**Chapter 20**

**Annihilation Tide**

*Many Demigods are eager to give grandiose names to their military operations, be they Greek or Roman.*

*This is something that began centuries ago, and will likely still be true centuries after this insane Great Quest.*

*It is often a very dangerous thing. The enemy can be placed under the orders of a human or a monster, but he or she is not forced to behave stupidly. If you try to be too clever with your military operation name, it is quite likely your opponent will discover what you intend to do to his forces. And then he or she will have contingencies ready to make sure your offensive becomes a bloody defeat.*

*This is why Demigods and Demigoddesses try their best to not shout the operation name across an entire Zone Mortalis before the offensive is officially over. And the competent sons and daughters of the Olympians tend to choose extremely cryptic names. The designation might be elegant or particularly ugly, but they have one common point: learning the name does not give you any information about the military operation itself.*

*But our leader for this Great Quest was Perseus Jackson.*

*As a consequence, the assault on the island where the Golden Fleece waited for us took the name of Operation Annihilation Tide.*

*And the first phase would receive the absolutely unsubtle designation of Operation Doom Whale.*

*That nobody on the enemy side had contingencies for what was about to unfold can be blamed on the sheer craziness of a certain son of Poseidon.*

*The Triumvirate was not ready for the kind of madness that was about to be unleashed. But then to be fair, they were hardly the only ones...*

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

**13 December 2006, Grand Strategium, Forge of All Perils**

In her memories, Anne didn’t remember Demigods and Demigoddesses being so...eccentric. And most of those she had met after sailing for adventure had been pirates.

That said, being eccentric also meant you were alive. Something few Olympian children could boast when the Sea of Monsters was involved. A handful of heroes thrived when facing the sea beasts and the lethal threats. Most were devoured or drowned before they were strong enough. While their name sounded like an insult and a taunt in one, the Suicide Squad had survived so far. This made them worthy of attention, if nothing else.

Anne Bonny would have preferred them to not transform the inside of this mountain into a succession of massively heated pools. It was not a place a daughter of Demeter would ever feel comfortable.

Then there was the indecent...‘swimsuit’ she had discarded her prison’s clothes for. It was *orange*. It was bright. It looked something like whores would have worn in her time to attract clients.

And no, that several other Demigoddesses wore ‘swimsuits’ that managed to be even more indecent wasn’t a consolation.

But unless she wanted to be cooked like a lobster, it wasn’t like Anne had much of a choice.

Indecent the ‘swimsuit’ might be, but there was an enchantment woven into it which allowed you to endure the heated water and the humidity of the halls without too much trouble. Courtesy of that, a Demigoddess like her could become stronger, day after day, until the ‘swimsuit’ would not be needed anymore...not that she intended to walk naked here, of course.

There were monsters in this Forge, and the ones which had taken the appearance of massive sharks were just the ones honest about it. The true monsters were the ones hiding behind a human face.

“Ah, the infamous Captain Anne Bonny,” speaking of the Devil...green eyes feigning to be bored turned towards her, but Anne wasn’t fooled. Between the enormous shark-shaped Telekhine who had been introduced as ‘Don Lino’ and this Demigod, the daughter of Demeter would take her chances with the Telekhine.

“Captain Perseus Jackson,” she knelt.

“There’s no need to kneel,” the Lord of the Suicide Squad chuckled and intimated with a wave of his hand she could stand again. “I kidnapped you from your prison-island because the Family is towing a new bombardment ship here to reinforce my naval strength. I have need of a Captain for this proud addition to my forces...interested?”

Anne almost asked him if he was mad. The idea of sailing again, the freedom to roam the seas with no curse chaining her soul...it was everything she had dreamed of for centuries.

“Where is the trap?”

Perseus Jackson showed her an evil grin that made her shiver.

“I believe you are already familiar with the crew which will obey your orders.”

“WHAT?”

The exclamation had not come from her or any of the other Demigods and Demigoddesses who had been here when she entered. It had come from behind...from a massive group of Roman Demigods she was indeed very familiar with.

This was the group of Demigods whose ship’s damage had forced them to wait upon the beaches of the prison for weeks in the hope someone would come to rescue them.

“Ah, Centurion Elvis Knight and other Legionnaires I didn’t bother learning the name of,” the bare-chested Demigod smiled while baring teeth that should never have been so threatening. “What a pleasure for you to be here in my humble Grand Strategium.”

Fifty-two Legionnaires glared fiercely at him...and Anne quickly noticed how much they were sweating and looking like they were about to boil like lobsters or some other nicely prepared crustacean in hot water. None of them had donned a ‘swimsuit’, by the looks of it.

“This farce has lasted long enough, Jackson!” The leader of the Legionnaires barked. “We won’t serve under a...a pirate!”

“Oh?” The words were light, but the eyes suddenly became far more vicious and ruthless. “Are you saying you intend to break your oaths so quickly after I helped you escape this prison-island where your crippled ship forced you to stay until a Telekhine party rescued you? For shame, Centurion, for shame...”

One of the Legionnaires, certainly one of the most stupid ones, was foolish enough to laugh.

“What are you going to do? You haven’t the right to give Legionnaires orders. You are a Greek! Leave the Expeditionary Force affairs to the real professionals and-“

“Legionnaire Eustace,” the son of Poseidon whimsically began, proving that his former assertion he had not bothered to learn their names was a lie, “failing to obey my orders is mutiny. But it isn’t mutiny, isn’t it? Otherwise...**I would be forced to crucify the mutineers**.”

And Anne had no doubt this monster would indeed do it. Quickly, efficiently...and without remorse.

“You...but you need us!”

“I need beings which will follow my orders.” The son of Poseidon corrected with a dangerous smile. “If you think being Legionnaires is enough to convince me to spare you, let me disabuse you of that notion. I made a pact with several Roman officers before sailing away from New Constantinople. Unfortunately for you, it was with the Third Legio. For some reason I can’t fathom, no one bothered to negotiate the return of the First Cohort of the Twelfth Legion. Therefore until the end of this Great Quest and the Gods themselves order me to let you go, **you belong to me**. Am I clear?”

As several shark-shaped Telekhines had drawn some very sharp weapons and a few members of the Suicide Squad looked like they were ready to kill them here and now, the Legionnaires didn’t wait more than a few heartbeats before nodding and whispering new oaths of allegiance.

Anne wasn’t about to trust them after such a display, evidently.

She had sailed with several crews in the past, and this one had ‘treachery’ painted in bright red letters upon the hull.

“Good! You will all serve under Captain Anne Bonny aboard the Bombardment Galleon *Second Chance*.”

“And...err...the Telekhines?” Naturally, one of the Legionnaires was a bit slow to understand.

There was a loud sigh.

“Ten of you are not sufficiently recovered to participate in the next battle. They will recover in this very Forge...under the vigilance of the Honourable Family. If you are stupid enough to break your oaths, your ten friends will pay the price. Is it clear enough for you?”

It was, not that Anne had needed these last sentences. She didn’t know what kind of contracts and alliances Perseus Jackson had made with the Telekhines and other forces, but one couldn’t fail to see it was rock solid. The Legionnaires and Anne were the parties that could be sacrificed if they caused too much trouble, not the shark monsters.

“Now these tragic but necessary precisions have been made...bard, play us some music!”

One of the blonde-haired Demigods raised an eyebrow, but began to play the instrument reminding her of a banjo. He was rather good...the melody at least had some strength and gave the urge to dance, at least.

It wasn’t the only thing that happened. The centre of the pool-filled hall opened, and after a series of cascades diverted water away, light burned, before changing to adopt a shape looking like an island.

No, it was an island, one which looked like as if it had been scouted from the skies by Zeus himself.

It was...how the hell had these Demigods done that?

“I have decided to call this place...’Pear Island’.”

This time, the Demigoddesses’ sigh were so well-spread it was easier to be amused by the lamentable attempt to humour them.

“Stop it, Jackson. It doesn’t look like a pear!”

“It is a pear-shaped island!” the green-eyed Demigod protested. “Okay, it is one which is a bit munched at the base, but it is a pear!”

There were plenty of looks of consternation, Anne noted...

“Anyway.” The boy left his throne-seat, and as he approached the real-than-life image of the island, the island grew too...revealing an impressive system of defences, including an enormous fleet anchored so that a potential attacker has no choice to fight it first before landing on the beach of black sands. “As you can easily see, the Triumvirate located the Golden Fleece before we did, and they considerably reinforced the island. Therefore I affirm there is no choice but to unleash Operation Annihilation Tide!”

Anne Bonny rolled her eyes. Yes, this monster was definitely...eccentric. And it was to not give a far less polite description...

“How are we going to get through that?” a Demigoddess that Anne had at first mistaken for a boy grunted. She must be a child of Ares. “You complained we were going to lack ammunition if we decided to engage a good part of the Triumvirate fleet.”

“The ammunition issue isn’t as problematic as it was days ago, now that we have the Forge of All Perils to support us. But I have a plan. Let’s begin by the obvious. The enemy forces can be divided into four different parts. The first we must engage, clearly, is the fleet. Our enemies have gathered one hundred and eight pirate ships, none of them which participated in the recent attempt to storm our defences here. They are supported by a squadron of six Triumvirate warships, mainly to ensure the slave collars will detonate if they disobey their orders. And leading them is the super-dreadnought *Musashi*, formerly of the Imperial Japanese Navy.”

