have thought the rest of the body would be similarly hidden, but no! A tank top in a canary yellow shade and tight-fitting blue jeans completed the attire.

But to add to the weirdness a last time, the feet were hidden inside a pair of dark green boots. For some reason, they looked like ten different species of snakes had been skinned to make them.

One thing was certain: weird or not, the woman was fast. In less than a minute, the distance separating them was no more.

Leroy didn’t know why, but he began to feel ill-at-ease. There was something wrong. But what?

“You have not been invited.” It was like an opera singer had spoken. It was...it was beautiful. But the intent behind the words was not.

“My apologies, Lady,” Leroy saluted, “but the storm did not give us the choice. I present myself, I am Decurion-“

“I do not care who you are, Demigod. Remove your odious presence from my island. Now!”

“Hey!” Ian intervened. “We didn’t choose to come to your island, the storm threw us here! And we have been polite-“

“I do not care,” the woman replied, not bothering to turn her head, her voice as beautiful and devoid of positive emotions as the first time. “I didn’t invite you. You are not welcome. I will use simple words for your tiny heads to understand. Leave. Humans are not tolerated here.”

Humans? By the eagle of the Legion!

“She’s a monster! Defensive formation!”

Ian drew his blade and struck. His best friend had always been like that, and many times, his sword skills had allowed the Legion to win a skirmish before the enemy realised what had happened.

This time, he missed.

Not completely, but only a small piece of the black veil on the female monster’s head was cut...but it was sufficient for a snake, a honest black-coloured snake, to appear.

This wasn’t the end of the bad surprises, unfortunately. Just as they were rushing to support Ian, hands became claws, and in a move too swift for their eyes, the monster counterattacked.

Everything was blurry for a few seconds, busy as they were to strike a blow against an opponent which seemed incredibly fast.

When the first part of the fight ended, Leroy Ward, Decurion of the Third Legio, could only acknowledge the disaster. They had begun this fight with ten Legionnaires; now they were only six, as four were lying dead with horrible claw wounds mangling both Roman armour and Roman flesh.

“I will be honest,” the monster hissed, “I always hated Romans. And the only things I have grown to hate over the centuries is this infection the world calls *tourists*.”

The black veil was removed and discarded, revealing an unnatural corona of black-colour snakes.

Leroy wasn’t talented in Greek mythological lore at all. But he knew instantly who they were facing.

“Medusa...”

“Congratulations, Demigod,” green scales covered the arms, and the claws, which had been more something a big cat would have, grew in length with every second. “It appears you aren’t as stupid as you look.”

“The statues. It’s you. You turned everyone who came to this island into stone.”

“Everyone?” The Gorgon scoffed. “Please. For some reason, my island attracts a considerable amount of parasites like you every year. If I turned to stone every *tourist*, I would have ten thousand statues to warn away the interlopers, not one hundred.”

“Your reign of terror ends today!”

The red scarf was removed, revealing a super human mouth...but when it opened, it was to reveal the dentition of the monster had more common points with a piranha than a human.

“You realise I am playing with you, Legionnaires?” the Decurion wished the monster gloated, but her voice was...bored. “I remove my glasses, and it’s over for you.”

Then surprisingly, the scales receded and the claws disappeared. Human hands were back...not that the son of Pales was going to be fooled by that a second time.

“Then why don’t you do it?”

“It’s easier to hire good help to clean up when the corpses are made of flesh.” Medusa knelt and tore the gladius of Ian from his dead hands effortlessly. “And I admit I am curious to see how unskilled your band of *tourists* is.”

“We are going to kill you and take your head as a spoil of war!”

The corona of snakes hissed angrily, but Medusa’s mouth only twitched.

“I was the High Priestess of Athena, boy.”

“Attack her from every direction! Don’t let her catch you-“

Medusa attacked and Leroy and all his Legionnaires fought desperately for their lives.

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

“Well, if we have to fight her, I suppose buying some of the most expensive glasses Hermes is willing to sell will not be sufficient...”

“Jackson!”

“Yes, your Owlishness?”

“The entire crew of the Hispania just died and you are making a joke?”

“I am what I am, oh Amanda.” The son of Poseidon whistled. “And no, it was not a joke. I thought the most famous of the Gorgon sisters was extremely dangerous. I had no idea she was *that* skilled with a sword in hand. The ten Legionnaires she beat away from my drone’s camera? She could have ambushed them or led them into a massive trap.”

The blonde-haired daughter of Athena grimaced. Because damn him, Jackson had a point.

“But you don’t think that’s what happened.” And she didn’t make it a question. Not when she had seen Medusa slaughter her way across the surviving crew of the *Hispania*.

Even after the first scouts were wiped out, there were about thirty Legionnaires, and twenty of them looked like ready for a fight against a monster.

They were not. Not against something as dangerous and merciless as Medusa.

“You watched with me. She didn’t bother using the power of her petrifying glare once...which is a pity.” Perseus frowned. “I wanted to know the range of the Gorgon’s power able to transform humans into stone constructs. And I had a theory that it might apply to nonliving materials which aren’t made of glass. In this regard, this fight didn’t give me any useful information.”

It was certainly a way to look at the fight...and a particularly cold-blooded one.

“Yes. At least if they had been changed to stone, we would have the hope that vanquishing the Gorgon would return them to life.”

Since Perseus’ expression was anything but one of agreement, this forced her to ask a true question.

“You think I am wrong?”

The Earthshaker’s scion sighed loudly.

“That’s a lot of ‘ifs’. First, you have to consider that this unlucky group of forty Legionnaires, as far as we know, were massacred and unless I’m gravely mistaken, will all be lunch for the fishes and whatever monster nearby before sunset. Then there’s the fact that I am not a counter-curse specialist. I don’t know what exactly your mother intended when she cursed her High Priestess because Poseidon fornicated with her...”

“You forget they did it in her temple.”

“That was not very smart of my father,” Perseus’ smirk returned like a horse galloping, “I wonder what sort of punishment the Lady of the Seas gave to her husband for such a transgression? I will have to ask my dear sister-“

Annabeth clicked her tongue in frustration.

“Ah. The ‘if’ can continue like that for a while. Even if this rude host wanted to keep them as statues, it would be only useful if we managed to reach the island before she destroyed the transformed Legionnaires into debris of granite and marble.”

“Why would she do that?”

On one of the computer screens, Medusa’s hands became claws, and struck one of the Renaissance-themed figures with extreme ferocity.

In less than thirty seconds, what had no doubt been a middle-aged man with a spectacular sixteenth century-hat was reduced to very small fragments. Which confirmed the unasked question: could said claws cut through stone?

“Because she’s a vicious bitch?” Perseus raised an eyebrow. “You will forgive me for criticising your mother, your Owlishness, but I wish she had turned this woman into something a bit more...manageable.”

“For this once, I will shut my mouth,” Annabeth promised.

It was extremely annoying, but there was no denying Jackson was right. Even without the capability to petrify her enemies, Medusa would have been a first-class opponent. Maybe Luke and a few other swordsmen of New Byzantium would be able to survive more than a minute, but Annabeth was sure she wasn’t talented enough. The monster was simply too fast.

“It isn’t all bad news.” Perseus shrugged. “It offers certain opportunities.”

“If you try to hire her, I will ask the rest of the Suicide Squad to murder you in your sleep,” the daughter of Athena threatened.

“Don’t worry, given her...impolite behaviour, recruiting this sort of walking disaster isn’t on the table. But there are certain prison-islands where it would be useful to have a power of petrifying at our beck and call...”

“I’m sure Luke would be quite happy to open you the doors.”

“Oh, absolutely. But as you learn quickly when it comes to prisons, the strength of a prison doesn’t necessarily rely upon the magical defences. There also are the jailors to take into consideration.”

**18 September 2006, Sea of Monsters, somewhere near the Solomon Islands**

“How are we going to continue the campaign without a prow?”

“I don’t know.”

“The *Danubius* isn’t going to sail again!”

“It could have fooled me. And here I was saying we ran aground our Frigate just to see if it could sail on land.”

The black humour, as evident as it was, did nothing to stop the loudmouth from continuing his stupid remarks.

“There must be something we can do!”

“You can shut up, Eustace. Everyone is sick of hearing your mooing.”

“It’s your fault!”

Elvis Knight had enough and punched Eustace.

A competent Decurion would have seen it coming, but Eustace Bragg was neither competent nor skilled in boxing. He was just one of the arrogant brats who had been elevated above their level of competence by this wastrel of Octavian.

“You...YOU HURT ME!”

The Centurion of the Twelfth Legion did the first thing which came to the forefront of his thoughts.

He punched again.

And this time, Eustace Braggs mercifully fell unconscious...and silent.

The dozens of Legionnaires all smiled and breathed out in relief.

“Report,” he told his real second-in-command, no matter what the foolish hierarchy they had been forced to accept at New Constantinople proclaim.

“We’ve been able to save most of the supplies and the infantry weapons. But we only have a single eagle for aerial reconnaissance, and over one-fourth of our men are injured. Medicine supplies are going to be...problematic in the next days.”

“Arthur?”

“I agree. We have only two doctor-surgeons, and they can’t be everywhere at once. By the way, I think they won’t like that you broke the nose of Eustace.”

