Update 30 September 2022

**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. The majority 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 bought 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 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...and not just because the Master of Olympus would be particularly furious.”

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.

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 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 rather striking, 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,” 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 erased 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.”

“Yep.” 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 worse 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 did those pirate-dolphins had been able to create a torture chamber and metallic binding 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.”

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 line of battle 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 stocks 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 arch.” 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 that!

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