Anne wasn’t going to lie; she shivered when watching the thing. It was an enormous colossus of steel and guns, one the like which looked ready to rule eternally over the seas and oceans.

“The first part of Annihilation Tide, Operation Doom Whale, is going to take care of this little problem,” the daughter of Demeter gaped, and her reaction was measured compared most of the hall, with many bellowing ‘impossible!’ and ‘you’re crazy!’ among other imprecations.

“**Silence**.”

Everyone who had tried to shout or protest loudly was silenced...ah, Charmspeak...of course.

“I assure you everything had been accounted for in my genial plan. I have precisely counted the number of anti-Telekhine measures deployed by the Triumvirate. I calculated the range of the *Musashi*’s guns, determined the positions and the numbers of artillery spotters at the defenders’ disposal...and I can tell you this, this fleet is exactly where I want it to be. Operation Doom Whale is going to smash this fleet apart.”

Before this astonishing and inhuman confidence, there was nothing to do but bow and wait.

“The second layer of the defences, and the first on Pear Island itself, is the beach and its surroundings.” The image shifted to the black sands behind the huge fleet. “As you can clearly see, the enemy has mined it heavily, before installing many pillboxes, bunkers, anti-tank obstacles, and generally as many kill zones as they could imagine. I will add the beach is the only way to land on this island; the rest of Pear is nothing but high cliffs almost impossible to climb, and the monsters above would have no difficulty throwing rocks and killing those who dared such an audacious enterprise.”

“So we have to attack through the beach,” a grim-faced, dark-haired boy declared while crossing his arms. “Given how exposed the positions are, the enemy certainly placed its less valuable troops there.”

“Yes,” Perseus Jackson approved. “Hundreds of skeleton warriors, in addition to killer-automatons built by Forge MP-42 and delivered there. They have at the minimum thousands of machine guns and grenade launchers.”

“Is that all?” A Legionnaire asked sarcastically...it missed, for the green-eyed Demigod leader took it as an honest question.

“No, of course not. Mere metres after the beach, you will have noticed the island becomes far rockier. The elevation is easily of two hundred metres for one kilometre of depth...and naturally the enemy has dug three fortified trenches into the rocks. The last and most elevated one can boast of a significant number of World War One and Soviet-made rockets, so they can generate a pretty impressive amount of destruction from the heights without bothering to send the infantry down. Here again, the majority of the units are either undead or automatons.”

Anne had to admit, just by looking at it, someone intelligent had made the defensive plans. Some of the traps were painfully obvious, but as it had been said before, the beach was the only way to land. The cliffs were way too high, and there were dangerous reefs close to them, in addition to other dangers like the ‘sea mines’ and other infernal devices.

The daughter of Demeter had pillaged and attacked some well-defended places...but this one was truly an entirely new level of danger.

“The third layer of the defences behind it, as you can see, is a city based on some Greek theme.” There was more? “It isn’t really defensible, but the streets are tortuous, perfect for hit-and-run attacks, sneaky ambushes...which unfortunately suits the allies of the Triumvirate well.”

This time it was a girl Anne recognised as a Huntress who cursed profusely.

“Lycanthropes? They brought Lycanthropes to this island? Are they mad?”

“They supply them with meat,” the tense answer proved how serious a matter it was, “and they have another faction to counter them...the ‘kits’ of the Teumessian Fox.”

The images that were revealed to them could have been amusing in other circumstances. They looked like foxes which could imitate human behaviour. But their fangs were looking a bit too large, and the expressions of those monsters...

“They are very intelligent, excellent tricksters...and they love the taste of the human flesh.” Yes, she had seen it coming. “So I advise you to not believe anything coming from their maws, no matter how convincing it sounds like.”

Interestingly, the green eyes were staring at the group of Huntresses...two of which looking like they had been cursed.

“And the fourth defensive system is this parody of the Parthenon standing at the summit of Pear Island, I suppose?” A grey-eyed Demigoddess wondered out loud.

“Yes. The Golden Fleece is there...and so is its current Guardian. But there’s no need to worry about this particular trial for now.”

“Why?”

“Because the Guardian isn’t going to risk his life as long as there are disposable monsters and assets to throw at us.”

“That’s...cold.”

“No, that’s smart. The more we fight, the more exhausted we are, while the one who has stolen the Golden Fleece stays in his lair, fresh and rested.”

The daughter of Demeter had to admit it was indeed a sound strategy. And unless someone knew how to fly, the Demigods and Demigoddesses had no choice but to play the game of the monsters. They had to assault each part of the defences in the order their enemies wanted to; otherwise, if by some divine miracle they were given the ability to bypass one part of the defences, all it would be result was their destruction. They would be caught between two different forces of enemies. It would be the classical ‘hammer and anvil’ strategy...and they would be slaughtered in short order.

“Well...err...that’s...err...incredibly bad.” One of the Legionnaires admitted frankly. For once, Anne Bonny agreed with him. “But we still have an advantage. I mean, they don’t know we’re coming for them, right? The Sea of Monsters is vast, and while they may be aware our orders involve grabbing the Golden Fleece, they can’t know when we will go after it, right? Right?”

The second ‘right’ was incredibly alarmed...especially when a lot of members of the Suicide Squad began looking at their leader with incredibly ironic expressions.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” the son of Poseidon grinned maliciously. “I had to proclaim my eternal friendship to the Triumvirate leader in command of Pear Island’s defences!”

**13 December 2006, the Dark City, ‘Pear Island’**

Praetor Lucius Vorenus was speechless.

Some part of him couldn’t believe what he had just read.

He closed his eyes.

But when he reopened them, the letter was still there, refusing to disappear.

It was there, and it gave him a feeling of...the officer couldn’t properly describe it. Like he had just watched thirteen bad omens in close succession, maybe?

Lucius grimaced, before studying the letter’s materials, if not the words. This was clearly high-quality paper, with a big ‘S.S.’ printed at every corner. The ink used was of high quality too, as it smelled of fruit and magic. And the pen its author had chosen had to be an expensive one, for the finesse of the writing was evident.

No, much as Lucius wanted to believe it was a prank, the letter was in all likelihood authentic.

And that meant he had to re-read the letter, which was likely the biggest pile of lies he’d ever witnessed in a short amount of words.

*Dear Praetor Lucius Vorenus,*

*It is with the greatest regret I inform you of the pirate raid I intend to commit against your defences erected to protect the Golden Fleece.*

*I am your eternal friend, but the needs of the Great Quest surpass the positive emotions I feel for you.*

*Naturally, no one is to blame for this among your or my forces. The fault falls sorely on Zeus and Hera. If the former had not killed my mother, I would have been an innocent Demigod, eager to live off a pacifist existence. If not for the latter, I’m sure my Lord Father would not have hesitated proposing a polyamorous union to his wife and his favourite lovers.*

*Nevertheless, despite Hera’s odious influence, I, Perseus Jackson, Grand Admiral of the Suicide Squad Pirates, refuse to believe bloodshed and unlimited violence are the only options available to men of our noble lineage.*

*This is why I’m sending you this letter, Praetor. I propose, in the name of the eternal friendship, that you surrender the Golden Fleece into my custody the moment I reach your fortified command, which I have decided to name ‘Pear Island’ because I felt like it.*

*If you agree with my conditions, you will paint the* IJNS Musashi *in bright orange paint before placing the Golden Fleece on the prow. A minimum of ten thousand rum bottles will have also to be stored aboard this Dreadnought which must have cost you a fortune to salvage.*

*I know it is unconventional, but the Telekhines party hard, and I have a son of Bacchus to corrupt. He won’t become a Don Juan just because I click my fingers and wish it, after all.*

*This is a party to which all your soldiers, be they covered in fur, metal, or scales, are invited, of course. The Suicide Squad is a bastion of tolerance and friendship, especially when it comes to volunteering things that will enrage the servants of Artemis.*

*To my regret, as I suppose you are not in the process of grabbing cans of orange paint and other artist tools, I am going to assume you think your loyalty to Mark Antony and Cleopatra is unshakeable and passes above everything, including our eternal friendship.*

*That’s why we will abandon temporarily the happy events and I’m about, respectfully and bluntly, to threaten you.*

*In twenty four hours, Praetor Lucius Vorenus, I am going to attack Pear Island and take the Golden Fleece. You can blame Zeus and Hera again for forcing me to resort to such extreme and amoral deeds.*

*You won’t stop the Suicide Squad. You won’t save your forces. You won’t prevent me from seizing the Golden Fleece.*

*I am sure you believe the sheer quantity of your military assets will give you an insurmountable advantage. After all, you have about one hundred and eight pirate ships to use as cannon-fodder, over twelve thousand undead warriors and battle-automatons, plus the* Musashi *and a horde of monsters to bathe in blood the black sands against anyone audacious enough to storm your positions.*

*I assure you, my friend, they are not going to be enough.*

*Naturally, you might believe that Cleopatra and her fleet will provide a source of reinforcements that even the Suicide Squad can’t vanquish.*

*You may even be right. That’s why I’m telling you honestly that if the* Spear of the Gods *is anywhere in the vicinity of this island in twenty-four hours, I will just attack elsewhere, in a pirate tradition older than the Roman Republic you served once.*

*The name of the operation I am about to unleash is* Annihilation Tide, beginning with its first extraordinary blow, Doom Whale*. Once again, I hope you will not give me a reason to use these evil and violent methods. Alas for my tender pacifist heart, I am surrounded by bloodthirsty Demigoddesses, and I don’t know how long I can control them.*

*I won’t contact you again before battle is joined.*

*Sincerely and Pacifistically Yours,*

*Perseus Jackson*

*P.S.: I appreciate the nice move of providing Teumessian Kits and Lycanthropes; the surviving Huntresses of my order of battle are suddenly far more motivated in dealing with you permanently than they are glaring at me all day.*

Lucius Vorenus gritted his teeth, and then threw the letter into the chimney of the house he had taken over as his quarters when not commanding from his command bunker.