“Eustace will wait his turn like a good Legionnaire,” otherwise he would be gagged and thrown into the sea, with a stone attached around his neck. “The island?”

“We were a bit busy removing everything of value from the ship, but it seems like a nice little paradise. Those trees are orange trees, for example, and they definitely can be eaten.”

Elvis sighed, noting how scandalously the standards of discipline had fallen since they were forced to endure Octavian’s presence.

“Food is always a major preoccupation, but I would have thought you mentioned the volcano first.”

The trees may cover half of the island as far as Elvis could estimate, but everything was on the slopes of a giant volcano which dominated them.

Arthur blushed.

“Err...well, it is a volcano. I don’t know why there’s a black flag flying above one of the lesser peaks-“

“Boredom, and because this island is mine.”

The feminine voice startled every Legionnaire, and everyone tried to grab his gladius in a hurry.

After a second, a figure came out of the woods, hands in the open.

To the Centurion’s relief, it was a woman, not a monster or any kind of inhuman enemy the Sea of Monsters was so infamous for.

That said, the closer she got, the more evident it was that her clothes were not from the nineteenth century. The black coat and the yellow-brown pants were definitely coming straight from the eighteenth century, if maybe not earlier. The white ‘shirt’ under the coat looked even older. And the pistols and the model of sabre tied in leather holsters around the belt had become obsolete centuries ago.

For all of that, the young woman – between twenty and twenty-two, he would guess – was rather striking. Elvis wouldn’t say she was very pretty, but the dark red hair were long and attractive, and there was steel in those brown eyes.

“Centurion Elvis Knight of the Twelfth Legion of New Constantinople,” he presented himself. “Those are my men, and the damaged ship behind us is the *Danubius*.”

“Captain Anne Bonny, daughter of Demeter,” the newcomer answered with a grin, “I tried to become Queen of Pirates in my time, and the Gods didn’t like that at all. Did Olympus erase my exploits from existence, or am I still remembered in...what was the year you entered the Sea of Monsters?”

“It is the year two thousand and six.”

Anne Bonny flinched...before clearly steeling herself.

“I see. So she wasn’t able to find a way to rescue me...”

“She?”

“Not important,” the red-haired daughter of Demeter dismissed the question with haughtiness, and the more time Elvis spent observing her, the more there was a certain...majesty about her. “If you’ve said the truth, everyone I’ve ever known is dead, if the Gods didn’t make them immortals.”

For all the efforts to hide it, the Demigoddess’ very behaviour betrayed her sadness.

“I’m really sorry for your loss,” the Centurion tried. “That said, while I don’t want to change the subject-“

“This island is my prison,” Anne Bonny interrupted him. “If you want a ship, I will be of no help at all...I’m fascinated by this ship of metal of yours, of course. But a blind Captain can see you’re missing a few vital things...like the prow.”

This was...really bad news.

“Why would anyone imprison you here?” he asked, bewildered.

“Because this island has the only gate allowing someone to enter the prison of a Titan, Centurion.” Anne Bonny smiled, and unveiled teeth which somehow remained quite white for someone having embraced pirate life centuries ago. “It needs many jailors...beginning on the soil of this island. When Olympus’ huntresses captured me, I was given a choice. I could stay on this island, regain a youthful appearance, and protect the prison’s gate from all potential intruders in the name of the Olympian Council...or I could die.”

It was, quite clearly, a choice the daughter of Demeter had lived to regret for centuries.

Maybe she had thought her friends would come and break the curse. Maybe there had been some hope to build a ship and escape...

But evidently, every attempt to abandon the fate of jailor-prisoner had failed.

“Should we manage to repair our ship,” Elvis began carefully, trying to ignore the murmurs of his fellow Legionnaires telling him how impossible it was, “there won’t be any curse which will prevent us from leaving, surely?”

“No,” Anne Bonny shook her head. “The only curse active on this island is mine...and thus I have come to deliver you my warning: stay as close to the beach as possible. Don’t go past the first circle of fruit trees.”

“Why? Miles asked to his right. “Your curse will injure us if we go beyond them?”

“In a certain manner,” the daughter of Demeter drew her sabre...and suddenly, it was no mere sword, but a huge scythe which was in her right hand.

All Legionnaires fell instantly silent.

“The closer an unwanted visitor gets to the Gate,” Anne Bonny said with a sinister smile, and an accent which implied magic translated some of her words in proper twenty-first-century English, “the stronger the pressure to kill the interlopers. There was one crew before you who didn’t heed my warning.”

The scythe was lowered, and in a fraction of a second, returned to a nearly-inoffensive sabre appearance.

“Don’t make their mistake, if you want to live.”

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

The room was a complete mess.

There were none of those extremely mechanical devices called ‘computers’, which in a way was...reassuring.

On the other hand, Perseus Jackson had accumulated the equivalent of ten thousand sheets of paper in less than twenty-four hours. And that for reasons that even she, a former Dread Empress, was struggling to understand.

Needless to say, it was a bit...frustrating.

“You know, there are servants for that sort of things,” Bianca di Angelo told him...and the son of Poseidon just...shrugged. “Otherwise you will never find anything you search for.”

The last words were uttered with the proper gravity they deserved...and the infuriating ex-Tyrant snorted.

“I know exactly where everything is supposed to be, oh daughter of the Rich One. Everything is in perfect order. It’s not my fault if you have problems with-“

A pile two gargoyles were struggling to keep standing promptly collapsed on his left, missing the host of the Barrack by a few fingers.

The animated stone constructs were nearly buried for several seconds under the mass of paper, something they didn’t seem to find very funny.

“Your perfect order is impressive.” Bianca would have rather called it ‘chaos’, personally.

“Everyone fails to understand my genius.”

The best answer, the black-haired daughter of Hades had found out very early, was to not succumb to the provocation and stay silent. Sooner or later, Jackson would stop his stupidities and return to the subjects which mattered.

“All right. First, a quick recounting of the Roman exploits. I let my treacherous lieutenant to monitor the situation, and he hasn’t informed me of any change, though we’re still trying to locate most of the warships which left New Byzantium. One ship was swallowed by Charybdis. One had its crew slaughtered by the most famous Gorgon sister. And the other is heavily damaged, and its crew is forced to camp on an island-prison where the guardian is compelled to kill them all if they do something idiotic.”

“Three ships lost in less than a week?” Bianca raised an impressed eyebrow. “If the Romans continue to suffer such casualties, they will have no one by the end of next month.”

“Personally, I would rather bet on the end of *this* month,” the son of Poseidon disagreed.

“The situation is that bad?”

“The situation is that bad, and it looks like having empty skulls is not exactly a good thing when your best behaviour is recommended. But never mind.”

Many papers were thrown on the ground, almost burying another gargoyle under the avalanche of documents until Jackson found what he wanted.

“Ah. Here what I was able to observe.”

The drawing was absolutely atrocious, but the massive and strange oval-shaped thing was dominating everything, and the calculations...

“This is the formula of a magical boundary, Jackson.”

“Very good! To be accurate, it is *the* boundary. The one the Gods of Olympus decided to create when it became evident it wasn’t good for civilisation that ten or twelve sea monsters could attack you even for a short sailing adventure. Ignorant souls would speak of a barrier, but it is both a ward, the limits of a Domain, and many things besides it.”

All right. Now the Di Angelo Demigoddess was extremely interested.

“And it separates the Sea of Monsters from the rest of this plane of existence.”

“Yes.” The smug smile was back, of course. “But of course it was not enough for the Gods and the Goddesses to engineer something as huge and monstrous. They had to take into account future additions, you see.”

“The entrances of the Sea,” the daughter of Hades said slowly, “they aren’t just here to tempt the adventurers. They are...they are the bait.”

“You catch on quickly,” Perseus complimented her. “And yes, ‘bait’ is exactly the appropriate term. In appearance, this Zone Mortalis has everything to be a formidable training area, or a zone to fulfil your dreams of fortune...except if you aren’t an Olympian or operating under the favour of one, you rapidly realise the way out is denied to you.”

“And so new monsters can’t leave the Zone Mortalis.”

The current leader of the Poseidon Barrack chuckled.

“Monsters? If only them...I’m speaking about the pirates, dear. The legendary Demigods and Demigoddesses who decided to reject all the laws and tenets of Olympus, and sail away, caring nothing about freedom and plunder.”

Bianca was less than impressed by this speech.

“These are scum of the sea we’re talking about. And even if their support gave us some strategic advantage...most of them must be quite dead by now. Nico is very much a fan of the ‘Golden Age of Piracy’ book you gave him, but the fact remains it was centuries ago. Hearing your description of the Roman disaster, can a pirate crew really survive for long surrounded by creatures which can easily destroy entire fleets?”

“Oh, most of them are certainly dead,” Perseus conceded, “but the Sea of Monsters is a place where time is not playing by the usual rules...and as such, the best and the worst crews will have survived.”

“Some of them are undoubtedly serving in the Triumvirate’s fleet as we speak.”

“And they will serve us, in time.”

The assurance it was spoken with, alas, forced her to ask the question which burned her lips.

“Why are you so sure of that, Jackson?”

