**Chapter 14**

**Dreams of Warships**

**4 July 2006, Lotus Casino, Las Vegas, United States of America (de jure)**

The bank always won.

Adamantios was proud to say the Lotus-eaters, a noble race he was proud of administering via his seat on the Board of Directors, had elevated this principle to the rank of art.

Thousands of humans entered the Lotus Casino every year.

They never left.

The luckiest ones were those whose emotions were the most powerful, the ones which could convince his brethren and himself that letting them win represented a buffet of powerful bursts of joy and desire.

Those ones were authorised to win for as long as the bank desired. Money was not an issue; yes, by the laws governing the divine order, the Lotus-eaters’ casino cards had unlimited credit, but it wasn’t like the mortals were going to escape. Between the essence of the Lotus flowers dispersed by the palace’s air conditioner, the enchantments woven in the gaming machines, the table games, and the other distractions, mortals never thought about leaving the Lotus Casino.

Well, they never thought about leaving until they began to lose. But at that point, it was far too late for them. When this came around, the men and women suddenly realised that after decades of the Lotus-eaters draining them of their most powerful emotions, the will to resist was completely missing.

And then they were bound in chains and enslaved.

The Lotus Casino was an extremely legal and profitable enterprise, with all the paperwork to justify it, and above all, it allowed the Lotus-eaters to *feed*.

But too much was never enough. By accumulating wealth and investing it judiciously in both the Mist-shrouded world and the divine order of the Olympians, the Lotus-eaters were essential to the status quo, a guarantee Zeus would never turn against them.

Granted, it was a slim possibility, but it wasn’t as anyone had ever thought the Master of Olympus would ever throw his wife from the aforementioned mountain and strip her of her immortality.

No, their prudence was perfectly rational. It wasn’t paranoia if the enemies were really after you.

And in the end, the bank had to win.

“I think we have a troublemaker, Director Adamantios,” the intervention of his subordinate managed to break him off a fascinating family playing like madmen on a series of brand-new slot machines. “Blackjack, table thirteen.”

“Really?” This was a novelty this year. Assuredly the Lotus flowers impregnating the air didn’t prevent cheating per se, but between the state-of-the-art security system – which was very visible so as to deter the crooks – and more esoteric contingencies, it was a rare ‘guest’ which tried. “Lead to me to this mortal. I want to see how he’s doing before explaining him in detail how *monumental* his error was.”

“At once, Director!”

It took only a moment of navigation between the crowds of the different table games before reaching his target. And yes, those who didn’t play Roulette, Poker, Baccarat, and all the games currently ‘offered’ by his brethren playing the role of dealers were almost as important as the players themselves; it wasn’t because they weren’t playing that the Lotus-eaters couldn’t play with them.

The moment Adamantios could see the cheater, his first reaction was that the man who had dared challenging the established rules in the game of Blackjack was not so much a man but a boy...and this grin reminded him someone...something that had come down from the official announcements of Olympus...but after a couple of seconds, he was somehow unable to put a name on this face.

“You are cheating, Mister Jack.” His subordinate’s accusation interrupted all conversations, and a powerful sense of betrayal and astonishment echoed deliciously in the Lotus Casino.

Somehow, this didn’t faze at all the criminal.

Instead, the black-haired individual grinned.

Adamantios didn’t like this expression at all...especially as he couldn’t sense anything from the cheating soul....there was something about him that-

“If I am cheating,” the grin transformed into something terrible, “**why do you have card ejectors in your sleeves**?”

Adamantios began to chuckle at the ridiculous accusation. The Lotus-eaters never needed something as stupid as a card ejector to manipulate the outcome of a minor card game to win, obviously.

The chuckle died as a torrent of cards dropped from the sleeves of the Blackjack table’s dealer.

Such was his shock that Adamantios had not the reflex to pick one and notice that all of them were aces decorated with a grinning skull.

A couple of seconds later, it was too late.

As the cards never stopped dropping – to the point they were soon growing into a respectable pile on their own – the emotions of the hundreds of mortals flared dangerously.

Wrath.

Betrayal.

Rage.

Fury.

“My dear clients, I can assure you-“

“THEY CHEATED US OF OUR MONEY!”

“SOMEONE CALL THE AUTHORITIES!”

“GIVE ME BACK MY CHIPS!”

Adamantios tried to shout, to bring back the calm.

The chaos which engulfed the Lotus Casino in the next seconds made a mockery of his efforts.

**5July 2006, street outside the Lotus Casino, Las Vegas**

Perseus was whistling as he left the Lotus Casino behind him, a large briefcase in hand.

Ignoring the flamboyant sport cars on his right, the son of Poseidon looked at his watch. Ten minutes past midnight.

In total, the Lotus ‘affair’ had taken three hours...not a bad performance, considering the Lotus-eaters had a considerable number of time-distortion magical devices in and around their principal headquarters.

“You made it too easy.”

The green-eyed Demigod raised his eyebrows and gasped as if the newcomer’s arrival was a surprise.

“Oh, dear! Isn’t it my heroic thief lieutenant?”

Luke Castellan simply rolled his eyes.

“You didn’t need a good thief for that job, Jackson.”

“Maybe,” the ex-Tyrant agreed, “but I preferred hiring a good one. Just in case things didn’t go according to the plan, you understand.”

“And what made you suspect things would not go according to the plan?”

“The fact I had to rely on very incomplete information to organise this operation,” the leader of the Suicide Squad replied honestly this time.

Luke was intelligent. The realisation arrived before a minute was out.

“The di Angelo siblings,” the blonde-haired Quester voiced before grimacing. “There wasn’t anyone else?”

“My heroic thief lieutenant, the Lotus-eaters aren’t in a habit of allowing mortals to leave their gambling establishments alive. The only beings who can visit Casinos like this one and be certain to not be dragged in chains after being drained of all their emotions are the Gods. Anyone else is not leaving. Period.”

Something else he could thank Hera for...if he one day decided to thank ‘Antigone’ for anything.

“You aren’t worried the enraged ‘gamers’ will destroy the Casino and provoke a wave of panic in the streets of Las Vegas?”

“I wish it could happen,” Perseus admitted before frowning. “But by the time I left, they were tripling the intensity of their flowery drug in the air. That’s why I decided to immunise ourselves before coming, by the way.”

“Yeah, yeah, congratulate yourself on genial plan...”

“Well, if you insist...” Luke Castellan groaned in despair. “Fine. My heroic lieutenant is a kill-joy. But no, I don’t expect the Lotus-eaters to have too many problems subduing their future slaves.”

The two Demigods began to walk into the warm night, all the while ignoring the long limos and the egregious decorations Las Vegas considered normal when you could see through the Mist.

“I know you insist you’re a villain and all of that,” the teenage son of Hermes began, “but wouldn’t it have been better to free everyone and destroy this Casino? The Lotus-eaters are...err...”

“In plain English, they can be considered psychic vampires,” Perseus nodded absently, “modern culture is all about sexy creatures which drain you of your blood, but it’s naive. The dangerous predators don’t leave a mark on their victims...or do not leave a trace of the victims when they’re satiated.”

“Yes. That.” Luke Castellan cleared his throat. “Let me guess: they are more redoubtable than they appear physically?”

“Oh no,” the leader of the Suicide Squad shook his head, “given a proper weapon or two, I’m sure you could have destroyed this ‘Lotus Casino’ by yourself.”

“Then why?”

The son of Poseidon didn’t want to reveal too many of the plans he had for the place, but not giving out enough information would shake Luke’s loyalty, and he couldn’t have that.

“The simplest reason I didn’t vandalise completely this place, my heroic thief, is that it won’t be enough. The ‘Lotus Casino’ we entered in Las Vegas is not the only one to exist. I confirmed the existence of at least three others, and I know the exact coordinates of the one built on Macao. And while those dreadful Lotus-eaters have some sort of magical portals to evacuate from one to the other in a hurry if they have to, we can’t use them.”

He had tried tonight in the confusion. It had been a failure.