“Reinforce the defences and prepare the fleet,” he ordered to his second-in-command, “if the son of Poseidon and his forces dare to come here, we are going to make sure they will die before touching the sands of this island!”

**13 December 2006, somewhere in the Forge of All Perils**

Drew would lie if she said she was reassured.

This part of the Forge of All Perils was eerie, with a lot of strange lights, and while there was a lot of water around her, it felt sterile and cold.

And yes, that the Telekhine nearby looked like a mad scientist – the shark had the monocle on one eye and the white garb to play the ‘role’ – was not reassuring at all.

“At last a volunteer!” the smile was scary as hell, no doubt about it. “I was beginning to worry no one recognised my genius!”

Yeah, this Telekhine was definitely a mad scientist, all right.

“According to Perseus Jackson, all your volunteers died.” The daughter of Aphrodite remarked, trying to hide her nervousness.

“Science can’t progress without some sacrifices!” Or how to in six words dismiss an argument that your experiments were creating more dead people than a full-scale battle. “Project LV-X-S-HY-1111 is the future of warfare! Once it will be perfected, the arsenals of the Olympians will be obsolete! I will have surpassed the God of Forges!”

Suddenly, Drew Tanaka didn’t wonder how Perseus had contacted this Telekhine. The two had to be soul-mates or something equivalent. But one had reincarnated in a Demigod body, while the other was a Telekhine.

“And what is this project exactly? According to my leader, it is supposed to increase my physical abilities and my ability to survive a dangerous battlefield, for all its dangers.”

“The Restorer didn’t tell you?” for once the shark face seemed genuinely surprised.

“I’m sure he wanted to make sure the surprise stayed...a surprise outside these halls,” the Charmspeak-user said while trying not to roll her eyes too many times.

“Ah...yes, that is something the Restorer would do.” The mad scientist agreed with her. “Basically, Project LV-X-S-HY-1111’s chief goal is to transform the heroic volunteer into a living weapon.”

Drew’s eyes narrowed immediately.

“I’m going to need more...detailed explanations...please.”

“By all means,” the Telekhine answered cordially. “As the Restorer no doubt informed you, Demigods face dangerous challenges when engaging in moderately risky activities. Your flesh is weak and lack sufficient regeneration abilities. And the opportunity to gain a sort of semi-invulnerability is not granted to anyone. Besides, visiting the Underworld has all the chance to result in your death before you gain the power you seek. It doesn’t get any better when it comes to your weapons. You tend to be easily disarmed or have swords that break because a God decreed so. A solution has to be found, and I believe I found it: the Demigod and the metal have to become one, becoming an unstoppable weapon in the process.”

“But...” suddenly it was really easy to find out why the ‘volunteers’ all ended up dead, “the human body, mortal or part-divine, is not prepared to merge with something metallic!”

“Why?” The mad scientist asked with pointed interest. “Many soldiers who end up wounded have excellent prostheses that help them in their day-to-day activities.”

Drew wanted to scream that the ‘prostheses’ in question were replacements, and were in general poor substitutes compared to the original limbs which had been lost.

But shouting at the only being which understood the process that might kill her in mere seconds if something went wrong didn’t sound like a smart idea.

“And how is it suppose to-“

Too late, she realised that the Telekhine was pushing some buttons on a control panel.

The floor opened under her feet...and before she could curse, Drew dropped into a large pool which had been under the Telekhine’s lab.

Or at least the black-haired Demigoddess had assumed it was a large water pool.

But to her surprise, she realised quickly she could breathe it effortlessly.

Since no daughter of Aphrodite had the ability to breathe underwater – that was for sons and daughters of Poseidon – it stood to reason it wasn’t water around her.

This reassured her for a heartbeat.

Then Drew saw *it*.

The moment her eyes fell upon *it*, she recoiled in revulsion. It was if something had combined a worm with spikes and various insectoid attributes, before painting it in silver.

The daughter of Aphrodite tried to swim away as discreetly as she could...it didn’t work.

In an instant, the silver worm was on her, and before she could do anything, it forced its way into her mouth!

The pain which erupted in her throat a second later was evidence enough the creature intended to truly invade her body.

Drew tried to resist.

It didn’t work.

Soon enough, the creature was in her, and the pain became her entire universe.

“I would have given you anaesthetics...but they don’t work when my symbiotes are active.” The voice of the Telekhine scientist seemed incredibly far away, though it might be because of the water...or the pain that gave her delirious senses. “But have no fear, valiant volunteer: I’m told the pain diminishes after the third symbiote. Or is it the fourth?”

Drew opened her eyes again...and sure enough, there were half a dozen more silver ‘symbiotes’ swimming in the water around her.

“The moment I get out of here, I will strangle you, Jackson!” The daughter of Aphrodite promised out loud.

It was her last coherent sentence for many minutes, as Drew fell herself falling into an abyss of pain.

**13 December 2006, the Docks, Forge of All Perils**

“Are you sure it’s wise?”

Perseus didn’t turn his head.

“You will have to elaborate a bit, my second favourite treacherous lieutenant. What I am supposed to be sure of?”

When he looked at him, the son of Nemesis gave him an expression filled with disappointment.

“Anne Bonny. Are you sure it is wise to give her the command of this ship?”

Ah, that.

“It is not exactly wise.” The leader of the Suicide Squad admitted after a few seconds. “That said, I needed a skilled captain, one with the power and the charisma to keep these troublemakers of Legionnaires in line.”

“She might betray you.”

“Correction, she will certainly try to betray me...as soon as this Quest is over. The oath I forced her to swear is particularly diabolical, if I say so myself.”

It was too bad, really. With the gifts she had mastered in her pirate’s life and her formidable battle-experience, Anne Bonny could have been one of his lieutenants. As it was, only the oath and the difference of strength between she and him would keep her in line.

“So yes, I am well aware of the risks, Ethan. But I simply can’t afford to send someone from the *Inevitable Doom* on the *Second Chance*. The only Demigod we have aboard that I think could make the Legionnaires obey is Dakota...and unfortunately, his nautical skills are...poor.”

“He would send the Second Chance on the first reef they would encounter.” The dark-eyed boy conceded.

It would be a pity, for the *Second Chance* was a ship of the line which had been reinforced by many metallic plates, given a magi-tech propulsion system, and a couple of triple turrets had been integrated in its structure, justifying the designation of ‘bombardment galleon’...though it was technically not a galleon.

Truth to tell, the *Second Chance* had more in common with the ironclads of the mid-late nineteenth century, a new ship to test several unproven technologies.

“Yes. Naval losses are of course unavoidable when charging into battle, but I would prefer to not lose naval assets in such a ridiculous manner. The Suicide Squad has a reputation to uphold, after all.”

“This reputation is one of craziness.”

“And to beat impossible odds,” the former Tyrant wasn’t going to deny the first part; it was completely true. “Go ahead, my second favourite treacherous lieutenant. I feel you haven’t shared with me all your insecurities.”

“Was it absolutely necessary to separate the part of the treasure we owed to the Goddess of Wisdom, before sending it immediately via a heavily escorted Telekhine convoy?”

“That depends what you imply by ‘absolutely necessary’.” The green-eyed Demigod stretched, savouring the fact he could walk and go everywhere in the Forge without feeling exhausted after a few minutes. The saunas and pools of the Forge of All Perils had accelerated his recovery appreciably. It was still far from a complete recovery, but as long as he didn’t participate in a battle, it was going to be all he needed.

Ethan Nakamura gave him another unimpressed look.

“Theoretically, I could have delayed the transfer. But why should I? I am not going to try to make more money by loaning it and winning even more money as a banking institution. No, not paying the Lady Protector of Athens would have been acting in bad faith. I vastly prefer fulfilling my part of the deal to the letter. You appear as someone reliable when you pay your taxes at the agreed hour. While the King may be above this, the rest of the Olympians aren’t.”

“That’s all?” Suspicion soaked each word. “You did it to look good in the eyes of a Goddess?”

“Is it something so strange to consider?” Perseus asked lightly...before adding innocently a few more words. “And I wanted to ask her a favour.”

“A favour? The same kind of favour which led to the Goddess of Snow to give you the X-Suits?”

The son of Poseidon rolled his eyes.

“No, my treacherous lieutenant...the favour wasn’t that big...the X-Suits were only part of the favour I negotiated for, by the way, a lot of winter equipment was exchanged.” Perseus yawned theatrically. “It was a small favour we are going to need for the next battle. It is a small one, but it could be decisive. Isn’t there a proverb about a tiny pebble being enough to change the course of a large river?”

The exasperation of the son of Nemesis was, as always, a delight to listen to.