“Because I do not intend to give them the choice, *your Dreadful Majesty*.”

Evidently...she had kind of begging for answer of that nature...

“The island-prison,” Bianca tried to return to something Jackson had barely mentioned. “Is it the place you planned to visit with the daughter of Aphrodite?”

“No, it is quite another.” The sea of Poseidon admitted with surprising honesty. “I think that in an underground chamber of the volcano, there is a gate leading to Tartarus...and to the prison of the Titan of Mortality and Pain, also known as the Lord of the West.”

Also known as Iapetus, son of Gaia and Ouranos.

Yes, the Lightning Thief could understand why it held no appeal for the leader of the Suicide Squad.

“Since you evidently didn’t invite me here today to say all of those things without a reason...what do you want, Jackson?”

The green eyes of the Demigod shone with limitless malice.

“I want you to use your lore of demons to build something for me.”

**20 September 2006, Sea of Monsters, somewhere near the Solomon Islands**

This was too funny.

Despite the pain, despite knowing he was going to suffer once more, Decurion Clark Lucas laughed.

The reaction of the torturer didn’t make itself wait.

The enormous fin slapped him violently. Two seconds later, realising its mistake, the dangerous fish grabbed a sword of Celestial Bronze with some sort of magnet.

Clark screamed as he lost one finger of his left hand to the blade.

“I am forced to repeat myself,” a velvety voice came behind the bipedal and unnatural Dolphin warrior which had just mutilated him. “Where is the treasure of your ship? I was assured this ship contained priceless treasure! My sources were never wrong!”

This time the survivor of the Twelfth Legio didn’t laugh. There was too much pain; what the hell was on this blade, it felt like his entire hand was on fire!

“I don’t know what your sources told you,” Clark gritted his teeth, “but the sole thing our ship transports is the ammunition of the 1st Squadron! It is a valuable treasure...if your purpose is to make war.”

The Decurion was forced to grit his teeth and force himself to not show weakness. No matter how painful it was for his body, he wouldn’t give up. He wouldn’t beg the monster which had butchered his friends.

The massive dolphin for a second or two looked as if it was going to remove one more finger, but finally, at the urging of the butcher remaining in the shadows, abandoned the idea and sheathed its weapon.

Then it threw some green powder on Clark’s hand, and the bleeding stopped. Unfortunately, the pain doubled, and he was forced to scream again as the suffering coming from his hand was properly unbearable.

By the time Clark recovered, the group of pirate-clothed monster-dolphins had withdrawn somewhat from the torture section, and the master of this inhuman crew advanced.

And like the first time he had seen it, the son of Fontus shivered. Seriously, who would be so crazy as to don a golden mask representing a Gorgon upon his face? That was asking for divine retribution!

“It seems I asked my questions...poorly. I was promised a great treasure, and you have a great treasure...but not the one I want.”

The accent was definitely similar to the one of people who had lived for years in the Middle East, or a region in the vicinity of it.

“Tell me, son of Rome. Did any ship of your expedition carry gold with it?”

“Why...” Clark Lucas winced as pain became a fundamental part of his being for several seconds, “why would we transport gold? We are an Expeditionary Force! What Olympus must pay for our service, it will be given at our return...”

The monster having the body of a man laughed after he spoke. It was a sound almost feminine...but not quite.

“How naive, son of Rome. I have lived millennia, and I can assure you that the Gods don’t pay if you’re not alive to make them remember their oaths. And since most of you are quite dead...it seems I saved these hypocrites a lot of Drachmas.”

The Decurion didn’t reply to the enemy’s provocation.

“It is disappointing, but as true as I am Chrysaor, son of Medusa and Poseidon, there will be other opportunities for my crew and I to gain more wealth. This battle didn’t cost us a single warrior; we can continue to raid the Sea of Monsters as we desire, confident that one day, we will be able to escape it...and that day, I, the magnificent and glorious Chrysaor, will take the throne that is mine by right.”

“What, you will ask your daddy to make you a God?” Clark mocked him.

He seriously expected to be mutilated even worse than his dolphin tormentors had done, but the Gorgon-masked captain snorted.

“I will not ask anything from that scoundrel. I am not a hero, son of Rome. I am a villain. And there is a title that is mine by right and might. I will become *the King of Pirates*.”

There was only one answer the son of Fontus could give after having listened to this crazy proclamation.

“You’re insane.”

“And you, son of Rome...you are going to end up as dinner for the poor misunderstood predators of this forgotten sea. I don’t think you will have to wait long. The blood of your friends will attract them soon enough. Farewell, Demigod holding a treasure of no importance.”

The hybrid of dolphins and pirates left first, their infernal captain last. Clark wasn’t fooled by his slowness or his pompous air; many Legionnaires had thought this monster was easy prey, only to lose their heads and their arms in lightning-quick sword moves.

The *Vesuvius* was silent.

Clark tried to break whatever was holding the chains which kept him prisoner, but unfortunately, nothing moved. Nothing. How the hell were these pirate-dolphins able to create a torture chamber and metallic bindings so easily?

The pain in his hand began to decrease, though the sight of it brought a grimace on Clark’s face.

The Demigod began to feel really thirsty. Hunger, for the moment, was not a concern, as he had eaten during his shift – the last sailing shift he would likely ever made, given that the assault of Chrysaor and his damned ship had surprised them right after escaping a Megalodon’s jaws.

More than ever, the Decurion tried to find something which would allow him to save his life, but there was nothing he could do.

He was the son of Fontus, and his father had given him some minor ability to recover from his injuries when he touched water, courtesy of him being the Roman God of Wells and Springs.

But how could he touch water when he couldn’t take a step forwards?

And all the ammunition of the *Vesuvius*...by the Pit, make it all the ammunition in the world! All this ammunition was more than useless to him right now.

He was-

The sound of human voices arrived to his ears.

They sounded...guttural and dangerous.

But they were human voices.

Hope burned again in Clark’s voice. Maybe one of the other ships of the 1st Squadron had found the Vesuvius! Or maybe it was the 2nd Squadron! Maybe-

The door Chrysaor had closed when he left opened again, and the Roman Demigod’s hopes died, as a colossal figure came into view.

The intruder was definitely a man, but the very sight of him was cruel and inspired no confident at all. He was obese and when he smiled, quite a few teeth were clearly missing.

“It seems Fate has not been very gentle with you, *Legionnaire*,” the black-haired man began. “But you have been given a new chance. Cherish it. Nobody on the seas has more than one life to give. And a man’s dreams never end.”

The closer the newcomer came to him, the more his unease was increasing.

For all his decrepit and ugly appearance, Clark was confident this man was a Demigod.

“Who are you?”

“I am Edward Teach, son of Ares.”

Clark Lucas tried to break his chains, but they held like they had for the last hours. The name...every Demigod, be he a Roman or a Greek, had heard of this name. And of his famous pirate’s nickname, which had become a legend in its own right.

“*Blackbeard*,” he whispered.

The smile grew madder and larger.

“So the new generation remembers me, after all! Good! Good! Now...I have a ship filled with strange and wonderful weapons, and a Legionnaire who can teach me how to use them. Do you understand my intentions...*friend*?”

The son of Fontus shivered, for yes, he did understand it perfectly.

“I won’t help you. My loyalty to the Legion is absolute.”

“Well,” the old monster grinned, “let us verify that, shall we?”

**21 September 2006, Sea of Monsters, somewhere near the Solomon Islands**

For an instant, nothing happened.

But it was only for an instant.

Less than two heartbeats later, the galley disappeared into a colossal explosion of smoke and fire, with green fire spreading over the sea.

“So the bastards of the Triumvirate have the Greek fire too.” The Legionnaire next her remarked.

“Yes,” Erica answered. There had been a strong likelihood of it before battle was joined; all the Demigods who served the Triumvirate had not been sired by the traitors, meaning the likelihood of Greek and Roman defectors was high...and so was the possibility of Constantinople’s secret weapons being mass produced by the enemy. “Status of the two other galleys?”

“For some reason, their crews suddenly stopped rowing in our direction.”

Many Legionnaires chuckled.

“Stop laughing,” the Tribune of the Third Legio ordered, finding no humour in the situation whatsoever.

“But...Tribune, with all the respect we owe you...their ambush failed. We already sank three galleys today and-“

“Don’t you really think anyone intelligent would expect mere *galleys* to go against the *Jupiter Invictus*?” The daughter of Sol asked tersely. “The scum chained to the oars of these galleys were the scouts. They were sent to this island to warn their masters if someone came to this island to resupply. And judging by the flares they threw in the air the moment the battle began, they obeyed their orders.”

The laughter, it went without saying, ceased abruptly after that.

“In that case...shouldn’t we bypass this island completely and find a better anchorage?”

“I would love to,” the female Tribune admitted. “But we need to fill up our stores, and this island, apart from the traitors of the Triumvirate, has everything we need very badly.”

Food and water were the utmost priorities, but one couldn’t forget the less evident ones.

“And the *Corinthus* needs some urgent repairs,” which was also the obvious truth, as the sole ship to have found the Jupiter Invictus had not emerged from the storm in a good condition.