“When I will seriously act against them,” Perseus continued, “and make no mistake, this time will come, I will make sure this will be a coordinated offensive. I don’t want the rats scurrying away and rebuilding one new Casino within a year.”

Something which would undoubtedly happen if a ‘lone casino raid’ was launched. The Lotus-eaters were organised, skilled at playing their games...and very, very rich.

“The other problem is that they have Olympian protection.”

“What?”

The Demigod who had broken several armies of Hell looked with unhidden amusement at his lieutenant.

“We’re in the middle of Las Vegas, Luke Castellan. The Lotus-eaters aren’t exactly hiding themselves. The Dark One, under special circumstances, made sure his only two mortal children were safe here. Believe me, the Gods aren’t ignorant of their presence and what they’re doing to the mortals.”

“Oh...who...our Camp Director?”

It was a good guess, given that parties, madness, and games were in his jurisdiction.

But it was only a partial good guess.

“Good try, but in this case, it’s likely the authorisation came from the very top of Olympus.”

And it wasn’t likely to end, as Zeus was in dire need to replenish his empty treasury. If he was a betting Demigod, the ex-Tyrant would say the King of the Gods was closing his eyes in exchange of a cut of the profits.

“Anyway, provoking a scandal under false identities and generating a few hours of chaos will be completely ignored by the Council,” assuming the Lotus-eaters wanted to admit in public they couldn’t stop a single Demigod against their entire security personnel, “and for a night of work with a cheap distraction, we gained what we’re after.”

“The weapon schematics Daedalus sold them in the 1980s to expunge some of his debts,” Luke spoke in resignation, materialising in his hands the twin of the briefcase he was carrying. “The question I’m asking myself, is, if I went after this objective, why the hell do you have another briefcase in your hand?”

“Because while everyone was trying to beat the Lotus-eaters with their bare hands, I went to their exchange currency room, and I liberated those poor casino owners of two million dollars and about one million Drachmas.”

It was a good thing those briefcases he had acquired were weightless and could transport enormous quantities of materials, no matter how small and unthreatening they appeared to be.

“You stole the available cash, you mean. The rewards of the Great Quest weren’t enough for you?”

“My dear heroic lieutenant,” Perseus shifted to teaching mode, “the first thing you will learn tonight is that war is a terribly expensive affair. When you have the opportunity, make sure your enemy pays for it. It’s far better for your wallet.”

“If you say so.”

“I say so, and I am right. Any other questions?”

“Must we return to New Byzantium via the Labyrinth? I hate those tunnels...”

“I am not too fond of them myself. But if we want to be back in the colony before dawn and without attracting any unwanted attention...there are no other good options.”

**7 July 2006, Poseidon’s Barrack, New Byzantium, United States of America (de jure)**

“Extraordinary...” Annabeth looked at the weapon drawings again, and her excitation doubled. “Just extraordinary. And you say Daedalus invented them in 1980?”

“Oh, no,” the infuriating son of Poseidon clicked his tongue, “I said that Daedalus gave them away to pay his debts in 1980. There’s no way to know when he wrote what you have in your hands.”

“Jackson, many weapons described on those pages are missile-launchers or tubes to throw torpedoes at the enemy.”

“The science used by Daedalus was centuries ahead of his time during the Antiquity. I see no reason why this shouldn’t be the case in the twentieth-century...though with him having lost the Labyrinth and certainly enjoying Hades’ hospitality at the moment, this may be about to change.”

Why did the mad boy have to bring good arguments between two mad interventions?

“It’s going to be hell to produce those weapons in time for them to do any good, though,” the daughter of Athena didn’t understand completely every piece of lore laid on the documents in front of her, but it was evident this was extremely advanced technology, and the forges of the Hephaestus Barrack were almost certainly not up to the task. “And integrating them on a dedicated warship will be even more difficult.”

“I’m more worried about building a reasonable amount of stockpiles for the journey to the Sea of Monsters.”

Annabeth repressed violently the urge to smash his head against the blue-green table.

“Jackson...” she growled. “Unless you’ve forgotten, the Romans dismissed most of the docks’ employees and the sailors they didn’t hire for their Legion Expedition. As such, there’s literally no shipbuilding activity we can use without injecting millions of Drachmas into the Golden Horn shipyards...and it will likely take months to change that.” Though at least if they did that, maybe it would give them a priceless excuse to delay the next Great Quest? “And the forges of New Byzantium do not have the infrastructure ready to build weapons like that. The guns of the Roman Cruisers and Frigates were modified and altered over an entire decade, or the Gods gave them away when they needed to modernise their private military forces. We can’t build missile-launchers and everything with those industrial tools!”

“Well-reasoned,” Perseus Jackson applauded slowly like she had said something he had thought of a month ago...which was probably the case, sadly. “And it is why indeed our ship for this exciting adventure won’t be built at New Byzantium or using its resources. I intend to use the services of a private shipbuilding company I have the greatest confidence into.”

The daughter of Athena couldn’t hide her scepticism.

“You think this ‘shipbuilding company’ can build something which can survive the Sea of Monsters in a couple of months?”

“The latter part can only be verified by sailing to the Zone Mortalis, your Owlishness.”

The blonde-haired Demigoddess scowled. She hated that nickname.

“Of course, as you yourself said, we will have to play with high technology every step of the way. Therefore, the ship engineer will be the most important member of the crew after my humble self.”

“Well, if you hadn’t traumatised Jake Mason-“

“The once and future donkey wasn’t good enough,” the son of Poseidon interrupted her, before dismissing their ex-teammate as a negligible quantity. “The maintenance of a basic machine gun is nowhere near the level of what you and I will demand of the ship engineer.”

“Yes,” Annabeth conceded, “but you realise we need another son of Hephaestus or someone having superior mechanical engineering skills, and given how infamous we are, recruiting one is not going to be simple!”

Jackson must have waited deliberately until she said those exact words, for the door behind him opened, and Dakota McDonald entered the meeting room, dragging by one feet a young Demigod which looked...err...the Demigod looked like he had played with a barbecue, and it had ended very badly.

“A new potential candidate for the job,” the son of Bacchus commented sarcastically. “I went with your advice to ‘follow the explosions’, as you suggested. And just in time too: I think a few of the Questers’ nearby were warming up at the idea of teaching him a lesson. For some reason, they didn’t really like his fire bombardment of the volley-ball terrain.”

“Excellent work!” The mad boy complimented the no-longer-drunk Wine God’s son. “If true, we will only need a healer-doctor, a cook, and a musician before the critical positions are all filled!”

“Jackson...” A massive headache was coming, she just knew it. “Having a musician is not something vital for the success of the mission!”

“On that point, your Owlishness, my opinion and yours differ! Now, please a moment of silence, I want to be sure our new volunteer is indeed a potential ship engineer! ARE YOU ALIVE?”

Of course, the son of Poseidon screamed it as his lips were right next to the ears of the half-roasted Demigod.

“AHHHHHHHHHH!” Naturally, the boy wasn’t dead, and jumped like the end of the world had arrived before looking around fearfully.

Then his eyes fell upon Perseus Jackson.

Annabeth was pretty sure that for all he was covered in oil, coal dust, soot, and many other unclean things, ‘*Madre de Dios’* was what was whispered between his teeth.

The problem was that Perseus Jackson heard it too.

“Hola, Amigo!” The mad grin was back, and the world was going to tremble. “Your name?”

“Leo Valdez!” Oh, that was the new son of Hephaestus, the one with the explosive reputation...

And suddenly Annabeth froze, for listening to her thoughts, she realised how big the trouble they had inadvertently advanced towards...

“Leo Valdez,” Perseus Jackson slowly repeated, as if he tasted the Spanish language itself. “I’m hiring Demigods for an ***adventure***.”

“I don’t want to die...” which answered the question of ‘were the recently arrived Demigods of the Suicide Squad’s reputation?’

“Now this is completely ridiculous!” the son of Poseidon chided him. “I can assure you it was the enemy which dealt with the fatalities, not us! Well, there was this poor Scipio Varus, but he tried to assassinate me.”