“You aren’t going to fool me. You want all of us to gape the moment you will reveal your latest dramatic and crazy plan.”

“Am I getting that predictable?” He was really going to make some efforts to be even less so, if that was the case. Not letting Ethan Namura the time to answer, the leader of the Suicide Squad continued. “In any case, now that your worries have no reason to be, we have several-“

“JACKSON!”

The former Tyrant turned...and for the first time in a while, raised both eyebrows.

Drew Tanaka was charging straight towards him.

Her fury had been...kind of expected.

What he had *not* expected, however, was to watch the daughter of Aphrodite to rush in advanced power armour which reminded him of several science-fiction books he loved reading when he wanted some imaginative technology innovations.

It was a rather ingenious Telekhine creation...it could have benefitted from orange paint, but the dark blue and silver theme was acceptable.

“So that’s what the scientist implied by living weapon-“

Drew Tanaka stopped her race...and on her forearms, metal flowed...in the blink of an eye, the armour had added two enormous cannons under her armoured arms. And by the glow coming out of the barrels, the son of Poseidon could hazard the guess those were indeed samples of advanced laser weapons.

Needless to say, Perseus dearly wished they wouldn’t have been pointed at his head.

“Give me a reason not to kill you.”

Sensing that the answer ‘the blessing of Drakonic blood will allow me to shrug off some of the damage’ wouldn’t be accepted, Perseus sighed.

“Now that you have properly merged with the armament symbiote, I can give you some magical painkillers and medicines which will allow you to operate at peak efficiency...and last enough time for us to reach Pear Island, where the Golden Fleece awaits.”

“And you couldn’t have said that earlier?”

“No.” If Drew hadn’t had the determination to endure the pain and the other problems associated with the Telekhine ‘living weapon’ program, it would have been a disaster waiting to happen. It had been far better for to believe there was no salvation save the Golden Fleece and what the victory represented. “Can you please lower these laser cannons now? That-“

Perseus was quick enough to evade the first shot, but not the second. He had been right, by the way; apparently, the weapons were not laser guns; they were freaking *Railguns*.

And yes, when one founds its mark, it hurt.

Fortunately, his dive directly into the great lake allowed him to regenerate quasi-instantly.

Naturally, there were dozens of Demigods laughing when he resurfaced...truly, Perseus was ready to swear, he was a misunderstood genius.

“All right, the party is over.” Most of the ammunition had been loaded aboard the Inevitable Doom and the Second Chance; time was precious, and he didn’t intend to waste the hours he had. “SUICIDE SQUAD! ASSEMBLE! WE MUST SAIL AWAY WITHIN THE HOUR!”

**13 December 2006, approaches of the Forge of All Perils, Sea of Monsters**

Luke had thought that ‘sail away within the hour’ had been a new jest of Jackson.

Fifty-seven minutes later, watching the Forge of All Perils decrease in size below them, the son of Hermes could shake his head at how naive he had been.

Perseus Jackson was many things, but when he really gave an imperious order, most of the time it wasn’t a joke...though the commands could be accompanied by pranks to lighten the atmosphere.

This time the humour had been absent. Maybe it was because when the Telekhines were busy loading missiles and torpedoes along with other formidable weapons of mass destruction, security was paramount.

Another reason might be to enforce discipline. None of the original members of the Suicide Squad had missed the rebelliousness of the Legionnaires. Certain, like Elvis Knight, were obeying orders in the spirit they were given, no matter how obvious it looked they disliked being subordinated to Greek Demigods. Alas, those weren’t the majority, far from it.

It was like the Huntresses of Artemis all over again. The only good news was that the survivors of the Twelfth Legio had been assigned to the *Second Chance*...a ‘Bombardment Galleon’ which, somehow, managed to sail as fast as the *Inevitable Doom*.

Luke watched the other ship for several seconds, before turning his attention to their surroundings. There were several clouds, but the blue remained largely visible here and there, and for now, there wasn’t any sign a storm was brewing anywhere near them. The wind was rather weak, and the waves were low...always by the standards of the Sea of Monsters. And clearly, it wasn’t freezing any longer. It had not been cold since the Drakon perished.

The blonde-haired Demigod shook his head and went on to find the crazy Demigod they had accepted as their leader. The search wasn’t long; the son of Poseidon was playing the role of helmsman, with his usual orange tricorn hat and a grand black coat of pirate.

“If your intention was to catch any potential pursuers out of position, I think you have succeeded,” the thief began...only for Perseus to immediately make a negative sign with his head.

“We caught a few out of position, but the hyper-radar of the *Inevitable Doom* was able to locate one scout ship a couple of minutes ago. It certainly received orders to shadow our moves and report everything it can perceive from a safe distance.”

“That could prove quite problematic...if it can match this impressive cruising speed.”

“No, it won’t.” Perseus smiled and bared his teeth. “You want to know the truth, my heroic lieutenant? If it had only been the Triumvirate I was concerned about, I would have adopted a slow and tedious pace, so as to increase the nervousness of certain ambitious souls.”

“And you didn’t, because?”

“I did it because of Drew.”

Luke chuckled.

“All it takes is a furious Demigoddess threatening to kill you, and your plans are modified in mere minutes? If I knew that before-“

“Castellan, don’t be ridiculous. It was always my plan to sail away when I gave the order. And no, it has nothing to do with Drew threatening to kill me. Since apparently the secret has been well-kept, I will reveal it to you here and now: the armour and the weapons our Quest’s daughter of Aphrodite can create now are generated by a Telekhine weapon program which uses metal symbiotes to modify the target’s body.”

“Oh...good?”

“Humans aren’t born to transform themselves into metal, Castellan. Despite the healing Lou Ellen is busy providing, it is guaranteed Drew will die within seventy-two hours if we don’t win the battle against the defenders of the Golden Fleece.”

Luke heavily swallowed...before voicing the complete opposite of what he said a moment ago.

“Not good,” the older Demigod said weakly. “Not good at all.”

For many minutes, there was only the sound of the waves and the winds...as well as the various noises made by the Demigods aboard the *Inevitable Doom*, who were all preparing for the upcoming battle in various ways.

Everyone but the Huntresses that was: the servants of Artemis had disappeared into their quarters heartbeats after arriving aboard.

“Why are you willing to take such a risky course?” the son of Hermes asked hesitantly.

“Taking risky courses is the bread and butter of the Suicide Squad, my heroic lieutenant!”

“You know what I mean” Luke rolled his eyes at the new not-so-hilarious repartee. “We have enough missiles and long-range weapons aboard to kill the Triumvirate fleet waiting for us several times. Why are you so eager to risk Drew’s life when there is really no need to?”

The green eyes and the rest of the son of Poseidon’s face gave him a very ironic expression.

“The Sire of the Drakons may have been wrong upon a lot of things, Luke Castellan. But one where this mysterious and malicious not-benefactor was sadly right was that at the moment, we are too weak. Begin a battle where we aren’t prepared and that requires facing a Drakon-level opponent, and it is likely most of the Suicide Squad will die. And honestly, I would say there’s ninety percent of chance Drew Tanaka would perish within minutes. Charmspeak is all well and good, but if the monster has a good immunity to it, you’re literally defenceless. And no, polishing your nails and reading fashion magazines is not an adequate substitute.”

Luke winced...but as much as the remark was sarcastic, it was incredibly accurate. The children of Aphrodite had not taken their training seriously before the first Great Quest, and it was going to take a long time to remedy to this.

“The second reason I do this...we are still going to take casualties, and this option, gambling one life for the entire Suicide Squad, is a sword that cut both ways. Yes, Drew is going to die if we fail...but it also offers an opportunity that would be denied to us if I had declined the Telekhines’ help.”

Evidently, Jackson had anticipated his arguments, and was not going to change it at that point. Luke didn’t know if he needed to be terrified or relieved by it.

Thus the son of Hermes asked his last question.

“What is our destination then, Captain?”

**14 December 2006, approaches of Junkyard Island, Sea of Monsters**

Annabeth wished she could say the island nearby was a miniature paradise, one where ever Demigod and Demigoddess wished to spend his or her holidays upon.

It wasn’t the case. The large beach of white sands had seen so many ship wrecks arrive piecemeal onto it that it was genuinely difficult to count how many hulls had sunk in the vicinity of it. It hadn’t to be a small number, though. The impressive pile of anchors, broken masts, ruined barrels, and old cannons was all that she needed to confirm that.

“There’s no one alive,” the daughter of Athena lowered her binoculars, “I can’t see anyone, and there’s nothing to block my vision, anyway.”

“Junkyard Island is a place most pirates of the Sea of Monsters have learned to avoid, if they value their roguish existences.”

“Why? There’s a cursed treasure hidden somewhere below the sands?”

“No.” The son of Poseidon grinned, and Annabeth shivered. “Have you heard of the tragedy of Captain Ahab the Stubborn?”

“Err...yes?” She bit her lip, before continuing. “The story as it was told at New Byzantium...Captain Ahab was a son of Triton, I think, and he was given a Great Quest by the Gods. He was to hunt the Great White Whale, a monster he called Moby Dick. And he failed, no matter how many times he tried. The whale was too cunning, and according to the old stories whispered around the bonfires, the monster was capable of sinking every ship Ahab and his allies ever managed to build or buy to pursue this impossible Quest. In the end, of all the Questers, only Ahab was left...and he erred for decades, completely mad, before a last confrontation with the Great White Whale.”