“Exactly,” Erica winced inwardly. “Bypassing the island may be the correct tactical decision, but in operational terms, it will be a long-term disaster. We don’t know when we will have the opportunity to resupply if we don’t seize this opportunity. The next islands might be filled with edible food, or they may be barren rocks filled with monsters.”

Given the name of the Zone Mortalis, the latter was alas far likelier than the former.

 “What is your command, Tribune?”

“I am taking the risk of letting the enemy catch up with us.” The blonde Demigoddess told her subordinates. “Twenty-four hours. That’s how long we will stay here to resupply our reserves and repair what can be repaired.”

“Yes, Tribune!”

For the first time since they had entered this nightmarish location, Erica was able to sleep soundly for about seven hours that night. When she woke up, it was with the sound of tropical birds, and the sea around the island was perfectly calm.

It was idyllic. There were no monsters on the small island, save a sort of boar that her Legionnaires had promptly cooked. The fruits most of the trees gave were edible too. And the repairs of the Corinthus advanced at a satisfying pace. It was-

“Magical disturbance detected on the Aegis! Magical disturbance detected!”

Erica ran to the bridge of the Jupiter Invictus, and when she was in front of the screens reserved to her officer sand she, the daughter of Sol did her best not to swear.

There were a lot of dots, each one representing a potential enemy unit.

The good news was that with the hyper-advanced Aegis system of the modified Ticonderoga-class Cruiser, what had to be the enemy fleet was well beyond the horizon, and there was time to recall everyone aboard the ships and flee.

The bad news was that fleeing was all they could do. With each second passing, the dots grew ever more numerous.

It had to be the main fleet of the Traitor Triumvirate. There were already over sixty contacts confirmed and-

“We have the first formal identifications. Some of the vanguard units are clearly World War Two-era destroyers of the Italian Navy. On their flanks are modernised ironclads...and at the heart of the formation...it’s a battleship.”

“A pre-dreadnought one,” her tactical officer corrected with a good dose of optimism. “We can sink it.”

“Somehow,” Erica did her best not to mock her officer, “I doubt the rest of the fleet is going to stay idle while we destroy the flagship. Recall everyone who is ashore.”

“By your command...but we won’t have resupplied completely our food reserves, Tribune.”

The water reserves having priority over the food ones, they didn’t suffer from the same problem.

“Then we may have to ratio ourselves in the future. Status of the enemy fleet?”

“They’re coming straight for us, Tribune...their effectives are still increasing. We have confirmed at least ninety warships, and yet they are more coming!”

“Understood. Accelerate our preparations. We won’t abandon anyone, but there’s not a minute to waste now.”

Had she taken the good decision?

Erica thought about it...and arrived to the conclusion that yes, it was the correct order. Her Legionnaires had desperately needed the rest after what felt an eternity fighting storms and monsters.

For that matter, the water reserves of the *Corinthus* had been in a very bad state. Two more days, and they would have run out of potable water. Whether you were a confirmed sailor or not, any soldier recognised how incredibly dangerous it was when your men did not drink to their content.

“Contact! New contact! Magical emissions...what is that?”

Erica turned her head to tell the Legionnaire a reminder discipline was the virtue of the Roman legions and indiscipline the vice of the barbarians...but when she read the information gathered by the Jupiter Invictus’ advanced devices, the female Tribune felt as if someone had danced upon her grave.

“The readings must be wrong,” the Demigoddess heard herself speak.

“The readings are...resynchronised...and confirmed, Tribune.”

Something suddenly began to shine over the horizon. It was as if a new sun was rising over the Sea of Monsters.

“Impossible,” Erica uttered. “According to the Aegis system, they are still over forty kilometres away. How can we see them? No battleship can do that!”

“Tribune...I don’t think it is a battleship at all. I don’t know what it is, but...it has the tonnage of a Nimitz-class aircraft carrier. And...it is flying!”

For a second, the senior officer of the Third Legio assigned to this expedition desired nothing more than telling her subordinate to stop the drugs.

Unfortunately, if this was some banned substance causing that, they were all under the effect of it.

There had to be a logical explanation.

There had to be.

The leaders of the Triumvirate may be the traitors Marc Antony and Cleopatra of the era which led to the rise of Augustus Caesar, but-

Cleopatra. The Egyptians.

Oh, no.

“This must be a damned Solar Ark.” The daughter of Sol grimaced as all around them, the ruckus of dozens of Legionnaires running to their stations increased. “The traitors must have forced Lord Vulcan to supply them with the means to restore the flying capacities of their flagship.”

“Yes, Tribune. Your orders?”

“We flee.” There was no other option. The magical readings and the size of the enemy flagship were such that the possibility of their missiles doing enough damage to force it to crash was very low. And there was the rest of the one hundred-strong fleet to deal with at the same time. “We flee as fast as we can and we pray they will disperse their main fleet into smaller squadrons, giving us the chance to defeat them in detail.”

They were supposed to win against that? It was a bad joke. They hadn’t enough missiles and offensive armament to deal with more than a dozen warships, never mind the Solar Ark!

The fact that no one argued...it was all that needed to be said about how screwed they were.

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

“By my mother’s magic, how are they able to keep something that huge flying?”

Lou Ellen was not easily surprised, but the video of the SHARK drone Perseus had replayed several times was enough to astonish her.

“Unknown for the moment,” the son of Poseidon replied serenely, “I would love to say it is because they have the God of the Forges prisoner, but unfortunately, it isn’t likely.”

“Why?” the blonde-haired daughter of Hecate asked.

“Because this is obviously something which was built to fly, not sail upon the seas of this world.” The leader of the Suicide Squad answered. “Look at the shape of the hull and how the weapons are disposed. This ship was not built to endure the waves on a daily basis. It can likely land and travel short distances on them, yes, but it was not made for that. And the few weapons we could see without our drones being detected are clearly prepared to rain destruction from above.”

“Yes.” Lou Ellen nodded. “Do you regret now having built a super-yacht instead of a proper warship?”

“Absolutely not. I stand by my genial decision!”

The sorceress sighed. Of course, she should have expected that.

“Whatever the son of Hephaestus and his best Cyclops friends are busy working upon...maybe a proper warship-“

“My dear,” the smirking Demigod interrupted her, “have you forgotten that leaving aside the weapons of this massive ‘Solar Ark’, the Triumvirate’s flying ship is escorted by about three hundred warships of different epochs of war?”

Lou Ellen grimaced.

“I imagined you would have a plan to evade their attention and attack the ‘Solar Ark’ directly. After all, if we cut the head of the enemy, their fleet will disperse afterwards.”

“Ah, the good ‘cut the head, and the body dies’,” Perseus mused, “it works...extremely poorly with the Hydras.”

The sorceress who had bathed in the waters of the Styx rolled her eyes.

“I’m serious, Jackson.”

“So I am, my dear.” Her unimpressed glare only brought a shrug from the black-haired boy. “Anyway. The problem of this strategy is that it leaves us no margin of error. If we fail to decapitate the heads of the Triumvirate, then the fleet sailing on the Sea of Monsters won’t have its discipline broken, and all the attack will achieve will be our encirclement and prompt destruction. Worse, while I am more or less sure this is the flagship of the second duo of the Triumvirate, I can’t confirm the two are present. Cleopatra, yes, the flag was hers, and you don’t leave this kind of flagship to a lieutenant. But Mark Antony? He could be here...or he could be somewhere else.”

“Like the ritual grounds where they intend to do to the God of War what the Lightning Thief intended for her father?” Lou Ellen asked rhetorically and sarcastically.

“Yes and no,” Perseus gave her a vicious smile, “usurpation, yes, they definitely intend to do that. The method our dear daughter of Hell used? Absolutely not. While they could bleed their prisoners to obtain Orichalcum, it takes a very gifted sorcerer or sorceress to forge a sarcophagus to become a God or a Goddess...plus quite a lot of symbolism and stories that simply aren’t there.”

“And yet,” the daughter of Hecate said, “they are ready to challenge Olympus openly.”

“Yes. Isn’t this amusing?”

Lou Ellen Blackstone sighed. One day they would all be utterly crazy, and aside from knowing when they were infected by this madness, there would be nothing they could do...

“I suppose,” she cleared her throat, “that the current usurpation attempt of the Triumvirate, no matter what it involves, depends heavily upon my half-sister the Immortal Sorceress, sarcophagus or no sarcophagus.”

“I don’t know the degree Mark Antony and Cleopatra rely on her for their fabulous and glorious conspiracy of usurpation and mayhem,” Perseus denied, forcing her to give him a mocking stare, “but yes, it is very likely she is playing an important role.”

“In that case, I’m really surprised the Council of Olympus didn’t try to move against her. They know she lives in the Sea of Monsters, after all.”

“I’m pretty certain they gave secret orders to the Roman commanders which involve what to do about her if they find her island, my dear sorceress lieutenant,” Jackson poured the two of them glasses of orange juice with a very amused grin. “And before you ask, yes, I saw the packages being transported aboard the ships, but I don’t know what was inside them. And the drones weren’t able to observe the Tribunes and Centurions when they read them. All of that is done in each captain’s cabin, out of my curious sight.”

“Problematic.”

“Especially for them.” Perseus drank very fast the contents of his glass.

“Why so?”