The hirsute and unclean face of Leo Valdez did not believe a single word of it...especially not with the ‘reassurance’ Jackson had given.

“I can assure you the pay is excellent!”

“But I don’t want to die!”

“**Amigo**!” The Charmspeak of Jackson struck like a hammer wielded by the Gods. “**Do you have a special talent which makes you totally qualified for an engineering role**?”

“I...” It was clear the black-haired – at least Annabeth assumed the original hair colour was black – didn’t want to reveal his secret, but between a novice and the leader of the Suicide Squad, the fight was over before it had begun. “I am a pyrokinesist.”

Oh, by the Pit. No wonder that the Hephaestus Barrack was so lively since his arrival. This boy could control fire by the power of his will...

The next reaction, naturally, was as dramatic as it was predictable.

“EXCELLENT!” Jackson screamed in joy. “Why didn’t you say so earlier? You’re hired, Amigo! Welcome aboard!”

“Jackson,” the daughter of Athena began weakly, “we will have very dangerous ammunition and weapons aboard our warship, I don’t think-“

“My generosity is limitless! Every time Amigo Valdez feels like venting his fire is necessary, I will graciously give him the permission to incinerate the nearest enemy ship!”

Never mind, the madness was uncontrollable. Annabeth just hoped she would be able to find more ‘reasonable’ candidates for the healer and the cook jobs...

**9 July 2006, somewhere in Norfolk, United States of America**

The son of Hephaestus was fidgeting so much there was no point asking if he was nervous.

On the one hand, Ethan admitted the poor boy had good reasons to be. Leonidas Valdez – who insisted – everyone called him ‘Leo’ – had not been among them when they entered the Labyrinth and endured hellish challenges and Jackson’s madness, the latter obviously being greater than the former. He was not a veteran Quester; Hephaestus claiming him days after he arrived at New Byzantium was one of the last acts the God of the Forge made before being captured by the Sea Titaness.

And of course, last but not least, they were currently infiltrating a military base of the United States Navy, relying on Jackson’s talents and the Mist. The likelihood of everything going right without him being forced to draw a sword was infinitely slim.

“I don’t want to-“

The angry whisper of Annabeth had not the time to finish that the son of Poseidon pushed a large lever, kicked a sort of punching ball, before frenetically taping something on the venerable computer which had appeared from nowhere.

“Password accepted.” An emotionless mechanical voice laconically declared. “Tunnel opening. Please proceed within the next sixty seconds if you do not want to face the automatic defences reactivating.”

“Charming,” the son of Nemesis drawled.

“We’re in a military base, don’t forget.” Perseus Jackson rushed through the gargantuan hole which had just opened, and Ethan stepped up the pace to follow, despite the bad feeling this opening felt to him like an enormous maw about to devour them.

“Err...what do we do if we get caught?” the newest member of the Suicide Squad was not very good at pretending not to be afraid.

“We won’t,” Ethan replied with certainty. “I doubt very much we are going to meet ordinary soldiers here now that we’re past this...this thing.”

“But-“

“Leo Valdez, Jackson is a madman, but he values our services; if there is a risk there, it is likely he will deal with him himself, and Annabeth and I will finish it. Your fighting skills won’t be required.”

And thankfully, before in spite of being a pyrokinesist, the son of Hephaestus had likely every chance to lose a martial-only duel against Drew Tanaka.

The tunnel was incredibly long, and by the way they moved in every possible direction, the idea was there they might not be under Norfolk after ten minutes.

But since there were no alternative paths, the only choice was to go forwards.

The progression was done mostly in silence, under feeble reddish electrical lights.

After thirty minutes or so, they at last saw a massive source of light in the distance.

It was too weak to be the sun, Ethan thought, and he was right.

The location they arrived was a gigantic underground cavern.

Correction: a gigantic underground cavern, which had somehow acquired a cascade...and which had been transformed into a secret shipyard.

“Wow!” Leo exclaimed, and Ethan and Annabeth manifested their surprise differently, but they approved. He had never heard about this cavern before, not a whisper, not a rumour, nothing.

Meaning it had been built in complete secret, and the secret had held.

“My friends,” the green-eyed leader of the Suicide Squad grinned, satisfied by their reaction, “welcome to the headquarters of the Rogue Engineering Company. A company led by none other than-“

“BROTHER!”

A young Cyclops charged and went on to slam upon the son of Poseidon before shaking him like...oh right, was he trying to *hug* him?

“Brother...my...ribs...”

“OH! RIGHT!”

Ethan fought a losing battle not to snicker as when the steel-strong arms released Jackson, the son of Poseidon looked a little shaken and prone to count his ribs.

“Jackson...” Annabeth looked very pale suddenly. “This is a Cyclops!”

“I would never have guessed!” Perseus smirked. “Guys, this is by brother, Tyson. Tyson, my new friends. Ethan is the dark grouchy one, Leo Valdez is the ship specialist I wanted you to meet. Annabeth is the blonde girl.”

“FRIENDS!”

What followed would be censored for the next two hundred years. Ethan was just going to say that when it was all over, he had all his limbs and his body was mostly unbroken. Mostly.

The next seconds gave him the opportunity to watch the young Cyclops...who had an odd sense of fashion, even by his race standards. The large T-shirt he wore was green and red, with a large ‘DA BESTZ’ in the middle, and the tools on his back and his arms looked like they were straight out a mad scientist movie.

“First the Minotaur, then a Cyclops?” Ethan was the first to react vocally. “Wait a minute, he’s a son of Poseidon like you?”

“Well, there is only one me, or so I’m told, but yes, he’s a son of Poseidon too.”

“Cool!” Leo Valdez had no self-preservation instincts, that much was clear. “And he’s the one who’s going to build the ship?”

“YEAH!” The Cyclops and his half-brother bumped their fists up.

This wouldn’t have been so bad, if half a dozen young Cyclops and perhaps thrice that number in human workers had not decided to cheer up behind them...and the cavern had the perfect acoustics to create a hell of an echo.

Ethan was certain they were all going to have a powerful headache within the next hour.

Fortunately, Tyson the Cyclops lowered his tone after that.

“Half of the materials have arrived, and we’re setting up the foundries in the other cavern, brother,” the ‘leader’ of the ‘Rogue Engineering Company’ reported semi-formally. “We will begin working on the hull tomorrow. We should have everything gathered here for the yacht by next Friday.”

“Jackson!” The daughter of Athena growled dangerously quasi-immediately. “You told us you were going to build a *warship*! You never mentioned anything about a *yacht*!”

“Because you didn’t need to know,” Perseus Jackson, incorrigible mad man, shrugged, “and it won’t be a yacht, Tyson’s words were a bit hasty.”

“They were?” ah hope, how beautiful it was before it all collapsed...

“Absolutely! It won’t be a mere yacht, it will be a super-mega yacht armed to the teeth!”

Why wasn’t he surprised? This was Jackson they were speaking about...

“When you say, ‘mega-yacht’, you mean, err...”

“I mean our ship will be about one hundred and forty metres-long, the tonnage should be in the nine thousand-plus tonnes, and the draught will be around five point four metres. But with the engines and turbines Daedalus imagined and that plenty of Cyclops are busy replicating as we speak, we will be able to sustain a cruise speed of around twenty-five knots.”

Ethan was anything but a maritime expert, but it seemed extremely fast, for something the size of the ‘mega-yacht’ that was at the core of this little expedition.

Which left him to a very logical deduction.

“The ‘mega-yacht’ look will be the bait, right?” The son of Nemesis said, his concentration raised to the maximum as he examined with a new eye the ship parts dispersed near the main empty dockyard of the cavern. “It will be a Q-Ship, nothing more, nothing less.”

“Why not have the comfort of one and the firepower of the other?” their insane leader grinned. “The travel to the Sea of Monsters will be long, and I for one do not want to do it on a ship dating from the eighteenth century if there are far more pleasant alternatives.”

Ethan nodded before something made him grimace.