Perseus clapped his hands...in a very theatrical and exaggerated fashion.

“Wait a minute...” Annabeth couldn’t believe it! “That’s your plan? You want us to hunt Moby Dick, in the hope it gives us a lot of favours where the Gods are concerned?”

The leader of the Suicide Squad rolled his eyes and gave her a look pity.

“And you were giving such promising vibes at the beginning...daughter of Her Owlishness...ah, well, life is filled with disappointments!”

“This is not funny, Jackson!”

The son of Poseidon sighed.

“First above all, I am not doing it to obtain some favour. Several Olympians want me dead; whether or not I kill a particular monster is not going to change anything.”

That was...fair, the daughter of Athena supposed.

“But now, we must start by correcting a few problems your story has. You’re absolutely correct Captain Ahab was a son of Triton sent to neutralise Moby Dick, along with a full crew of Demigods. Where you are absolutely in error is that his target was not an enormous white whale.”

There was a headache coming, and it was all Perseus’ fault...

“Now you’re not making any sense. This is a Great White Whale! While many people have died fighting it, enough survived to confirm Moby Dick is real!”

“Have I said the contrary, your Owlishness? I just said it is not an enormous white whale...because it isn’t.”

“You’re not-”

“It is a titanic-sized sea automaton built in the shape of a great white whale.”

Annabeth was left with her mouth wide open, utterly speechless.

“What?”

“Originally, it was a project sponsored by my Lord Father, as Rhode was kind enough to explain to me,” the green eyes were not mischievous anymore; instead they were staring pensively at the horizon. “There were many fleets the Olympians felt they stood no chance against in conventional fighting, and so they decided to build something that their enemies would have no answer for. Atlantis funded the project, and the God of Forges was in charge of the industrial execution. But something went awry: by trying to make the automaton as intelligent as they could, they made it *too* smart. And as the not-whale learned, it began to hate the beings of flesh. The moment it was officially released into the sea, it went berserk, and none of the program fail-safes managed to stop it from going into a rampage.”

Perseus crossed his arms.

“Ahab was not sent on a Great Quest in a fit of pique; he was given a mission so that the Moby Dick project did not fall into enemy hands.”

“And he failed.” Annabeth was forced to point out.

“Technically, he succeeded. Whether Olympian Demigods or other parties, no one managed to inflict any significant damage to this whale-automaton...or to subdue it. And as the Great Quest was officially put on hold after Ahab’s death, the so-called ‘Great White Whale’ found its way to the Sea of Monsters...making sure the problem solved itself.”

And the son of Poseidon had just called his operation ‘Doom Whale’...oh, Gods.

“You don’t intend to hunt down Moby Dick,” the blonde Demigoddess whispered, not knowing if she had to be deathly afraid or in awe by the sheer audacity. “You want it to pursue us, so that as we approach the island of the Golden Fleece, it will attack and destroy the Triumvirate fleet.”

As the last words left her lips, there was an explosion of water about two or three nautical miles away...and the ‘Great White Whale’ surfaced.

It was indeed a titanic thing.

It was largely bigger than the *Inevitable Doom* and the *Second Chance* put together.

And now that she had been given the truth, Annabeth could indeed acknowledge that shining under the sun, the ‘skin’ of Moby Dick was some sort of divinely-forged white metal.

It was a gigantic whale-automaton.

An ‘eye’ bigger than she was tall revealed itself...it had noticed them.

It was a machine sensor, and yet it reeked of malevolence.

“Using Moby Dick to do our dirty work, as funny as it sounds on paper, would not work eternally Annabeth. Some Questers tried that to get rid of their enemies, and it didn’t work. The whale-automaton certain destroys the targets you choose, but its wrath is only a match for its viciousness. Give it enough time, and it will sink your ship too.”

“That...” what was the point, then? “This is bad. I suppose most of our weapons are useless against this creation of the Forge God?”

“Completely useless,” Perseus nodded cheerfully as Moby Dick created a new geyser and turned its head towards the *Inevitable Doom*.

“And your intention is not for this whale-automaton to kill us like it killed Ahab and hundreds of Questers?”

“It isn’t. Moby Dick, after all, has a single weakness.”

“A weakness?” Annabeth replied with scepticism tainting her voice. The thing was not going to be dealt with by swords and harpoons, spears and axes, or anything ever forged at New Byzantium!

“Yes, a weakness.”

And without warning, Perseus turned around and summoned a wave using his Hydrokinesis. Drew Tanaka had only the time to yelp before it threw her overboard. In mere seconds, the water attacked had carried her hundreds of metres away and far closer the killer whale-automaton.

“ARE YOU MAD? YOU HAVE-“

“Moby Dick will never obey beings of flesh again. But it can, and will, obey someone who has accepted to change her nature from flesh to metal...”

Annabeth was about to shout again, to scream at the son of Poseidon to not be ridiculous...but it was then she noticed it.

Moby Dick had stopped moving.

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She was going to kill Perseus Jackson.

Assuredly, she was likely going to have to convince Hades to send her back from the Underworld because...because there was an enormous white whale and-

“**STOP**!” The daughter of Aphrodite screamed.

It took her a couple of seconds, at the very least, to realise that the enormous monster had obeyed her command.

It took her a few more seconds to realise that she had no difficulty breathing underwater. Nor did she need special glasses, a spell, or anything to survey her surroundings and the white whale.

Drew could see perfectly, like she had been on the bridge of the *Inevitable Doom*.

So that was what the Telekhines had meant by ‘living weapon’, uh.

But that could wait.

First, there was a monster bigger than their ship to deal with.

Drew swam slowly towards the head...and she did, she realised her mistake. This wasn’t a true whale. It was not any living creature.

It was a monster, but one which had built with metal and some incredibly advanced technology.

The white metal could likely fool non-Demigods, especially with the Mist involved, but once you were as close as she was, the truth was incredibly obvious.

It was certainly a creation of Hephaestus. No one had the skills and the knowledge to build something like that. No child of his was that talented and-

The whale began to move again, and this time, Drew used her Charmspeak deliberately to keep the mechanical whale in line.

“**DON’T MOVE**.”

The artificial creation struggled, but clearly it had no choice but to obey.

The question was why Jackson had felt it was necessary to throw her there; the bastard could use Charmspeak, there never was any doubt about that.

It was only when she saw the silver-blue metallic layer the daughter of Aphrodite could feel she understood. Of course. Having the symbiotes inside of her had turned her into something that was more metal than human...and the mechanical whale recognised that.

The whale would not have obeyed the Charmspeak of any Demigod or Demigoddess, no matter how powerful he or she was. But it obeyed the power of metal *and* Charmspeak.

Still, what did their leader hope she would do? The Charmspeak couldn’t be repeated over and over, it wasn’t practical-

Operation Doom Whale.

Perseus Jackson wanted her to take control of the ‘white whale’.

But she couldn’t do it with the power of her voice, she had to...she had to take control completely.

It would be impossible if it was a ‘normal’ sea monster...but this one was built by the divine, and with god-wrought metals.

“**Give me access to your controls**.”

There was a ripple, as if the monster was trying to resist...but after three seconds, a large hole opened into the flanks of the incredibly huge automaton.

Drew Tanaka was propelled inside and for twenty seconds, it was like being inside an immense toboggan.

Sign of how displeased the automaton felt about giving her access, the pool which was there to stop her fall was filled with molten metal.

The pain was incredible, and that was when most of her body was already tortured by the symbiotes.

But Drew endured, as her body immediately covered her with a layer of silvery metal.

She stood. She felt so weak...and yet so powerful.

There was a seat in the centre of the alcove, and while there were many screens showing her what the whale could perceive around her, there were no controls, no levers...nothing.

Something, excuse her the bad pun, was definitely *fishy*.

“**You will give me command**. **Tell me how to use your full capabilities**.”

There was a rumble of...approval? At least it felt that way.

And suddenly, hundreds of compartments, opened, and the ‘seat’ was surrounded by countless screens, buttons and so many advanced commands one would take hundreds of hours just to learn the basics.

Yes, the metallic monster was definitely not cooperative at all.

Drew began to elongate her nails, and soon they were so long they looked like comical claws. But for her purposes, it was excellent.

Because when the whale tried to bury her under hundreds of complicated systems, Drew stabbed violently the closest consoles.

Instantly, clarity filled her mind. As she had guessed, about three-fourths of what was in front of her was just there to destabilise and confuse there.

But now she could see what was distraction and what wasn’t.

The metallic whale tried to resist, but it was only mere seconds before Drew located the ‘brain’, so to speak, and once she had, the Charmspeak could do what it did best...again.

“**I am your mistress now. Give me full control**.”

The monster fought her mentally...and she crushed it ferociously.

At last, the environment around her changed, becoming a proper throne that doubled as command seat and from which each of her moves could determine the correct course of the gigantic automaton she had forced to submit to her will.

Drew felt a lot of pain...and it didn’t matter.

Was it what the son of Poseidon felt when his crazy plans succeeded, no matter the personal cost he had to pay?

“Open communications with the Inevitable Doom, Unit MD-X. Highly-secure frequency only.”

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Perseus had been just entering his quarters when the pricey communication rang.

As such, Lou Ellen was able to watch as a short-lived expression of relief appeared on the son of Poseidon’s face.