“My dear sorceress lieutenant,” Perseus smiled wolfishly, “the worst mistake the Romans could do, bar challenging a Titaness directly, would be to threaten an Immortal Sorceress where she built her powerbase. People forget it a bit quickly, but her father was Helios, God of the Sun.”

“And what it does it mean in military terms?” Lou Ellen asked, very interested by the answer.

“It means,” the insane leader of the Suicide Squad bared his perfect white teeth, “that if I they decide to be the good obedient dogs of the Olympians, they are going to regret it in short order.”

**23 September 2006, Approaches of C.C Spa and Resort, Sea of Monsters, somewhere near the Solomon Islands**

“I don’t like this at all, sister.”

Reyna took great care to check if there was no one who could hear them before opening her mouth, and even then, she whispered.

The punishments endured by several of their fellow Legionnaires had been awful, and the daughter of Bellona had no wish to emulate them.

“Orders are orders,” Hylla replied before grimacing. “At least it is going to be quick.”

This time it was Reyna to show a gloomy expression as they fulfilled their duties on the flight deck of the *Dominus Caelum*.

Yes, the attack was going to end quickly.

Against the modified Casablanca-class Escort Carrier repurposed by the Twelfth Legio to launch giant eagles, the island they could see some ten kilometres away wouldn’t stand a chance.

The main structure covering the island looked like a tourist resort, and though it had a sort of magical shield to protect itself from the light explosive ordnance of the *Assyria* sailing by their side, this was a type of shield Legio Fulminata had seen before.

The ‘solution’ found by their Centurion was simple and brutal: the eagles of the *Dominus Caelum* were going to fly over the island, and drop phosphorus bombs upon it...among other things.

Reyna Avila Ramirez-Arellano had done several things she wasn’t proud of before being formally welcomed into the barracks of New Constantinople.

But in the two years she had served with the legion, this horrible deed promised to surpass them all in blood and atrocity.

This island, despite the existence of the shield, was clearly no military target. There wasn’t a single military ship at anchor in the idyllic blue bay, only yachts and things which could be used to sunbath.

Yet for some reason, Centurion Flavio Ronco, son of Deimos and commander of the Dominus Caelum, had left his cabin proclaiming there were secret orders of Olympus which demanded they destroyed this island.

And since the bastard outranked the officer of the *Assyria*, there was no choice but to obey.

“Any court-martial will confirm we were only following the orders.”

“This excuse wasn’t exactly useful at Nuremburg, sister.”

Hylla shook her head...before giving a slight nod.

“We are ten minutes late! Hurry up, those bombs should already be in our eagles’ claws! Go! GO! GO! Junior! Why are you so slow? Bellona daughters! Work harder! The Legio won’t tolerate dead weights!”

“I hate him,” the young female Legionnaire murmured as soon as the Greek bastard couldn’t possibly ear her. And no, the problem wasn’t that Centurion Flavio Ronco was one of the rare Greek Demigods who had chosen to enlist in the Legions. The problem lied in the total, definite evidence that the son of Deimos loved to terrify the Legionnaires who were forced to obey him.

And so the two sisters obeyed, like everyone, no matter how tempting mutiny was.

The bombs were aligned in perfect order in front of the giant eagles. The Legionnaire pilots strolled out of the aircraft carrier’s tower, the sign that the flight commander had given them his instructions.

Twenty giant eagles, twenty phosphorus bombs, and the others which would be dropped by the second flight were likely more devastating.

Hylla had been right. This was going to be quick.

Reyna turned her head in the direction of the island...and she immediately noticed the fluorescent blue halo of the shield was gone.

“Sister! The shield is gone!”

An enormous beam of red-yellow colour came into existence above the island, and it was so bright it was as if a new sun was born.

“Decurion! The eagles must launch immediately! We are under-“

Reyna had wanted to say ‘under attack’, but the enormous beam of light – it looked like a super-laser – slammed into the *Dominus Caelum’s* flight deck before she could finish.

Reyna’s eyes were sharper than a lot of Demigods and Demigoddesses, and so she managed to watch where the enormous blast impacted: right in the middle of the bombs and giant eagles had been gathered.

And then everything turned dark and painful.

Everything was dark...as dark as her most unpleasant nightmares...

And then suddenly something pressed on her lungs.

Reyna, daughter of Bellona, screamed...and spat the salted water she had in her mouth and her lungs.

The youngest of the Ramirez-Arellano sisters opened her eyes.

She was...alive?

As she had been told the moment she became a Legionnaire of the Twelfth, Reyna observed her surroundings. She was lying on a beach of white sand. A woman with green hair was clearly healing her.

Hylla was next to her, in about the same condition she was, and the daughter of Bellona felt more relieved than she had been in weeks.

“What...what happened? Our ship-“

“Ssh. Don’t worry your pretty little head, warrior. Your ship sank, but you among many were saved by the Goddess.”

Goddess?

Her gesture of panic was noticed and countered.

It took many minutes...maybe one hour, and it felt far longer, before Reyna was allowed to sit on her own, and the same was true of Hylla.

All around them were the majority of the female Legionnaires who had been part of the *Dominus Caelum* and *Assyria*’s crew.

Not that she was going to cry if their idiot of a Centurion was missing, but...where were the males?

Now that she had asked herself the question, it was not difficult to acknowledge that between the women healing their injuries and the guards in hoplite armour...they were essentially surrounded by women.

Then violins played a superb symphony, and a column of exotic-coloured women went to form two neat lines as if to welcome a chief of state.

The initial impression was more than justified when they unrolled a brilliant violet carpet.

And then a small animal was kicked and flew over Reyna’s and Hylla’s heads, before being caught in mid-air by one of the guards.

It was a guinea pig, with a brown fur, and a strange vicious appearance. Somehow, he was reminding her the Centurion when he was about to bark...

“Who,” a melodious and seductive voice asked with a tone of disappointment, “dared to place this irritating *pig* in my path?”

“We are sorry, your Immortal Highness! He was going to be placed in the cage, but profiting from my inattention-“

“Don’t make the same mistake again.”

“Yes, your Immortal Highness!”

The voice was so beautiful...and as she advanced on the violet carpet, Reyna stayed there, unable to move, and even less to think.

This...this was no woman. This was a Goddess. Of course, she was. She was so beautiful, so glorious, so fierce, so...there was no woman like her in this world or the next-

“Welcome, sisters,” everything was so perfect about her, from her Chinese-styled red dress leaving one of her legs nearly entirely naked, to her high heels. Her long black hair was perfect. Her nose was perfect. Her figure and her body were perfect. “Welcome to my island.”

Magic washed over them, and Reyna felt better than she had ever felt.

“I am Circe. I forgive you. Do you want to be as beautiful as I am?”

Reyna felt in love listening to the words of her Goddess. Circe was both the sun and the moon of this new world...and nothing mattered anymore.

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

“It was a new weapon of unlimited destructive power that the God of Fire and the Forges likely was ordered to build during his imprisonment.”

“No, it wasn’t.”

There was nothing more annoying than having prepared a speech and many facts for several hours, and see your crazy leader disrupt in three little words.

To say he wanted to strangle Perseus Jackson at this very moment was evidence itself.

“Explain,” the son of Nemesis growled. “Now.”

Jackson grinned for several seconds, daring him to enforce his threat...and not saying a word until he lowered his eyes.

Seriously, why had he joined the Suicide Squad again?

“To answer your question, my treacherous lieutenant,” Perseus Jackson answered at last after being thoroughly satisfied with his own cleverness, “what the Immortal Sorceress used to destroy two Roman warships in three seconds was called an ‘Ancient Weapon’ by the Gods themselves. This one is called *Helios’ Eye*.”

“By the Pit, why is she in possession of such a weapon?”

“Because it was given to her, obviously,” Perseus clearly was savouring his surprise, the bastard, “according to the rumours I was able to collect, it was a joint effort between Helios and Hyperion. It...suitably impressed the Titans, shall we say?”

No kidding. An aircraft carrier and a minesweeper had been sunk with one shot each, and the Legionnaires aboard said warships had seen nothing coming.

“After the Titanomachy, the Gods were a bit paranoiac about being overthrown like their parents were,” Perseus continued like a maniac story-teller, “and so in a gesture of good will, Helios, who had sided with them, agreed to relinquish his most formidable weapon of mass destruction. And who else would you trust but your cherished daughter? *Helios’ Eye* went to the Sea of Monsters-“

“And the Immortal Sorceress became the warden.” Ethan finished before frowning. “Wait a minute. If the witch has had this ungodly super-weapon in her possession since the dawn of time, why by the feuds of Olympus would she waste her time bewitching sailors like she did with Odysseus’ crew?”

Jackson gave him his favourite look of ‘don’t be stupid’.

“My treacherous lieutenant, I said Helios gave the weapon to his cherished daughter. I didn’t say he trusted her enough to give it to her in a serviceable state.”

“Oh.”

“And after thousands of years, the damage to the parts which were kept in storage, divine help or not, were likely in need of some pretty good maintenance anyway,” the son of Poseidon shrugged off. “It likely would have taken a genius of engineering to return to pristine condition the existing parts, and a super-genius to know which parts were missing and how to fabricate them...unfortunately, with recent events, the Immortal Sorceress had someone at her disposal who fits the ‘super-genius’ role.”