“I will freely agree there are far less pleasant alternatives than a mega-yacht to travel around the world...and I completely support the idea of having a floating headquarters from which we can explore the aquatic Zone Mortalis with the luxury usually given to billionaires...but can we afford it? It may be one of the more pleasant options, but it’s certainly not the cheapest.”

The grin disappeared, and when the son of Poseidon nodded, it was in a sober manner.

“Yes, it is very, very expensive. All the money I took from the Lotus Casino a few nights ago has already been poured into it, and my thief lieutenant and I have also done other jobs which will...divert non-insignificant amounts of money to the Rogue Engineering Company.”

Ethan was not so easily astonished, but knowing the ‘Lotus Casino affair’ had earned around two million dollars and one million Golden Drachmas...

“How expensive is this ship going to be? Seriously?” Leo Valdez asked a good question, for all his inexperience.

“This isn’t the good question.” A shadow of a smile was back. “We’re not just paying for the ship, you know. We’re paying for all the infrastructure of the shipyard, and of course the foundries Tyson will make us visit in a moment. We also have the defences outside and the contingencies if someone ill-intentioned find this place.”

Jackson sighed.

“Most of that is already paid, by the way, the Casino job was the last investment Tyson and his workers needed; some other things I won after the Great Quest, like valuable information, have been surprisingly profitable when addressed to the right parties. No, the problem is the ammunition.”

Ethan frowned, and Annabeth imitated him. Yes, the son of Poseidon had multiplied the hints that producing enough ultra-modern weapons and its ammunition was going to be a problem, but this was before knowing the ‘warship’ was likely costing more than the Roman Expeditionary Fleet by itself.

“We don’t need that many missiles!” Leo, predictably, was the first to say the reply they had all in the lungs.

“Of course not!” Perseus feigned to be worried, which was-

“We just need around twenty thousand of them, so that every ship and monster sent by enemies will die by...what is the appropriate word...ah, yes, OVERKILL!”

“OVERKILL!” The Cyclopes thundered, and just like that, this poor world was again in danger...

The second Great Quest was likely going to be crazier than the first one, Ethan was sure of it now.

**10 July 2006, a beach near New Byzantium, United States of America (de jure)**

When Bianca abandoned the very idea of swimming and returned ashore, she hadn’t any energy left in her, and as such her arrival on the beach was more a long period of crawling than anything majestic.

Bianca hated it. She hated it almost on the level of the revealing black-silver swimsuit Jackson had forced her to don. Yes, it was enchanted, and yes, it was excellent for a novice to learn swimming...and she hated it nonetheless.

Contrary to one might think, when she chose to get naked before beginning a ritual, it was with the knowledge that there were few witnesses to watch her body...and that there would be even fewer to report what they had witnessed in the next hours.

“Damn you, Jackson...”

Unfortunately, her curse conjured the aforementioned Demigod and ex-Tyrant before she could utter a single spell.

“Well, well...one kilometre, and no one had to bring you back this time...that’s a neat progress, your Dreadful Majesty!”

The former Dread Empress of Praes glared at the black-haired boy, wishing he dropped dead on the spot.

Reality, alas, refused to obey her will.

“I will make you regret that.” She swore. “You will see.”

“It’s not my fault that of the entire Suicide Squad, you’re one of the rare ones to not know how to swim!”

The daughter of Hades gritted her teeth...and didn’t answer.

It had the problematic issue of being the truth, really.

“Where and when would I have learned?” She asked instead. “During my childhood at Wolof, several of the Sahelians were breeding their pet monsters in the river, and going to swim there would be just madness.”

And afterwards, when she had begun her conquest of Praes, when she had been known as Triumphant, the mere idea of asking to someone how to swim was utterly ridiculous. Thousands – before it became tens of thousands of souls – had tried to find a weakness they could exploit to kill her, some chink which would allow them to breach her flying fortresses and rout her Legions of Terror.

Handing them this priceless information would have been like asking them to cut her throat.

“I thought the Lotus Casino had an adequate swimming pool.”

“It...sort of did?” Despite her magical exercises to fight off the effects of this cursed location, Bianca always had some problems remembering the exact details of the Lotus-eaters’ lair. “I think it was constantly under assault by drunken imbeciles between two sessions of card games, though.”

“Acceptable,” Jackson agreed before smiling again. “It makes all the more important though for you to learn how to swim correctly. It would be the height of ridiculousness for someone with the Curse of Achilles to drown and prove the fallacy of near-invincibility that way.”

Evidently, seen that way...

“It may not matter against some monsters and hurricane-strong storms of a Zone Mortalis!”

“Maybe not, but in such conditions, if you know how to swim, you’re definitely one of the Suicide Squad officers who can survive relatively easily.”

The way it was phrased made Bianca di Angelo instantaneously suspicious.

“You know something.”

“I know a lot of things,” the expression was definitely ironic. “Like the fact I swam five kilometres this morning in half of the time you needed for one. And I don’t have the Curse of Achilles!”

“You are a son of Poseidon,” the Lightning Thief didn’t let herself be fooled. “The moment you are plunged into a vast quantity of water, you are Achilles for all intents and purposes...only killing you instantly will prevent your super-regeneration from activating.”

The shrug the daughter of Hades received in return told her she was right.

“Don’t forget, the sooner you finish your swimming lessons, the faster you will get to the torture...I mean the sea fighting training!”

One of the first things you learned when living too close to Perseus Jackson was that his ‘slips of the tongue’ were really, really nothing of the sort.

“I thought our first strategy was to sink everything that dares interposing itself between us and our goals,” the former Dread Empress glared...again. “A ‘rain of missiles’, I think, was the term employed during the last war meeting.”

“I said it was a strategy, yes,” the Demigod who had stopped from achieving a cursed form of immortality in the Underworld corrected with his usual cheerful expression. “I never said it was going to be the first.”

“If we let the enemy get in range, we’re going to take a lot of damage.”

That was the very reason she had gone for flying fortresses in the first place, to be honest. Until the damned heroes somehow *befriended* an entire *dragon colony*, the fools serving Above had had no defence against her biggest weapons, and the same had applied to her Demons and the Legions of Terror.

“True. And I don’t plan for doing it more than three or four times. But you, as a former warlord, can appreciate how rare and vague the information about the Sea of Monsters is. The best sources we have are about the entrances of the Zone Mortalis...and practically everything end once a Quest advance beyond that threshold.”

Bianca rolled her eyes.

“The same was true about the Labyrinth and the Underworld, and it didn’t slow you down.”

“No, but your little conspiracy wasn’t expecting the Suicide Squad.”

On this point, it was impossible to argue. The Titaness and her mortal ‘allies’ would expect them once the Legionnaires were dealt with...they would be idiots not to.

“Reading between the lines,” the daughter of Hades cleared her throat after partially returning in the water to get rid of the sand gathered after crawling on several metres, “I assume the entrance is part of the problem.”

“Exactly!” Perseus grinned, and for a moment, the teenage girl who had been Dread Empress Triumphant found it...interesting. “More than ever, the Suicide Squad has to be **unpredictable**.”

“Unpredictability had its uses,” a great deal of her successes as the Dread Empress of Praes had been because no one had been sure which nation was next on her list of conquests, “but there are only two ways to enter the Sea of Monsters, as far as I’m aware. The Clashing Rocks, which was used by the Argonauts. And the second is the Scylla-Charybdis Strait.”

The latter was obviously the most infamous, and, if the archives the son of Poseidon had acquired could be trusted, far more survivable than the former.

“Yes. We will have to do something about that, don’t you think?”

Bianca raised an imperious eyebrow.

“You intend to build a flying ship, then?”

“No.”

Right, how surprising to not get a straight answer outside of a war meeting...

“Fine. In that case, may you answer another question I have?”

“By all means!”

Bianca bared her teeth carnivorously.

“Why is Lou Ellen coming this way with an identical swimsuit as the one I’m wearing today?”

Her murderous glare was a ‘hint’ the son of Poseidon better find a very good explanation and quickly...