The daughter of Hecate was a bit relieved, to be honest; for all the rumours of infallibility, it was good to know Perseus Jackson could doubt like a normal Demigod.

This thought rapidly disappeared, as a holographic screen materialised, and Drew Tanaka appeared.

The Goddess of Love’s daughter had changed a lot.

The futurist armour had disappeared; now her body looked like it had been covered in metallic silvery paint leaving very little to imagination.

Of course, that wasn’t the case. The metal was both covering and part of her body now. The body-paint was a true silver armour, and Lou Ellen had seen her transform her limbs into lethal weapons before they reached Moby Dick.

“You were able to take full control of Moby Dick.”

“*No thanks to you*,” the daughter of Aphrodite peevishly replied. Strangely, her mouth was moving, but what was read on the lips was not what they were hearing via the holo-recorder. “*Would it have killed you to tell me your plan*?”

“My plan is always to let my subordinates react to the unexpected.” Perseus offered a fake expression of innocence that many pious men would have fallen for. “That way, they tend to be quick on their feet and acquire survival skills.”

Drew Tanaka didn’t seem to enjoy that. Then again, Lou Ellen didn’t like it either; and she hadn’t been the one thrown overboard for a confrontation with something that could have sunk their mega-yacht with a single tail strike.

“*I will make you pay for that, Jackson*.”

Many beings in this world or the next would have shown a significant amount of fear, for the black-haired Demigoddess didn’t sound like she was joking at all.

Perseus Jackson cackled, and he did it loudly.

“I await eagerly your legendary vengeance, oh Mistress of Moby Dick.” The green eyes shone, and were accompanied by a large grin. “Oh, and by the way, congratulations.”

“*For not dying*?”

“For successfully completing a Great Quest that was first offered to Captain Ahab, and which led to the demise of at least two hundred Demigods, counting Greek and Roman adventurers. I will prepare the paperwork. You should have the million or so of Drachmas transferred to your account within a week or so.”

“*One...million?”*

“About that, yes,” the astonishment seemed to amuse Perseus Jackson greatly...because it was the kind of things he was doing for fun and giggles. Obviously. “It’s a pity this Great Quest’s rewards were not changed to correctly take into account the effects of inflation, but still, that’s a very nice reward, and unlike the rest of the loot, it is all yours.”

Suddenly, the blonde sorceress wondered how many incomplete Great Quests had Perseus decided to tackle on when they departed New Byzantium...because between the Drakon Fimbulvetr and Moby Dick, it looked like the answer was ‘all of them’.

“*Don’t think it will save you from my vengeance*.”

“I wouldn’t dream about it, dear.” The infernal grin had not disappeared...in fact, it may have become wider.

“*Fine. What is the plan*?”

“The plan is simplicity itself. The *Inevitable Doom* is going to eliminate the few Triumvirate scout ships which are rushing in this direction in a desperate bid to discover what my intentions are. That way, they will be in the dark. Once our missiles have sent them to feed the monsters of this sea, you will be free to engage the fleet of Pear Island. Moby Dick’s white cuirass is completely impenetrable to any modern weapon our opponents could possibly muster...so feel free to go wild.”

This was...this was indeed simple.

No, correction, this was indeed brutally simple.

They had all seen Moby Dick from the outside.

It was something that Gods and Goddesses should engage, not mere Demigods and common monsters.

It was a small island in its own right; it had largely the mass and the speed to sink one of the US super-carriers.

“You are hereby given command of the attack Mecha-Whale *Moby Dick*, Drew Tanaka. Make sure all systems are ready...and then unleash the wrath of this fully operational sea automaton upon our enemies.”

The next grin was decidedly a very malicious thing.

“Let’s have a short prayer for the salvation of their souls. They really are going to need it.”

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

“It’s impressive how humans are able to walk in circles until they have dug a trench without any tool but their feet.”

Lucius Vorenus stopped walking, and glared at the insolent monster he was forced to tolerate.

“You are insolent.”

“And you, you are afraid,” the bipedal fox calling himself ‘Master Goupil’ bared his fangs...and those were long and sharp. “Why are you so surprised? The enemy was kind enough to warn you it was coming. Surely you didn’t think the Sea God’s spawn was going to let your scouts shadow his flagship until he engaged the pirates’ vanguard.”

“I am not afraid!”

The kit of the Teumessian Fox laughed...and this sound irritated deeply Lucius Vorenus.

“If you are not afraid, why the anger?”

“Because I don’t understand why the super-yacht and the pseudo-ironclad the Demigods have used to sail away from the Forge are taking such a large detour.” The Praetor admitted. “The *Spear of the Gods* is some nine hours away from the island; they can’t possibly locate it with precision. If the survivors of the Drakon fight believe they have the firepower to win against these defences, they should have attacked immediately, not wasted several hours. And if they don’t have any intention to confront the fortifications built to protect the Golden Fleece, then they should have killed our scouts the moment they left the Forge, not let them shadow their ships for many hours.”

The foxy monster shrugged.

“Why bother applying logic when there is possibly none? They say the spawn of the Earthshaker is mad. The more we learn about him, the more I’m inclined to agree. I just hope we will get him alive. My brothers and sisters are eager to see if his flesh is as succulent as the one of other Demigods.”

Lucius couldn’t hide the disgust he felt for this...this monster. Fortunately, the moment approached where the Triumvirate wouldn’t need Goupil and his band of carnivorous foxes. And on that blessed day...many debts would be settled.

“Praetor! Status change on the long-range detection array! We detect two ships...signatures are consistent with the profile of the super-yacht and its escort!”

“Ha!” Goupil exclaimed. “It seems that the period of boredom is about to come to an end.”

“Indeed.” Lucius watched the red-lit dots for several seconds, until the possibility of a feint or decoys was so remote it wasn’t worth considering. “They are coming. All the forces, be they naval or land-based, are to be put at maximal alert. Empty the depots, prepare all the guns to fire. Prepare to unleash Plan Alesia.”

“That might not be the best idea...” Goupil interjected. “They are coming straight for our throats.”

Lucius Vorenus frowned. But as he looked at the course the two enemy ships had decided to go for...

“That...doesn’t make any sense. By the pits of Hell, what are they thinking? If they do not change course soon, our fleet will cross their ‘T’. We will likely be able to sink them because they can use a third of their hidden armament...unless they have a significant range advantage with their guns, it simply doesn’t make any sense.”

“And yet they are doing it,” the bipedal fox pointed out. “I smell a trap.”

“Yes.” Lucius watched the battlefield, trying to discern something that he could have missed. “But where could a trap be triggered? There are only two ships sailing in that direction, they are now fully in our detection array. The radars would have told us if there was an aerial force nearby ready to descend from the skies and launch an airborne assault. As for the underwater threats, well, we have-“

“The buoys detect something! Praetor, all the underwater sensors are reporting something huge is-“

Many screens went dark and a couple of seconds later, explosions began to rock out.

“The underwater minefields are under attack! Hundreds are disappearing as we speak!”

Lucius stormed out of his bunker...and froze.

For suddenly, the fleet he had been entrusted with was not alone anymore.

It was facing an enormous mass of white, which was getting bigger and bigger as it surfaced.

It was not a submarine.

As its form became clearer, what it was became easily identifiable.

It was a gigantic white whale.

And it was rising, towering over the warships, which all were suddenly struck by a feeling of terror.

“FIRE! FIRE AT WILL! SEND IT TO HELL!”

Missiles roared. Cannons opened fire by the hundreds.

For a brief moment, the entire sea around the island was covered in smoke...but a few seconds, the wind blew away, to reveal a perfectly unharmed whale.

There was an angry sound coming from the white behemoth....and then it let itself collide with the water.

The *Musashi*, flagship of the Golden Fleece’s fleet, did not have time to evade.

The impact was bloodily terrifying, and the former Japanese Dreadnought...it did not resist.

In less time it took to say it, one of the greatest warships to have been built was broken in half, and then proceeded to rapidly sink.

It was a bloody disaster.

It was just the beginning.

The impact of the whale crashing into the Dreadnought had created a massive wave, and four other warships instantly went down with the *Musashi*.

Sea mines began to detonate by the dozens. In fact, all the anti-Telekhine weapons were detonating at once...and it was useless. The white whale was completely immune to all their weapons, be they aboard their warships or hidden on the hidden deep platforms.

The sea was aflame.

Gunpowder magazines were exploding right and left.

Lucius Vorenus gaped...before suddenly understanding what his enemy had warned him of.

“Annihilation Tide...Doom Whale...that bastard...”

“The fleet must withdraw at once,” Goupil told him seriously. “I don’t know how the Sea God’s spawn convinced Moby Dick to obey his commands, but the pirates don’t have a single chance against it. Better they evacuate and remain as a fleet-in-being in the enemy’s back than-“

“NO!” Lucius Vorenus raged. He was not going to fail his Caesar, not here, not again! “They must advance and destroy the Demigods’ ships! If we kill them, whatever means of control they have over the white whale will deactivate and we will able to mop them up!”

“Yeah, about that...” Goupil bared his fangs. “It seems many pirate captains are rather disagreeing with your interpretation of the military situation!”

The Praetor of the Triumvirate gritted his teeth as he was forced to acknowledge the Teumessian Kit had a point. Many pirates had seen the destruction of the Musashi, and were now trying to desert.