Hephaestus. The more days passed, the more the capture of the God of the Forges and Technology revealed itself to be a colossal disaster...and no, this wasn’t an exaggeration.

“One thing I don’t understand.” Ethan Nakamura cleared his throat after several seconds of deep thought. “Why did she let the Romans get so close to her island? Seriously, she had a shield and no doubt a few counter-measures, but if the Roman commander had played it a bit more smartly, there was a risk of her island receiving a lot of damage. The giant eagles can bombard with ammunition which could easily raze her lair in a few hours.”

“I suspect,” Perseus for once didn’t smile, “is that the Immortal Sorceress was on a little recruiting operation of her own. My drones stay underwater, but they could confirm the servants of the Immortal Sorceress prioritised the rescue of the female Legionnaires.”

“And the male ones?”

“Guinea pigs,” Perseus commented with an innocent expression. “Literally.”

Ethan sighed.

“This sorceress has a sense of humour as twisted as yours, Jackson.”

“Nonsense, my treacherous lieutenant! No one has a sense of humour as twisted as mine!”

Ethan knew he was quickly approaching the limits of his ‘Jackson tolerance’ for the day.

So he asked his last question.

“What do you think the surviving Roman ships are going to do? It’s been a few days, and with the number of ships they have lost, not to mention how dispersed they are across the Zone Mortalis, their chances of finding the Golden Fleece are...slim.”

“Nonexistent, you mean.” Jackson declared as a happy Hellhound barked in the distance. “Sooner or later, my treacherous lieutenant, the Demigods and the Legacies who went to the Sea of Monsters in the name of duty are going to lack ammunition. Unless it is the supplies which run out first. It will depend on their first encounters with monsters and the Triumvirate fleet, honestly.”

“And then?” Ethan asked, fearing already the worst.

“Then, knowing the utter lack of leadership provided by Centurion Octavian McArthur and Tribune Bryce Lawrence,” Perseus announced like a tyrant about to sentence someone to die, “the betrayals will begin.”

**28 September 2006, Sea of Monsters, somewhere near the Solomon Islands**

Michael was beginning to hate everything there was about this expedition.

He hated how hot it was on a constant basis. The air was so suffocating that they had been forced to abandon their armours, no matter the daily danger threatening them.

The son of Venus hated the constant monster attacks. Yes, he had heard there were many of them, but this was just ridiculous. Everything was trying to attack them, even now when they had taken refuge in a secure bay! And of course there were never the same species of monsters attacking. They had faced Sirens, giant crustaceans, winged creatures no one had been able to name, and quantities of sea monsters which had somehow not gotten the call they were supposed to be extinct, like prehistoric crocodiles and the infamous Megalodons.

And that wasn’t the most unpleasant thing there was about this ‘adventure’. No, in Michael’s honest opinion, this place of honour was incontestably won by the abominable leadership of Tribune Bryce Lawrence and Centurion Octavian MacArthur.

The famous discipline of the Roman Legions was more or less inexistent now. It had been failing badly when they arrived in this bay, but the lack of enemies on the island and the presence of food and clean water in large quantities had been the trigger to let everything fall apart.

Now? Save to defend the ships, the Legionnaires who had survived Charybdis, Scylla, and many other dangers were exploring the island, enjoying the natural wonders of the island, and drank some exotic drinks they distilled from the fruits growing upon the trees.

The First Cohort of the Twelfth Legio had been considered the elite of the elite a couple years ago.

With its inept leadership and the current conditions, they had fallen so far that Jupiter Himself may demote everyone back to the rank of recruit Legionnaire...to begin with. Their shameful behaviour here and in the days before certainly didn’t deserve anything else.

“At least we are going to be reinforced,” the blonde-haired Legionnaire who waited next to him commented, feeling his bad mood. “With the *Vesuvius* about to join us, the rebuilt squadron will be four ships strong.”

Michael Kahale gave a brief nod.

“You’re right. But I wish we had the *Dominus Caelum* with us. Without its flights of eagles, our aerial reconnaissance capabilities are nearly nonexistent.”

“The fact we had no sign of their presence so far is concerning,” Aulus York acknowledged. Like all sons of Mithras, the young Decurion Legionnaire seemed to accomplish his duties effortlessly and maintain a dignified appearance. Michael was glad to have him; it was thanks to Scipio’s effort that some Legionnaires of the *Rhenus* were not busy experimenting with prohibited drinks other stupid activities. “But if the Tribune gives the order to sail out of the bay, I’m confident we would be able to locate them relatively easily.”

“And the chances of our *Tribune*,” Michael let his sarcasm soak the word with all the respect it deserved, “giving that order in the next hours are, according to you?”

“Nonexistent,” Aulus was forced to admit, swearing a few insults which were favourites of veteran soldiers.

Michael didn’t say anything more; there was nothing he could say, really.

Or to be more accurate, the Centurion could say something; the problem was that it was not going to change anything.

There was a reason he was here, on the deck of the *Rhenus*, helping several Legionnaires to repair the damage the modified Oliver Hazard Perry-class Frigate had suffered, instead of the *Ave Caesar*, where he should be if circumstances were normal.

But the *Ave Caesar* was mostly empty right now, as was the *Brundisium*, the oiler of the 2nd Squadron which had joined them two days ago.

The Legionnaires who should be aboard these warships, repairing the damage and refilling the stocks of fresh water and food, were on the island, either feasting on the beach or doing something completely useless.

By all rights, they should be ready to sail away from this island at any moment. It had been at least five days they were here, and the exhaustion of their first battles against the monsters had faded away.

Yet, and Michael knew he was repeating himself, discipline was gone. And the Tribune and the imbecile whispering poison in his ears had decided to ignore their Legionnaire duties and satisfy their capricious whims ashore.

“At least with the *Vesuvius* back, we will be able to satisfyingly replenish missiles, shells, and every special ammunition we used in the last days,” the son of Mithras said, “I wouldn’t say we were at risk of having no ammunition left for our guns, but in a few days, we would have been forced to pilfer a bit from the *Ave Caesar*...and I would have preferred to avoid that...the regulations are what they are...”

“Oh yes, the regulations,” Michael chuckled. If they decided to apply the regulations strictly, Octavian and the group always singing his praises would have already been jailed after a lightning-fast court martial. “Hail the *Vesuvius*, Decurion. Ask them-”

This was the moment the unique rocket launcher installed upon the prow of the modified Kilauea ammunition ship barked in anger...and Michael looked in horror as a rain of shrapnel fell seconds later upon the deck of the Ave Caesar. Fortunately, it was mostly empty at this hour of the day but-

“TO ARMS! The *Vesuvius* has been captured by the enemy!”

“Battle-stations!” Aulus reacted next to him. “All Legionnaires! Prepare for battles! Boarding teams, prepare to repel the enemy! Gun crew, load your guns with the anti-infantry ammunition! The *Vesuvius*’ ammunition is not something we can afford to detonate!”

As orders after orders were shouted, the Twelfth Legion’s colours of the *Vesuvius* fell, and a black flag which needed no introduction replaced it.

“Pirates...” Michael grimaced. “And we are the only ship which is ready to fight them.”

But the *Rhenus* was a modern warship. No matter how the pirates had captured the *Vesuvius*, it was an ammunition ship, and by firing on the *Ave Caesar*, it had missed the most dangerous opponent.

“What is that dark shape? NO!”

A second later, there was an enormous geyser exploding from the bay, and suddenly there was an enormous three-master warship straight from the Age of Pirates surfacing like a submarine would...mere cables away from the *Ave Caesar*.

Michael felt something cold on his skin. Suddenly, the sky was no longer so blue, the sun seemed to fade away.

“FIRE! FIRE AT WILL!”

Michael drew his gladius...and suddenly the blade was fighting against him.

The three-master attacking them...it was swallowed in darkness!

“The cannons aren’t firing! Our own armament is turning against us!”

“You are sons of Rome! Prepare to defend the ship!”

“CENTURION! THIS IS THE *QUEEN ANNE’S REVENGE*!”

\*\*\*\*

For the fiftieth time today, Blackbeard cursed the witch who had imprisoned him for an eternity.

It was bad enough he looked ridiculous, but his strength, which had once been the terror of the Caribbean and American coast, was only a shadow of what it once had been.

Before sailing to the Sea of Monsters, his ability to turn the weapons against their legitimate owners would have engulfed this island. Edward was not his father Ares, but he was the most powerful Demigod when it came to this ability.

Add the shroud of terror which had been part of the *Queen Anne’s Revenge* armament for centuries now, and the battle should have been a one-sided victory.

To be sure, it was a victory.

But Fate and events he couldn’t be aware of had robbed him of an even greater triumph.

The legendary pirate released the hold he had upon his multiple talents and in the seconds after, he did his best not to sound too exhausted. All his crew was diminished, and there were new heads he couldn’t rely upon for now.

His breath became more regular as the cannons of the *Queen Anne’s Revenge* unleashed their wrath.

Edward Teach showed no sign of disappointment when the shots failed to do any damage and the Roman warship *Rhenus* evaded the boarding attempt of the *Vesuvius*.