**16 July 2006, Demeter’s Palace, Olympus**

It was a good day to be a Goddess.

Persephone amended her thoughts an instant later. It *always* was a good time to be a Goddess on Olympus.

Really, one just had to look between the differences of scenery between the divine mountain where the Gods ruled and the Underworld to acknowledge that. One minor effort, and she could watch New York City under the Olympians’ seat of power. In one move, the Goddess of Spring could easily walk the streets of the Big Apple, and do...practically everything a Goddess wanted.

But it wasn’t just the scenery. It was the servants and the multitude of nymphs and spirits serving them at every hour of the day and the night.

Oh, Hades’ court was not short of personnel either...but they were dead, and their imagination, their sense of initiative, and pretty much everything made clear they couldn’t equal the living.

They could carry her shopping purchases, but ask them if the blue robe was better than the red? A few millennia later, you would still wait for the answer.

The eldest daughter of Demeter left the dining hall where she had been enjoying a delicious soup of cold vegetables followed by two peaches supported by some red fruits’ sorbet, and changed her clothes in a fraction of a second.

There was a new collection of *Paradise Summer* being revealed today, and it would be a crime not to be present.

Before it, though, Persephone summoned the holo-interface of *Divine Amazon*, and immediately ordered a new butterfly brooch. The last one was simply unfashionable with the shade of blonde she had chosen for the week.

The recently divorced Goddess rapidly shifted her attention to something else, which was a weird beeping sound caused her to look around in surprise before she realised the command panel was the source of this noise.

And the moment she reopened the page of Divine Amazon, Persephone was ‘welcomed’ by something she hadn’t seen since the invention of the modern banking system.

**INSUFFICIENT CREDIT**

“**What in the name of...this is impossible**!” The Goddess of Spring exclaimed, but the red-black screen refused to vanish, no matter how many attempts to convince it that her order had to be satisfied. “**I am using...the credit card Zeus gave me**...”

Persephone wasn’t used to it, but she was within a few seconds able to access the details of the ‘Ultimate Thunder Credit Card’ her genitor and once-lover had given her. And once she did, a scream exploded out of her throat.

“**A limit of one million Drachmas? What do you want me to do with one million Drachmas per month? I am not a peasant! I have needs! I need to do shopping**!”

It took Persephone quite a few minutes to calm herself.

Zeus...it looked like their tryst amounted to nothing, and this credit card had just been a poor farewell’s gift.

It was...regrettable. And the great and mighty ‘Master of Olympus’ was going to regret it, she was ready to swear it on her shoes’ collection! Before the day was out, the Goddess of Spring would make sure the entire East Coast would know Zeus’ avarice was no mere rumour. And if he didn’t amend his behaviour fast, in the next forty-eight hours, it would be the compromising photos which would be released!

Not hers, obviously. She didn’t want her mother on her case. But even without those, the last millennium assuming the duties of the Queen of Hell had given her a library worth of blackmail where the owner of the Master Bolt was concerned.

Persephone sighed before shrugging.

It wasn’t the end of the world...and she had made a small mistake. It would be corrected in due time. But first, ordering the brooch with the credit card’s her mother had offered after the divorce was settled. And there also was this nightwear she couldn’t wait to-

**WARNING! YOU DON’T HAVE ENOUGH DRACHMAS IN YOUR ACCOUNT FOR THIS PURCHASE!**

“**WHAT**?”

Persephone was aghast. Zeus she could understand; he had never bought more than ten presents a day when she was little.

But her mother?

This was unfair! She had barely used it! There had only been this marble antiquity of Sicilia yesterday...and the villa on the Cote D’Azur before that...and this small shopping session near London...but apart from that, she hadn’t used it this month!

“**Mother**!” The blonde-haired daughter of the Goddess of Agriculture and Harvest raged. “**MOTHER! YOU NEED TO UNBLOCK MY CREDIT CARDS AT ONCE**!”

Silence answered her.

“**Don’t you dare ignore me**...” Persephone seethed, but deep inside her, for the first time, she felt unease. “**I KNOW YOU LISTEN TO ME! MY SHOPPING CAN’T WAIT! I NEED A MILLION DRACHMAS FOR MY DAILY SPENDING**!”

The Goddess of Spring waited. There was no change on her credit card...and no message of apology.

“By the dreary fur of that disgusting beast of Cerberus...it seems I have no choice.”

Taking a deep – and unnecessary – breath, Persephone materialised in her hand two midnight-coloured credit cards. Unlike the others which had been offered recently, these ones came from before her divorce, but she was certain her ex-husband wouldn’t mind, after all it wasn’t like he was really suing the mountain of precious gems and gold if she wasn’t there to convince him to-

**YOUR DIVINE RIGHTS TO ACCESS UNDERWORLD FUNDS HAVE BEEN REVOKED**

“**HERMES**!” Persephone raged.

Unlike the previous Olympians, the God of Speed was there when she turned her head.

“Yes, oh delightful Queen of Spring?” The God smiled, his winged helmet under his arm.

“Correct this!” She ordered, pointed a manicured finger at the red and black holo-screens which infuriated her by their mere presence.

“I can’t.”

“This wasn’t a suggestion!”

“**I know. But I am sorry, Lady Persephone, I don’t have the authority to do anything to solve your little...problem. My hands are tied. Your credit cards’ accounts will remain empty for the rest of the month**.”

“**What do you mean, my accounts are empty for the rest of the month**?” It was only the sixteenth! She wasn’t going to live on Olympus for more than ten days without doing any shopping! It would be torture! It would be a crime against divinity! It would be-

“**I mean exactly that**.” Hermes said in an apologetic tone and with fierce gestures of ‘don’t shoot the messenger’. “**Zeus will only replenish his with twenty thousand Drachmas per month anyway**-“

“**TWENTY THOUSAND**?” Persephone exploded. “**TWENTY THOUSAND IS FOR PEASANTS**!”

“**And your queenly mother has decided your shopping and living habits could benefit from some reasonable limits**-“

“**I AM PERFECTLY REASONABLE**!”

Hermes silently conjured photos of her enjoying the swimming pools of twelve stars-class hostels in the last month, as well her Goddess tweets where she showed fifty of her cocktail dresses.

“**I was celebrating my divorce**?”

“**That was a hell of a celebration**,” the Olympian in charge of all messengers, be they physical or divinely immaterial agreed, “**I think you almost impressed Dionysus**.”

Persephone groaned loudly. There were things you didn’t want to do, and impressing Dionysus had to be near the top of the list.

“**But the world of finance is ruthless; your next money transfer will come from your mother; with Spring over, donations and Olympian subsidies are at an end**.”

“**There has to be a mistake**,” Persephone protested, “**my mother**-“

“**Paid one million Drachmas per day to let you enjoy your immediate post-divorce days? Yes, she did. And apparently she decided it was a great time to move past that phase**.”

“**But...I had my ‘Better than Midas’ credit cards of the Underworld**...”

Hermes snorted before giving her a tin apologetic smile.

“**I’m sorry, but Hades blocked everything on that front...and he’s perfectly within his rights**.”

“**Surely there has to be a solution**!”

“**Of course there is, my dear**.” The God of Travellers, Thieves and Trades said seriously.

“**There is**?”

“**Spend fewer Drachmas, or find a job to earn more**?”

Persephone’s aura flared up.

“**Oh, dear, I have a package for Tahiti! What a coincidence! Bye**!”

Persephone screamed in rage and threw a middle-sized tree through the window the Olympian had just used to leave.

**21 July 2006, somewhere not far from New Byzantium, United States of America (de jure)**

The ice stalagmites he had so slowly conjured were reduced to nothing in less time it took to say it, and the harpoon-trident caught him right in the legs.

Perseus didn’t even have time to think ‘it was going to leave a few bruises’ that the blow had sent him several hundreds of metres below the sea.

Thank his luck Poseidon was his father in this world, for the average human would likely have been killed by such an attack.

Even with all these advantages, the ex-Tyrant still needed around thirty seconds to make sure he wasn’t going to bleed and attract of a lot of sharks and other inimical wildlife, before using his hydrokinesis to return to the surface at great speed.