“Let’s return to the bunker...I will remind them who holds the leash...the explosive collars are not there to be pretty.”

**14 December 2006, Armoured Super-Mega-Yacht *Inevitable Doom*, approaches of ‘Pear Island’**

Dakota was no longer stranger to one-sided slaughters.

Some part of him would always regret it.

The other part was very relieved that so far, the butchery was entirely on the other side.

Still, it was...awful.

Countless warships were in flames or busy sinking in a scene which felt like an apocalypse.

Galleons had been torn apart, their masts broken before they fell, taking in their fall hundreds of sailors to death, before crushing hundreds more. Galleys and Ironclads looked like they had been disintegrated by the heaviest battering ram in existence...and considering what Moby Dick had done to them, the description was horribly accurate.

As the *Inevitable Doom* had slowed down considerably, one could hardly miss the colossal numbers of corpses floating, dispersed across a fleet worth of debris.

It was the end of the Triumvirate naval supremacy...and it was worse than everything he’d imagined.

The air was filled with the screams of the dying. There were cannons and other weapons still firing, but not that many...and in the distance, once more the engine of destruction called Moby Dick resurfaced again before ramming several ships of the line.

The cannonballs and the harpoons bounced off the white armour, and the whale-shaped automaton continued its vengeful campaign of slaughter.

There were many tail strikes, which aside from causing severe damage, forced all ships in the vicinity to receive phenomenal quantities of water at the worst moment possible.

There were instances where the thing that was commanded by the daughter of Aphrodite simply passed under the keel and broke it with an unblockable assault, guaranteeing the ship was doomed no matter what its crew tried to save it.

Weapons thundered.

Guns and countless artifices were unleashed. The Triumvirate leadership left in charge of the island defence was clearly pushing for all attempts that could make a difference.

Dakota knew it wasn’t going to solve anything.

The same was true about the slave collars.

At some point, you had to acknowledge some battles were lost.

The pirates who had been assembled here had not been cowards.

They had been ready for a fight.

But they couldn’t do anything against Moby Dick, and a gun pointed against their neck was only going to spread despair and sink their morale.

“Operation Doom Whale,” the son of Bacchus sighed before opening his flask and drinking a good dose of wine. He knew he shouldn’t, alcohol made him more susceptible to the kind of things Jackson wanted him to do, but the bloodbath...Dakota really needed that drink.

“To be fair,” Ethan Nakamura said grimly, “*he* warned them.”

“Yes,” Dakota swallowed more wine before replying. “Yes, he did. And I know I shouldn’t feel pity. If we had tried to make it a fair fight, these pirates and their Triumvirate masters wouldn’t have hesitated to kill us. It’s just...”

It was just that there was so much destruction. There were so many dead.

It was victory, yes, but the magnitude of the massacre...

“It will be soon over,” the son of Nemesis commented emotionlessly, “there are only a dozen warships left in action by now, and some look like they are going to try their chance by throwing their ship on the beach, and damn the consequences.”

“Isn’t the beach heavily mined?”

“Like I said,” Ethan said darkly, “damn the consequences.”

Dakota grimaced again, and finished emptying his flask. There were times when you really wished you were drunk...not that he was going to say it aloud, Jackson might teleport behind him and ‘encourage’ him to drown into a new barrel of Eleutherian wine.

“Poor bastards,” the Roman Demigod reacted after one more Cruiser disappeared forever after a ‘smashing crash’ of Moby Dick. “They didn’t have a chance.”

“No.” He didn’t need the confirmation, but that was good to hear. “In fact, I suspect Jackson only warned the commander of the Triumvirate garrison because if our daughter of Aphrodite was unable to tame Moby Dick, it would give us a splendid distraction to attack elsewhere. And if his plan proceeded like he had imagined...there was just nothing they could do to save their fleet.”

One more galleon went down as Moby Dick rammed it, and dozens of men fell into the Sea of Monsters. Mere seconds later, more ammunition stockpiles blew up. There were bright explosions, and for a few seconds, it was like new volcanoes had been born in the Zone Mortalis.

This time, the pirate fleet – or more likely, the remnants of it – had enough and several warships, likely no more than seven or eight, began to flee as fast as their sails or other methods of propulsion allowed.

Whoever was in command there must have realised that slave collars would do no good, for the galleons and other warships seemed to be able to get away in a coordinated fashion.

The rumble of the artillery diminished, until it went completely silent.

The other sources of explosions decreased too.

“By the Pit, that was extremely brutal.” Dakota coughed. “Well, at least we now have the answer why our mad leader was not reluctant at all to risk Drew Tanaka’s life.”

Whether you admired cold-hearted calculations or not, you couldn’t deny that the risk was justified by the potential gains.

In a worst-case scenario, the daughter of Aphrodite lost her life and Moby Dick was impossible to use again...but then the Triumvirate was likely going to have massive difficulties compensating for these atrocious losses.

“Yes,” Ethan continued to watch grimly the flames and the rest of the carnage. “All the defences...they ended up to be traps for the ones who placed them. The warships were trapped into a kill-zone with no choice but to fight Moby Dick, and the underwater mines among many things were corralling them before the white whale dealt with them. Operation Annihilation Tide...the name was not an empty boast.”

“Truer words have never been spoken...” the son of Bacchus murmured before clearing his throat. “Of course, that leaves the fortified island to storm. Unless the God who created Moby Dick was as insane as Jackson, I doubt a whale automaton was built with a land-mode to wreck armies like it did smashed apart this Triumvirate fleet...”

\*\*\*\*

Drew felt incredibly...weak.

The moment she had left Moby Dick, it was like all energy had left her.

At least most of her body had returned to a normal colour...save part of her right leg. It was still metallic silver.

And as she arrived on the deck of the Inevitable Doom, the daughter of Aphrodite could verify her powerless wasn’t just in her mind. Not when she was suddenly wracked by pain. Not when she coughed blood.

Then a wave struck her, and the suffering grew just a bit more tolerable.

“Hydrokinesis as a basic healing ability?”

“My dear sorceress lieutenant, most of our bodies are made of water.” A voice she knew very well arrived to her ears.

Her eyes were unable to really see everything happening around her.

Suddenly, everything seemed hazy and indistinct.

“We’re beginning to lose her. Her body is-“

“Call the son of Apollo here. Now!”

“We must remove the symbiotes. Immediately!”

“This would do nothing but kill her faster. Now obey my instructions!”

Drew tried to struggle against the waves of pain, but it was a battle she would never be able to pain.

She fell, and darkness claimed her.

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

Lucius Vorenus could only glare in hatred as the super-yacht and its insolent Demigods stopped just outside of his artillery’s extreme range, soon imitated by the modified ironclad following on its heels.

As for the monstrous mechanical whale, it had disappeared under the waves again, though the Praetor didn’t believe for a second it had left.

Not after the near-unimaginable amount of destruction that had been unleashed against the Triumvirate forces and their ‘allies’.

“Two hours...it took them two hours to annihilate an entire fleet...”

Nine ships had fled the battlefield in the end, but that didn’t change anything. For all intents and purpose, the Triumvirate fleet ordered to defend the Golden Fleece was gone.

“Praetor,” one of his Legionnaires saluted. “All our communications are jammed now.”

Lucius grimaced.

“The enemy wishes to keep Neo Isis unaware of what just happened.”

Whether it was because the son of Poseidon wanted to make sure reinforcements didn’t arrive in time or because he wanted to ambush the *Spear of the Gods*...the Triumvirate Praetor didn’t know.

And after what he just saw, Lucius was almost afraid to guess.

A certain bipedal fox began to cough on his right.

“It might be wise to open negotiations. I’m sure Perseus Jackson can be quite reasonable...”

Lucius Vorenus drew his gladius from its scabbard.

“What happened to all those ‘Sea God’s spawn’ insults and the previous arrogance, *fox*?”

“This was before my brothers and I watched him destroying your armada! And he didn’t even sink one ship himself! We were told we were there as insurance! Your fleet was supposed to destroy them, or at least exhaust them! As it is, it is doubtful you injured anyone from their crews!”

“Your pay will be doubled.”

“There are moments when you could multiply my pay by ten times, and it still wouldn’t be enough,” the Teumessian monster shook his vulpine head, “no, I have seen enough. I have no wish to fight *that*! The Primordial Night only knows what new sort of madness-“

“**Deserters...will not live...another day**.”

There was no warning. Far on the red sea, there were new explosions and black flames.

Lucius Vorenus grimaced. Unless he was badly off-mark, the Praetor could acknowledge all the pirate crews who had survived the wrath of the Great White ‘Whale’ had just perished.

And yes, the Roman officer was sure everyone on the island had heard the implicit threat, from Goupil nearby to the half-drowned pirates staggering towards the first trenches.

“You were saying?” There was no triumphalism in his voice.

Yes, it was going to limit desertions and cowardice. But Lucius had no doubt that without his commanders to protect him...he would be executed in equally ruthless manner if he showed an insufficient amount of fighting determination.

“I will stay and fight.” The bipedal fox bared his teeth. “So will my brothers. But I want to make it high and clear that’s because the Guardian scares me more than the son of Poseidon does.”

The Praetor remained silent.