Soon, the ‘Frigate’ – a curious name for a ship so big – left the bay like all the demons of the abyss were on its heels.

“Cease fire,” he ordered. “Let them go.”

“Captain? If they have other friends in the Sea of Monsters-“

“Then we will meet again. Fate has blessed them to escape today. Who am I to stand between them and destiny? Ha! Ha! Ha!”

His crew, after a moment of hesitation, joined him in laughing and celebrating.

Blackbeard turned around and walked upon the enormous metallic warship that had just been conquered by force of arms.

It sounded so glorious when said like that. In reality, they had surprised half a dozen Legionnaires – most of them drunk – and the ship, the supposedly terrifying *Ave Caesar*, had been captured with barely any resistance.

“The *Brundisium* is yours too, Captain.”

“Ha! Send my congratulations to Lafitte. Two out of three in less than one hour! It is a honest day of piracy like we didn’t enjoy since entering this damnable sea!”

“And the Triumvirate ships were forced to look at the spectacle like the cowards-“

“Careful,” Blackbeard commanded. “I know what you are feeling, but this is neither the time nor the place.”

Several of his crewmates nodded seriously. They understood. Good. He would have been sorry to punish them on a day of triumph.

His fingers caressed the collar around his neck. It was the sign that until it existed, his freedom was denied by a Roman warrior and his Egyptian lover.

Slavery had never bothered Edward Teach that much.

It was one of those unfortunate facts of life that Fate had decided the strong ruled over the weak, and might of arms decided who lived and who died.

If you weren’t strong enough to fight your convictions, your freedom, and your dreams, then you deserved to be a slave.

But that was not what had happened to his men and him.

They had been tricked by some sorcery no proud pirate could do anything against, and been transformed into animals.

This was a humiliation which would never stop burning in his heart.

“What now, Captain?”

Blackbeard let his gaze fall upon the small flotilla that was going to bolster his power across all the known seas. While the Vesuvius would be useful as long as the ammunition stores were filled and the Brundisium was a slow transport, the Ave Caesar was an extremely valuable.

“First, we make sure there are no Legionnaires hiding aboard this ship. I want to be sure no one will try to sink our fleet’s new addition when we have our back turned. And then,” his smile became a malicious smirk, “we are going to pay our respects to the lazy souls waiting on the beach! I want to tell them in person how thankful I am for the warships! HA! HA! HA!”

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If some Middle Eastern Djinn materialised in front of him right now and offered him a wish, Bryce would tell him his heart’s desire was to kill Michael Kahale with his bare hands.

His treacherous Centurion had abandoned him without a fight! The son of Orcus knew that the sons of Venus had often been pretty boys who fornicated with boys and girls at the same time, but this kind of treachery had left him speechless.

Michael had committed the worst sin any Legionnaire could have done: he had run away like a coward when the enemy showed its ugly head!

And he had taken the *Rhenus* with him, and more than forty Legionnaires!

It was one-third of the ships that were his by right missing, and more when it came to firepower, since the *Brundisium* wasn’t a true capital warship.

It was outrageous.

“If this betrayal arrives to an Olympian’s ear,” Octavian said in an echo of his thoughts, “the Council will crucify the traitors.”

“Yes,” Bryce agreed before falling silent as a boat was pushed ashore and the pirate who was no doubt the leader revealed himself.

At first, the son of Orcus thought the outlaw was not impressive. Fat and ugly were likely the best description for the enormous worm that had taken the *Ave Caesar* from the rightful Legio’s ownership.

But then the left hand of the man went up in air. Power was summoned, and in mere seconds, quantities of weapons were summoned to crash before his enormous black boots.

And to Bryce’s consternation, while many of the weapons were the gladius and the personal weapons they had deliberately surrendered when the cannons of the three-master were pointed at them, some of them weren’t. They were the javelins and the blades which had been hidden in the forest and the island’s interior to be used the moment the pirates lowered their guard.

There was nothing to do but to grit his teeth as the pirates laughed.

“In my time, the Romans had a bit more honour than that,” the obese pirate rumbled, “but I will be merciful. After all, I know more than anyone here what it’s like to lose one’s liberty.”

“Forgive us, *Captain*,” Octavian acidly replied, “but you have us at a disadvantage. You know who we are, but we don’t know your *august* identity.”

“True enough! The name is Edward Teach, son of Ares. But you know me better as Blackbeard, Captain of the *Queen Anne’s Revenge*. There, the presentations are done.”

That thing was Blackbeard? Please. No doubt this disgusting waste of grease had usurped the real one...

“Now being a blunt and honest pirate, I am going to give you a choice, Legionnaires. Join my crew. Abandon the ridiculous oaths you swore to the Gods. Sail with me. Embrace freedom and liberty like many of you did on this island. No rules, save one: obey the order of your new Captain and Admiral...me.”

Everything in Bryce rebelled instantly at the idea of serving this pile of excrements.

“Never,” the Tribune of the Twelfth Legio swore.

“Why?” the fake Blackbeard grinned, seemingly amused by his defiance. Incidentally, the grin revealed many, many missing teeth. “I am a good judge of men, boy. I can tell you don’t care about the oaths you swore. You are a killer, a bloody sword which seeks new battlefields to drench your gladius in enemy’s blood.”

The malevolence following the pirate like a shadow...maybe he was a descendant of the real Blackbeard, after all.

But it didn’t matter.

“Yes. But I won’t obey anyone I don’t respect. You can threaten or try to blackmail me. I won’t serve you.”

“Hmm...” the enemy leader huffed, “and if I told you I am going to tie your second to the prow of the *Queen Anne’s Revenge* to serve as monster food-chow?”

“I would tell you to go ahead,” Bryce smiled wolfishly. “He was useless as a military advisor and as an omen-reader.”

“WHAT?” Octavian exclaimed. “Bryce! You can’t be serious!”

“I am serious.” The son of Orcus retorted, giving a glare to the whimpering son of Apollo. “It was upon your recommendation we waited here for every ship of the squadron to join us. It is your fault we were defeated here!”

“You are the Tribune! Responsibility is yours! I only presented you the options we had!”

“Snivelling worm!” Why had he accepted the Sesterces of this hypocrite distant descendant of Apollo? “I am going to gut you!”

“Boys...silence.”

“Don’t give me orders, fake Blackbeard!” Bryce spat. “You spoke of liberty and freedom? Well, give me my gladius-“

There was a gust of wind, and a second later, pain tore his chest apart.

The Tribune of the Twelfth Legio’s First Cohort looked down with incredulity to see a gladius...no, not a gladius, his gladius, embedded in his flesh. Since they had all been chained bare-chested, there had been no armour or piece of enchanted cloth whatsoever to protect him.

“You...you...”

“I am giving everyone a chance to fulfil his destiny,” the pirate declared, and with each heartbeat, the world seemed to unravel. The silhouette of this enemy was surrounded in corpses and darkness. The clamour of the damned arrived to his ears. “It appears Fate did not decide to keep you alive today. Farewell, Tribune Bryce Lawrence. Give Hades my regards.”

Everything began to lose its colours around him. Bryce saw monsters and humans. He saw many islands which should have been beyond his sight.

And below him, he saw what awaited him. Words arrived to his ears, but they were useless to him now.

“Your leader chose poorly. Now I will give you the same choice he did. *For I am Blackbeard, and my Age is coming*.”

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

To her credit, Athena didn’t gloat. It was something that Apollo had always thought impressive and frustrating when it came up to her war reports.

“**The First Cohort of the Twelfth Legio can no longer be considered a military capable force. The *Ave Caesar* and the *Vesuvius* were captured by the infamous Blackbeard and his pirates. Circe’s reactivation of the *Eye of Helios* cost them the *Dominus Caelum* and the *Assyria*. The *Danubius* won’t sail again without major repairs the island it is stranded onto is completely unable of providing. Of the original order of battle, only the *Rhenus* and the *Corinthus* survive as we speak**.”

There was no consultation of notes or any divine aspect used; Athena’s memory was perfection itself, even among the Gods, and listing the fate of destroyed or crippled ships a child’s game for her.

“**The Third Legio fared better**.” The Goddess of strategists acknowledged, before even demolishing this faint hope of good news. “**But they had only five ships to begin with. The *Hispania*’s crew was slaughtered by Medusa**...”

No one among the Council failed to notice the smirk of Poseidon, and for the first time Athena’s grey eyes were filled with a violent emotion.

“**The *Rhodanus* sank after colliding with a magical reef while trying to manoeuvre against a Triumvirate’s squadron. And the *Brundisium* was captured by Blackbeard**.”

Athena’s serenity and implacable tactician returned, seemingly unaffected by the short emotional outburst.

“**Fortunately, Tribune Erica Keller appears to be largely more competent than Tribune Lawrence was. She has already managed to reunite with the *Etna* and the *Corinthus*. The *Jupiter Maximus* and she, assuming nothing changes in the next forty-eight hours, should be able to engage the pursuers of the *Rhenus* and thus place all the surviving ships under her authority**.”

 “**In this case**,” Zeus intervened, perhaps emboldened by the name of the Cruiser “**the *Jupiter Maximus* and its squadron will be ordered to abandon the war against the Triumvirate. The search for the Golden Fleece will be their next priority**-“

“**No**.”