“**Thirty-one seconds this time**,” Rhode noted on her surfboard. “**You beat your record of last days by two seconds**.”

Wordlessly, he used his powers to conjure a surfboard, though his was purely made of water, and after a groan of relief, fell upon it.

“The last one was extremely painful, dear sister.”

“**No pain, no gain, the mortals have known that for millennia**,” the titular Goddess of the Greek island said smugly. “**Though if you will forgive me curiosity, what kind of plan do you have in mind? Thirty seconds in a fight against a God or a Goddess is not long**.”

“For the moment,” Perseus snarked back, “knowing I can hold thirty seconds is a prize by itself.”

His half-sister showed a face of concern.

It was extremely warranted, because, yes, the rapport of strength in the Squad’s disfavour was that bad.

“I do not intend to challenge the Sea Titaness, obviously,” unlike some Legionnaires who had boasted about it while drunk on their last night before sailing away, the former ruler of Helike had no desire to die within a few heartbeats, “but accidents happen. The wife of the Ocean Titan will certainly want to test us every step of the way. There are monsters and immortals which, while less dangerous than her, have macro-hydrokinesis capabilities or some skills which can cause the same effects in a sea battle.”

“**This is good sense**,” the compliment was short, and of course, there was a ‘but’, “**but it lasts as long as the weak link in a team, and most of your ‘Suicide Squad is pitifully weak, brother. I heard what you said when you presented the young girls the paths they could follow. It is already producing small but encouraging results**.”

“The question you want to ask is ‘why didn’t you try the same thing with the boys?’, I think.” Perseus authorised himself a small grin.

“**Yes**,” Rhode approved, “**especially as the daughters of Hades and Hecate are the most powerful members of your Questers with a significant margin of superiority, assuming you’re not counted among the order of battle. They have the Curse of Achilles, but let’s stay honest: those two would likely be the foremost Champions of their generation if this era wasn’t so...troubled**.”

“I agree.” Hades and Hecate had not been guilty of avarice when it became time to decide how many ‘gifts’ they would imbue into their own children. Neither had been Poseidon in his case, to be fair to the Earthshaker. “And to come back to your question, there are several reasons why I didn’t replicate the ‘girl strategy’ with the ‘male Suicide Squad’. Above all, I think, is that they have already acknowledged the paths which are offered to them. Dakota McDonald, for example, can be the innocent guy I always transform into a Don Juan who will create a fantastic orgy...at the worst moment possible, it goes without saying.”

Some eight kilometres away, a black-haired son of Bacchus shivered, and thought someone had stepped on his grave.

“Ethan Nakamura can be a grim reaper, live up to the treacherous lieutenant nickname I have given him, or follow another path. Luke Castellan can be the kind of the thieves, an unbeatable swordsman, a tormented hero, or something else. And what apply to them apply to the others I haven’t mentioned.”

“**Like with the son of Hephaestus? An explosive Tinkerer, a Master of Flames, or...something else**?”

“That’s exactly what I wanted to convey, yes.” Perseus clicked between his fingers. “Of course to achieve that, no, before they can think of achieving that, they need to stop basking in the greatest sin one can commit in this world.”

“**And this great sin is**?” Rhode wondered in amused tone.

“Hesitating.”

The Sea Goddess who happened to be his half-sister said utterly silent, the only sign she was conscious being her long legs often transforming into a mermaid tail.

“**Yes, this is fair**.” She answered after a long period of deep thought.

“There are other reasons, of course. Another important issue is that they have to ask; while I’m delighted to intervene in the affairs of others, I respect the privacy of many...that’s why I said those critical words to some of the female members and not to others. Hammering the hesitant parties with information they aren’t ready to accept would be *extremely* counter-productive.”

“**You have a point, but entering a Zone Mortalis with a force which is plagued by doubts and uncertainty, whether they want to admit or not, is hardly promising for your victory odds**.”

“I will find a way to turn it into strength,” Perseus promised sincerely, “assuming we indeed arrive to the Sea of Monsters with those ridiculous levels of indecisiveness, naturally.”

“**I will hold up to your word**.” Rhode said seriously before snorting. “**You can go rest in your Barrack. Training is over for today.”**

His half-sister plunged under the waves, and it was only a question of seconds before his senses failed to locate her. Though she had not the strength of their father, Rhode had truly the celerity of an Olympian...at least as long as she stayed under the waves.

The son of Poseidon sighed in relief, not too loudly, but he did it. And then he largely breathed out and let the contact with the sea heal him, because, damn it, being defeated nine times in violent and one-sided manners was leaving marks. And he had no intention to return at New Byzantium looking like he had been used as a chow-toy by Cerberus.

“I know you listened to every word we said, you know.” The ex-Tyrant said whimsically.

Unfortunately, the not-so-mysterious observer remained invisible and silent.

“It is not healthy, you know, doing that.” The retort, alas, failed to come. “More powerful entities have *faded* for far better reasons.”

This, at last, brought a weak shimmering.

“**You do not care about family**...”

It was a plaintive whimper, carried by the winds, and if he wasn’t so close, it would have been entirely unheard by anyone.

“That’s not completely true, isn’t it? What was true several years ago is changing day after day. It’s just my conception of family is different than yours...**Hestia**.”

**2 August 2006, The Senatorial Amphitheatre, New Constantinople, United States of America (de jure)**

Michael knew going to the Roman part of the town was a bad idea. He had said so to his brothers and sisters. He had gone with them anyway, because, hell, what was the worst thing that could happen?

Yeah, he shouldn’t have asked that one aloud.

Yes, it had been...stupid.

The theatre spectacle was over, but his problems were just beginning.

And no, it had nothing to do with the fact that despite the advanced hour, the atmosphere was still incredibly hot; in fact it was nearly suffocating, with not a breeze in sight and Demigods paying fortunes in ice creams and enchanted freezing solutions to forget for a short moment the summer overheating.

No, the big problem wasn’t coming from that direction. If Michael yew was sweating, it was for an entirely different reason.

Said reason had black hair, green eyes, and was grinning like a mad loon on drugs.

“I’m telling you, Jackson, Clarisse tried to punch me first!”

“No,” the son of Poseidon countered, “first, you used a Cursed Arrow on her. Are you trying to trick me, son of Apollo?”

“No, I’m just saying-“

“That somehow you could release a projectile into an Ares’ backside without facing any violent repercussions? And at close-range, to boot? I’m a great admirer of liars, being naturally predisposed to monologues circling around the truth, but I didn’t try something as brazen as you did...”

This, Michael Yew knew, was a bigger lie than anything he had said tonight. According to the rumours-

“Fortunately for you, I’m willing to close my eyes on this violent method of seduction.”

Relief and outrage fought inside his heart. Outrage won one-sidedly.

“I’m not trying to seduce Clarisse, Jackson!”

“Then you won’t object if as reparation for this tumultuous incident, I recruit you as my personal bard for the next Great Quest which will no doubt come before the end of this year.”

“Yes! No! Err...Yes! Yes, yes I object! I do not want to go on a ship!”

“That’s funny, you were pretending exactly the contrary yesterday evening in front of a lovely daughter of Aphrodite!”

Michael cursed mentally Silena Beauregard. It wasn’t enough for the daughter of Aphrodite to refuse to date him, she had to report what he said to the craziest Demigod of all Byzantium?

“Hypothetically, I mentioned that-“

“Hypothetically, you wanted to give her some affectionate cuddles on a yacht. I have a yacht. There will some nice girls aboard-“

“Clarisse will be here. And the same will be true about the Lightning Thief!”

“I’m sure the former will be very forgiving.” Clarisse? Forgiving? They were speaking about the same bloodthirsty Demigoddess, right? “And the latter still ignores some ugly rumours you spread were coming from your brain. Of course, it could always change...”

Michael snorted.

“I am not going to let you blackmail me, Jackson! I am a proud Quester, a son of Apollo-“

“Who is doing big efforts to be as narcissist and a womaniser than his father,” Jackson continued after a yawn.