His eyes were focused upon the mosaic of destruction and death that was presented in front of the beach. It hadn’t been supposed to happen like this. There were rumours – most of them likely true – the Gods and the Goddesses of Olympus were not to intervene to help these crazy Demigods.

Yet for the first time Lucius Vorenus wondered if the inaction of the deities that had sired these half-bloods was really a hindrance.

“The jamming of the communications will alert the *Spear of the Gods* better than any message we could have sent. Neo Isis will come. And the main fleet is less than a day away.”

“This would be all very reassuring,” Goupil snarked, “if an entire fleet had not been sunk in mere hours.”

Lucius glared at his insolent ‘subordinate’.

“The sea defences are no more, but our land defences are intact and operational. And unless the ‘doom whale’ suddenly grows legs, the Suicide Squad will have to storm the beach like every attacker since the dawn of ages had to.”

And the beach itself was a murderous kill-zone if there ever was one.

The Demigod commanding this force was crazy, resourceful, and dangerous, but he had fewer than one hundred soldiers, and most of them were as mortal as he was.

Blasted by landmines, shredded by artillery shells, or burned alive by the cursed fire traps waiting for them, the result would be all the same: the Demigods would die in droves, mixing their half-divine blood to the black sands.

“I know the tactical difficulties a landing under enemy fire represents, thank you Praetor,” Goupil replied with a sneer. “I just can’t help to think that Perseus Jackson tailored exactly his strategy to annihilate your fleet like it was a minor irritation. If he had a plan for that, he must have one to deal with us before reinforcements can arrive.”

“**He is a mere Demigod**.”

The Guardian’s voice...caused Lucius and everyone close to him to shiver.

“All the artillery on the heights must be ready to fire the moment I give the orders. Our enemy has proven more ingenious and tenacious than we expected...but it ends now.”

The anger returned, an inferno of rage spreading in his chest and veins. He had many friends aboard the Tsunami, and all of them were now in the Halls of Pluto waiting to be judged.

“If he dares landing against these defences, the career of Perseus Jackson ends here.”

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

“Drew will live.”

“Good.”

“But not for long,” it would have taken someone really stupid to not notice Michael Yew’s anger, and Perseus had never pretended to be so oblivious. “What were you even thinking-“

“My dear healer,” the former Tyrant kept a playful tone to his voice, “would you have preferred fighting the Dreadnought *Musashi* with your guitar and a sword?”

“What? No!”

“Would you have enjoyed boarding five galleons in close succession with no back-up save an explosive-addicted penguin?”

“Kaboom! Ha! Ha!”

“No, but-“

“I heard many protests and angry comments once the true scope of Operation Doom Whale was revealed,” the son of Poseidon continued to speak calmly, hiding his disappointment beneath a clam facade. “Unfortunately, I also have completely missed the minutes when valuable alternative plans were proposed.”

It said quite something that the best ‘plan’ which had arrived to his ears was Rico’s.

And yes, in case you wondered, the invasion strategy consisted of bombarding the island until there was no enemy alive.

It was honest. It was brutal.

Unfortunately, given the identity of the ‘Guardian’ waiting for them in the shadows of this Parthenon’s dark copy, Perseus wasn’t sure they had enough ammunition to achieve it.

“This isn’t fair, Jackson.”

“Olympus doesn’t care about fairness, son of Apollo. Do you want to be the one to explain to Hera’s ex-husband that you were unable to recover the Golden Fleece?”

The guitar-holder had the good sense not to answer that very rhetorical question.

The green-eyed Demigod let silence reign for a few heartbeats before grinning.

“And by the way, if Drew’s salvation was not tied to the recovery of the Golden Fleece, this would be the moment I would stop the assault and go attack another island.”

“WHAT?”

“No need to scream, dear Antigone...” the ex-Goddess was mostly mortal, but there was nothing wrong about the power of her lungs.

“That’s Hera for you...and what do you mean abandoning the assault? You have just destroyed a fleet of the Triumvirate!”

“Well, technically, it is Moby Dick we must congratulate...” the son of Poseidon chuckled, “and I thought my reasoning would be evident. As long as the Golden Fleece is here, the Triumvirate will be forced to commit a significant naval force to defend it. In all modesty, I could easily transform Pear Island into an anchor that would strangle their military power.”

“But you aren’t going to do it.” The daughter of Hecate was back...and as always, she confirmed what the old and the wise knew: that it was best to fight an army of men rather than the fury of a scorned sorceress.

“I won’t.” The leader of the Suicide Squad confirmed. “First, we need to save Drew’s life. I don’t fancy sailing on the Sea of Monsters with an angry Moby Dick in pursuit. Secondly, I made a pact with a certain Goddess. I will play my part; what the Goddess will do is her business. And last but not least...I promised a certain Praetor that I was going to annihilate his forces if he didn’t surrender promptly.”

Luke Castellan coughed.

“Legionnaires don’t have a big tradition of surrendering. Not even to fellow Romans.”

“Yes, my heroic lieutenant, strange as it might sound to your ears, I was aware of that.”

“In that case,” Dakota McDonald emptied another flask, “I suppose there’s no problem to insist the land defences of this...this Pear Island...the fortifications and the artillery redoubts are all intact.”

“Not at all,” Perseus nodded, “you could have added we have lost the effect of surprise that was ours when Moby Dick broke in half the *Musashi*.”

The son of Bacchus...blinked.

“You are too calm.” He said in an accusatory tone. “Please, please, let it be a reasonable plan for once...”

“Please?” Annabeth Chase scoffed. “This is the son of Poseidon who thought going through a hell was the perfect method to make a triumphal entrance into the Sea of Monsters! The plan is sure as hell not going to be reasonable...”

“I agree with that,” Miranda Gardiner crossed her arms. “What is it going to be this time? Are you going to drop a mountain-sized stalagmite upon the heights the enemy fortified?”

“No,” Perseus cheerfully replied. “Not that it’s a bad idea, but I didn’t think to grab a stalagmite from the Forge of all Perils. However...”

The son of Poseidon turned his head slightly to look at Bianca di Angelo, whose presence here could only mean the magical net had been opened and the second phase of the plan could begin.

“However, I have something far better than a stalagmite to break the defences of the Triumvirate.”

Exerting his powers this time was not complicated at all. They were far away enough from the beach for the legacy given by Poseidon to be strong, and Moby Dick’s carnage had made sure death was omnipresent in the water.

“**RISE**.”

It was a pulse of magic reigning over the liquid element and the abyss.

It was a command.

It was a prayer.

It was tyranny, and it was madness.

“What the hell-“

For a heartbeat, there were only splashes and magic.

But it was only for a second.

Then tens of thousands of scaly heads emerged, ready to obey his orders.

“BEHOLD!” The commanding officer of the Great Quest cackled. “BEHOLD MY SECOND INVINCIBLE WEAPON! THE UNDEAD IGUANA ARMY!”

It had been a pain to recover all the intact corpses across the Forge of All Perils and imbue them with Necromantic magic.

It had been even more of a pain to hide them from magical monitoring and transport them via a colossal net trailing behind the *Inevitable Doom*.

There was a new colossal splash, and a snake-like construct, one which had been assembled from several Drakonic bones, hissed and thrashed, with the joints and several spikes coursing with the remnants of frost magic.

“And this is my third invincible weapon. The Drakonic undead construct!”

“That...that was your plan from the very beginning?” what a pleasure to have the penguins frozen in comical poses...

Perseus smiled.

“It doesn’t matter how much ammunition the enemy has if I have an army that can soak up the damage and keep coming. It doesn’t matter how good the defensive positions, for every soldier and monster that falls will be instantly resurrected to fight by our side!”

Already, the effects could be felt all across the approaches of Pear Island.

In his previous life, when he had been Kairos Theodosian, necromancy had been something he had dabbled into. But his instances of animating constructs and corpses were not common.

Triumphant, however...the greatest Dread Empress of Praes had plenty of times forced entire armies of undead to fight under her banner, despite the corpses being reduced to the state of skeletons.

Here and now? With tens of thousands of corpses which had just drowned and that the fishes had barely the time to bite once or twice?

The result was never in doubt.

In thirty seconds, the thousands of undead iguanas were joined by an army of undead pirates, corsairs, and other former slaves of the Triumvirate.

Perseus didn’t have a proper count, but this combined army had easily to be over thirty thousand.

“Operation Doom Whale is officially over. Operation Zombie can begin.”

The former Tyrant allowed himself another megalomaniacal laughter before giving the only order which truly mattered.

“**ATTACK AND NO QUARTER**!”

**Author’s note**: This was the first part of the Battle for the Golden Fleece. Part two will be next chapter. I freely admit I haven’t found a good name for it yet...and for Operation Zombie. I don’t think I need to explain further the plan for that one, don’t I?

The Triumvirate thought they had a good idea what Perseus Jackson could unleash.

By the time this day is over, they will understand how wrong they were...

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

*Judith – Huntress of Artemis*

*Kalinda – Huntress of Artemis*

*Eudoxia – Huntress of Artemis*

*Douglas Smith – son of Volturnus*

*Phoebe – Huntress of Artemis, daughter of Eris*

**Wall of Dishonour**:

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

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

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

**Reinforcements**:

Bombardment Galleon *Second Chance*

Anne Bonny – pirate and daughter of Demeter, formally given command of the *Second Chance*

42 Legionnaires of New Constantinople, commanded by Centurion Elvis Knight

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