Dionysus stopped eating grapes. Artemis abandoned the examination of her arrows. Poseidon’s surf transformed back into a Trident.

Apollo grimaced internally. Yeah, he had expected something of the sort from his half-sister...

“**No?**” The Master of Olympus growled, and in his voice, the tumult of a thousand thunderbolts could be heard.

“**No**.” Whatever you wanted to say about Athena, she didn’t move a single eyebrow as their genitor’s Master Bolt aura of power blazed in fury. “**The Romans we still have available do not have the military firepower to break through the challenges separating them from the Golden Fleece. And the Triumvirate hunters will not stop pursuing them because the goals we give them have changed. Moreover, too many supply ships have been destroyed or captured. Within a month, major battle or not, the Sea of Monsters will continue to corrode their strength. By simple attrition, the new ‘2nd Squadron’ will be combat incapable well before the end of the year**.”

“**Then we send more Legionnaires!**” Zeus barked, and seven Gods and Goddesses stayed silent as their King made his dissatisfaction known to his daughter and strategic advisor. “**We send a full Legio**!”

“**The result will be the same, or worse.**” The grey-eyed Protector of Athens replied emotionlessly. “**The reality is that we have sent over ninety percent of the capital warships of New Byzantium with this expedition. It will take at least sixteen months, even with my shipbuilders and war architects supporting them, to rebuild a fleet as imposing as the one the Legionnaires lost. By then, the Squadron of Tribune Keller will be wiped out or reduced to band of survivors camping on tropical islands.**”

“**And if you are wrong?**” Something like reason was evidently trying to insufflate its wisdom into Zeus’ skull, but the God of Thunder was clearly resisting. “**If we can build a greater fleet and the Legionnaires already deployed survive?**”

“**Then the end result will still be the same,**” Athena stated as it was an irrefutable reality. “**The Romans’ main strength in a naval fight is their boarding operations, and save the pirates of Blackbeard, no one else is using that**.”

A button was pressed, and a holographic image flashed into existence in the empty space at the centre of the Council Room.

It was a warship. That much you didn’t need to know a lot about military warfare to recognise.

It had vaguely the same of an aircraft carrier, except the ‘tower’ was literally separating the flight deck into two neat parts...and it wasn’t so much a tower as it was a pyramid.

It was the kind of vision which attracted everyone’s attention, even Aphrodite.

And for good reason, in his sunny opinion.

Apollo had seen some colossal warships in his life. The Nimitz-class carriers were a bit bigger than that...but not one of them could fly like this one did.

Sure, there was an outrageous prow of gold representing two lovers enlaced for eternity. Marc Antony and Cleopatra were like that. But the ultra-advanced weaponry on each side of the flight deck was not giving him the urge to laugh.

“**These are extremely armoured turrets**,” the God of the Sun said after clearing his throat. “**And assuming the fire arcs are realistic, may I assume they can be fired on ground and aerial targets indifferently**.”

“**Correct,**” Athena nodded. “**Of course, the turrets, as impressive as they are, are far from the most impressive armaments this flying warship is equipped with. I’ve monitored it for several hours when they couldn’t hide from my sight, and I can tell you it carries several dozen Giant Kites that can be used for reconnaissance, interception, or heavy bombardment. They have advanced torpedoes to use when the carrier flies at low altitude over the ocean. Somehow, they also managed to acquire medium-range ballistic missiles, though those are extremely inaccurate on a good day.**”

The Goddess of Strategy’s grey eyes looked at something beyond the image, and her tone was colder after a couple of seconds.

“**It must be emphasized that these are the only weapons I saw fired, and given that no one has felt suicidal enough to launch a direct assault against the *Spear of the Gods*-**“

“**What,**” Zeus rudely interrupted her in a voice which told everyone to prepare for the worse, “**did you call this warship?**”

“**The *Spear of the Gods*...Lord Father,**” Athena added the last words with a lot of precipitation, realising she had inadvertently activated something she should have told well away from. “**I mean, this is the name the Triumvirate...the usurpers have given their flagship**.”

“**The *Spear of the Gods*,**” Zeus rumbled, and Apollo had no doubt that New York must be granted a lightshow of lightning cascades with a phenomenal thunderstorm tonight. “**They certainly are getting confident, these usurpers, aren’t they?**”

No one, not even Athena, was brave and suicidal enough to answer this very rhetorical question.

“**Very well.**” The Master of Olympus declared after ten seconds of complete silence. “**If these usurpers want us to take them seriously, I will give them my congratulations. They have succeeded. We are going to mobilise and crush them. They want the Sea of Monsters to be their battleground? So be it. I am going to make this Zone Mortalis their grave. Hermes, go to the Underworld. Hades is summoned to Olympus, immediately! Athena.**”

“**Yes, Lord Father?**” Everyone could tell the divine Protector of Athens wasn’t at ease.

“**The mobilisation is going to take several months, isn’t it?**”

“**It will, yes.**”

“**Then it won’t be said that the Council of Olympus will abandon our loyal Legionnaires to a dreadful fate. Go to New Byzantium.**” The eyes filled with the light of thunder turned towards Poseidon. “**It is time for your son to prove his loyalty, *brother*.**”

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

Dakota sighed before drinking once again his Kool-Aid. Unfortunately, his headache refused to disappear.

“You know, Ethan,” the son of Bacchus began, “I now remember the card games of last years and surprisingly, I realise they were fabulous...with the benefit of hindsight.”

“I don’t see how you can be fond of them...even with the benefit of hindsight, McDonald.” The dark-haired son of Nemesis replied. “Unless the memories I have were somehow altered, we were spending most of our time wondering how the sons of Hermes were cheating.”

“Yes,” Dakota raised his eyes to the starry sky. “But at least we were rather certain these thieves were the only ones cheating. Now that Jackson is participating, it seems *everyone* is cheating. And I’m sure it’s his fault.”

“Obviously,” Ethan drawled with his usual humour which should belong to some place near gallows. “It’s only now you have noticed?”

Dakota sighed...again.

“I’m not drunk enough for this.”

“Evidently,” Ethan Namura didn’t miss the occasion to inflict a spiritual blow once more. “You have barely touched anything looking like wine tonight. Is it relaxation before the Eleutherian Wine?”

“Don’t mention this cursed substance tonight, please,” the son of Bacchus moaned. It was bad enough that he had done...what he did during the Great Quest, but at least most of his memories from these episodes were blurred and incomprehensible. Alas, rumours had started to spread out...he blamed Jackson for that. And girls had begun to spike his drinks to test if the rumours were true or not.

Everything was Perseus Jackson’s fault. Everything.

The object of his irritation, alas, seemed to be perfectly happy ignoring his glares at the table where the...the outrageous cheating occurred.

“Oh, look,” the smug son of Poseidon gloated when a brown-haired son of Hermes went all-in. “A Royal Flush for me. How unexpected!”

“That’s the fourth time he got one! He’s cheating!”

From a child of the God of Thieves, the accusation was more than a bit hilarious...especially as a gargoyle ‘innocently’ touched the would-be thief left sleeve, ensuring a pair of aces dropped from it.

“Prove it,” the green-eyed boy stuck out of his tongue, and for a few seconds, the innocence of the expression was so convincing Perseus Jackson really looked his age...too young to organise Great Quests and world-shaking schemes. But it was only for a few seconds. The smirk was back shortly after, and faced with such a terrible glee, the sons and daughters of Hermes seated around the table surrendered one by one.

“You aren’t going to teach us how you do it, don’t you?” Luke asked, trying the ‘valiant defeated’ look.

“Of course I won’t,” Perseus shook his head as if it was the most ridiculous thought in the world. And perhaps it was. “If you were in my place, would you?”

“When you say it like this-“

There was an explosion of light mere hundreds of metres away from them, and the voices of spectators and players alike vanished like by enchantment.

It was what happened when a four metres-tall Goddess armoured for war landed inside the boundaries of New Byzantium.

No one wondered out loud who she was. With her black hair, shining grey eyes, and her hoplite armour and weapons and the symbol of the owl merged with Athenian letters, there was no way it could be anyone but Athena.

“**Perseus Jackson**,” the Goddess’ voice seemed to be barely above a whisper, yet the sound appeared to cut through the camp’s evening activities. “**You are summoned**.”

“I am innocent!” The son of Poseidon immediately declared.

A heartbeat later, several Drachmas piled up in front of Luke.

“I am really disappointed in you, my heroic lieutenant.”

“You should be more disappointed there were people willing to bet against you,” the son of Hermes snickered.

“You’re right,” Jackson somehow always managed to land back on his feet, physically or metaphorically. “I will have to-“

Athena coughed. And the spear at her side glowed in a grey aura which was definitely not good news.

“I have to answer the summon, of course. Am I not a loyal Demigod eager to serve Olympus?”

Dakota sighed for the third time.

“Ethan, before I die, I have a feeling nothing will have been spared on this world...”

**Author’s note**: The Roman expedition failed, as was eminently predictable.

Now it’s time for an Olympus Council...and to assemble the Suicide Squad again.

Hope everyone enjoyed the Interlude!

The madness will continue in chapter 16. Provisional title: *Ready Player Two*.

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