“Who is doing big efforts...hey! No, that’s not true!”

“Oh? You did not use that guitar to-“

The black-haired archer gritted his teeth.

“That was a single incident! I’m a respectable healer now!”

“Of course you are, that’s why you’re always trying to date the daughters of Aphrodite...”

“That’s not my fault they’re beginning to take their military training seriously!”

“No, that’s mine,” the mad Demigod answered with a cheerful expression. “Well, that was interesting.”

Michael breathed out.

“I formally hire you as musician and healer for the next great adventure! Your title remains ‘Bard’, though.”

“Out of the question!” Michael refused loudly, and no, he didn’t care about how many heads turned in their direction. The woods near the Barracks would likely hide their identities anyway. “I won’t participate in the repeat of the insanity of the Great Quest you recently completed! I have a future here!”

“No you do not.” Gargoyles appeared out of nowhere and poured some water on their master’s head, before disappearing as fast as they had arrived. “Ah...better. No, poor unfortunate son of Apollo, you do not have a future. You’re not good enough right now to be an archer trainer, not against the competition of your own cabin, the stubborn daughters of Nike, or the Huntresses of the Moon. You’re skilled enough to deserve the archer name, you’re dedicated half-way to the healer path that Chiron accept regularly your services, and your musical talents are sufficient to not be thrown out after a minute of concert. But by trying to pursue every path, you excel in none of them...and that means limited gains of Drachmas, failures to woo any girl who is not Clarisse-“

“I’m telling you, I’m not trying to date that brute! And whatever I do in my private life, it’s my choice and no one else!”

“Yes, and that’s why if nothing changes, you will die before you’re twenty, or be a desperate alcoholic trying to convince you’re a poet-warrior before you’re thirty. I offer you a chance to change that, *my* *bard*.”

“No, thanks.” The son of Apollo shook his head several times. “I heard what you did with Dakota, and I’m not stupid enough to believe you won’t change me into a rabbit or some sort of stupid animal-“

“I won’t.” The crazy son of Poseidon raised his up as if he was about to swear a solemn oath. “I’m ready to swear it on the new Goddess of the Hell Sea!”

If anything, it made Michael Yew more suspicious, not less. Jackson was making that concession too easily...

“Why? You enjoy music so much you can’t live without a song or two every hour?”

“I love music, but not to this degree of passion,” the predictable answer came, “no, I’m ready to swear this because bards must survive to play the music of the final battle at the most dramatic moment...and the reason they *often* do...is because they’re kidnapped beforehand to serve as bait by the heroes and villains’ ultimate nemesis.”

Well, that settled the matter.

“It’s even worse than my previous assumption,” the Vitakinesis specialist snarked, “the answer remains no.”

“Ah, what a shame,” Perseus yawned again, in a completely exaggerated manner.

This was a pre-agreed signal, for Gargoyles ran to his immediate right, carrying a...

“Hey, that’s a *Troy Rocks* guitar!”

“Indeed it is! I am glad you recognise the model, musician lieutenant! A superb guitar, which can also be used as a weapon, as I’m sure you are aware! And you would need both, as my bard!”

“For the last time, Jackson, I am not-“

There was a cracking sound behind him.

Michael Yew turned...and whimpered.

Clarisse La Rue was not five steps away...and where the hell did she find this titanic big axe sprouting lightning and an aura of bloodlust?

“By the Pit’s monsters...”

“As I’m fond of saying, oh son of Apollo,” his eyes remained on the demonic daughter of Ares, but he could imagine this eternally-cursed smile, “one has always a choice, no matter the situation. Yours begin with a golden weapon-guitar.”

“Will...” Michael swallowed very heavily. “Will she stop trying to murder me if I accept?”

“I’m afraid not,” Perseus Jackson...apologised? “You should have accepted sooner. Now, possession of my gift will largely determine if you are able to save half of your original teeth and not require a soup regimen for several days...”

“I hate you.” The archer-healer moaned.

“I know. But the Suicide Squad will be thankful for your sacrifice and will compensate you adequately...provided you accept. Otherwise, I’m afraid we don’t spend a Drachma on a non-member’s funerals...”

Michael grimaced and opened his mouth to answer.

**7 August 2006, Hades Fortress, the Underworld**

It was very kind of the son of Poseidon to offer him a splendid real-life scene. Laughing as he inaugurated his brand-new movie room after the renovation of his Palace was declared complete was a gift that none of his siblings would think of.

Hades chuckled as the miniature copy of a black-haired Apollo sprinted and did his best to stay away from the enraged Demigoddess channelling the fury of the Viking berserkers of old.

“**I didn’t know guitars could be that resistant**...” The wealthiest God of the Greek-Roman Pantheon smiled as the son of Apollo’s desperate attempts before wincing when the implacable axe, wielded expertly, slammed against the posterior of a certain Michael Yew.

And then, just as they were reaching the climax of the evening, the familiar chime and pressure indicating someone wanted an invitation in his domain manifested itself.

“**And I thought being the God of the Dead would at least grant me lengthy holidays**...” why was it that every time he began to think the boundaries of the Underworld had reached their maximal capacity, another Death deity suddenly decided to fade and to ‘generously gift him’ their after-life and the souls of the departed which went with it? Why was it that the paperwork always multiplied illogically while he had his back turned? And why was it the idiots ruling above the earth thought he was conspiring against them when the reality that was that most of the problems were entirely the result of their negligence and laziness? “**Let’s see how bad it is going to be. Invitation accepted**.”

Hades’ could not pretend he felt the shadow of a feeling of stupefaction when Hermes materialised five metres away.

As always, the ‘Messenger of the Gods’ must have robbed someone important, for the large bag he let fall against the marble of his private cinema was filled with bullion.

The clothes of his nephew were also quite ostentatious...one would almost assume Hermes had participated in a bullfight in a persona of a Spanish matador personally before going stealing...some bank or another place where a lot of gold was stored.

“**Oh, uncle, you are looking at Byzantium Live too**?”

“**No**,” Hades said coldly, making no secret the arrival of Hermes at this particularly moment displeased him, “**I have bought several Iris Drones to have my private source of entertainment. What do you want, nephew? It is very late, and I was quite entertained by the methods of recruitment Poseidon’s son is using**.”

“**Yes, he has that gift, eh**?” Hermes chuckled. “**I can’t say his poor victims of the Suicide Squad will enjoy the next weeks-**“

“**Hermes. The message**.” Hades no wish to waste one hour or two, not when every word of the conversation would certainly be known to half of Olympus within two hours.

“**Oh yes, the message**.” Hermes licked his lips nervously, which given his appearance of toreador, was frankly quite humorous. “**Your sister, the mighty and benevolent Demeter, wishes for you to reconsider the breaking of your marital ties with her beautiful daughter**.”

Hades did something he did only very rarely, in general not more than once a year.

He exploded in raucous laughter.

“**HA! AT LAST I HAVE HEARD THESE WORDS! HA! HA! HA!**”

“**Uncle**?”

Hades laughed harder, so hard in fact that tears fell from his eyes, and were transformed into priceless diamonds by the time they hit the dark marble under his feet.

“**Tell me, nephew. How long did it take for her to become unbearable once my *wise sister* tried to block the accounts and establish a daily budget for the credit cards**?”

“**Err...about forty minutes? And it was a monthly budget, not a daily one**.”

Hades snickered.

“**Demeter has always been far more courageous than I did**.”

And he was sincere; it took a lot of courage – though more rational beings would call it sacrifice or suicidal insanity – to prevent Persephone from doing her shopping. The last time Hades had tried to impose her some modicum of restraint was the last time before this year where he had to renovate a large part the ancestral seat-fortress of the Underworld, and when he had earned Persephone’s pardon, the money flow had caused an hyper-inflation across a lot of domains, be they mortal or divine. It had been in 1929, and even the Mist had not been sufficient to hide completely the magnitude of the economical disaster.

“**Ahem...err...what am I going to tell her**?”

“**No**.”

For the first time, Hermes looked like he was about to cry, and it would not be to express his joy to Olympus and beyond.

“**You’re not serious! Now that the Spring Goddess hasn’t the Drachmas to indulge in her ruinous lifestyle**-“

“**No doubt she’s beginning to bargain compromising photos and videos of everything and everyone refusing to ‘donate’ for a good cause. What**?” The Lord of Hell added when Hermes allowed him to see an extreme expression of surprise. “**This is my ex-wife we’re speaking about. Unlike a certain Master of Olympus, I really lived with her most of the time she spent in the Underworld, and that means I’m very well aware of her qualities...and her flaws**.”

“**That...yes, but with the problems caused by the absence of Ares and Hephaestus, your...the Council vigorously beg you to accept Demeter’s request**.”

“**And I said no**.” Hades would deny forever the amusement he felt right now, but...well, he did feel righteous satisfaction hearing his brother, nephews and nieces admit out loud the reality that they couldn’t handle the presence of his ex-wife, especially not where the financial perspectives were discussed. “**It should go without saying, but Persephone is Persephone, and her choices are not falling into my domain anymore. I heard a lot of pleas from Demeter and the rest of the family. I have yet to receive a letter from Persephone demanding**-“

An enormous pile of carmine letters poured over the bullion bag of Hermes.

Before five seconds, they doubled in numbers...before tripling and tripling again.

“**I thought I should reiterate, *beloved uncle*, the point of your former wife being incredibly peevish about the reality of being cut off from the Underworld’s resources**.”

Hades winced...before nodding regretfully.

“**Consider me warned. My decision stands. If Persephone really wants something, she can come pleading her cause in person. I will listen to what she has to say. I am a Judge by necessity, and a merciful God by choice**.”

Hermes gaped.

Hades bared his teeth and smiled.

“**Now, dear nephew, I think you have other messages to deliver...and I want to see the daily report of the adventures of the New Constantinople Legionnaires on their way to the Sea of Monsters. Unless there’s anything else**?”

**15 August 2006**, **Hephaestus Forge MP-42, Sea of Monsters, somewhere near the Solomon Islands**

Before he was captured, Hephaestus was busy creating weapons for Olympus.

Now that he was a prisoner, Hephaestus was still ordered to create weapons, only for a different mistress.

In that respect, the God of Fire and the Forges would truthfully argue if someone asked him the question that not much has changed.

He was ankle-deep in luminescent green-blue water which prevented him from escaping or manifesting more than embers of his divine form, yes. But this was no more than a passing disagreement compared to the working conditions of some locations he had had to endure in the last millennia.

Industry was rarely clean, and his genitor and fellow members of the Olympian Council were rarely supporting of giving him additional funds to solve these ‘minor issues’.

Yes, there were a lot of practical reasons why most of his Forges’ assistants were automatons. Mortals tended to be crippled in short order before learning anything useful, and couldn’t be repaired in a few hours.

“**You aren’t so different from my genitor, Titaness.”** The ugliest of the Olympians grumbled as a platform carried away standard Legionnaire equipment accompanied by several heavy machine guns and enchanted swords. “**For all your pretty declarations, you’re pursuing the same exact goals as he did, and you’re arming fools who will cause more damage to the prosperous era we’re living into**.”

“**You are wrong, my dear Hephaestus**.” The vaguely feminine shape was not even a fraction of the power of his jailor, but the sheer power it released was...impressive. “**Changing the status quo is the exact reason I’m doing this; it is not unfortunate collateral damage. As for this prosperous era we’re living into...all the sources of water are getting polluted. Wars are raging on foreign shores, killing millions by the very weapons you forged. The ancient domain of Pan is torched or pillaged forest after forest, wild refuge after wild refuge. The Council of Olympus was given this world on an Orichalcum tray, and the mess they made of it would be impossible to believe if I hadn’t seen it myself**.”

Evidently, seen like that...

“**It does not matter. Sooner or later, Olympus will muster its armies. My spiteful mother may have hidden most of the royal funds, but new taxes can be created and millions of Drachmas collected. When the Demigods will have failed, the Council will act upon Athena’s plans, and for all the affection he holds for you, even Poseidon won’t be able to stand neutral. Not when one of your mortal allies has decided to usurp the War Throne**.”

Thethys’ watery figure gained in intensity and detail, until a nearly similar ‘Pirate Queen’ as the one who had utterly defeated him stood in his half-flooded weapon production centre.

“**You do not think mortal Legionnaires and Questers will be able to free you? I would believe you of all people would respect mortal ingenuity, especially after the Lightning Thief incident**.”

“**I greatly respect mortal ingenuity in all things**,” Hephaestus grouched, annoyed more than he would admit by the teasing, some of his best ideas when it came to new bridges, buildings, and metal alloys were improvements of human creations. “**But I can add two plus two, Titaness. The armada of the ambitious Roman-Egyptian duo was already far more powerful than any naval force Byzantium and Constantinople can muster in less than a year, and the weapons I was forced to deliver to your allies and the other associates I have seen since my imprisonment have made matters worse. The Sea of Monsters is nothing more than a gigantic trap**.”

Hephaestus wanted to dearly hope someone like the son of Poseidon would challenge the ugly destiny the Fates were rumoured to have in mind for him, and achieve a miracle.

The God of the Forges had not succumbed to despair in millennia of disasters, brotherly disappointments, and ill-conceived marriage; he wasn’t going to succumb now.

But this time, the ‘game’ had really been prepared for the Demigods to lose badly.

Hades’ hellion of a daughter and Zeus’ own efforts, once combined, had made sure the last Great Quest was nearly impossible to accomplish, but the Labyrinth had been a loophole no one had thought of.

“**Yes**,” the divine being who had sponsored automaton creation along with a million other useful inventions found it oddly reassuring Thethys remained completely truthful here. “**But I have to be sure the rising storm won’t renounce at the first obstacle. If the Olympian Order is to be challenged or saved, the sons and daughters of the Western civilisation will succeed in the trials I have erected between them and victory**.”

“**May Hades be merciful to their poor souls when they will be led in front of him**.” Hephaestus moved slightly his head to ensure the new batch of shields was up to Legionnaire standards. It was.

“**I’m sure your blessing will be direly needed in the next hours**.” Hephaestus didn’t turn his head again, but his jailor gave him the information he hadn’t asked for anyway. “**The Legionnaire Expeditionary Force will reach the entrance of the Sea of Monsters tomorrow**.”

**16 August 2006, The Scylla-Charybdis Strait, Entrance of the Sea of Monsters, close to the Solomon Islands**

Centurion Michael Kahale, proud member of the First Cohort of the Twelfth Legion, had a bad feeling.

The Expeditionary Force had, so far, made excellent progress since its departure from the Bay of New Constantinople, courtesy of the improved engines Olympus had released in a unique technology transfer a decade ago.

The monster attacks, while regular and visibly impressive, came no more than thrice a day and were easily repelled.

Except the *Emporiae*, their oldest Neosho-class oiler, no ship of the 1st Squadron had experienced significant mechanical problems.

And yet, the son of Venus had a bad feeling.

He had agreed to the course of action their Tribune had ordered.

They had many warships, and the most powerful of the squadron was the Ave Caesar, which was currently transporting him and the elite of the 1st Cohort.

It was nothing but stress, he tried to convince himself...and he was far from successful.

“We see the Strait, Centurion,” Decurion Vince saluted before giving his report. “The Mist has faded now we’re sufficiently close. “The radar has difficulties giving us firing solutions, unfortunately.”

“We always knew the magical interferences were going to be bad the moment we arrived in sight of the Sea of Monsters.” Michael said stoically.

His subordinate grunted, clearly implying wordlessly that whatever problems had been hypothesised before their departure had clearly been underestimated, at least where the radars were concerned.

“In that case, we better go find our armours.” Their personal weapons were already by their sides; the progression across the Pacific had been easy, not eventless.

Half a minute later, Octavian’s voice resonated through the modified Ticonderoga-class Cruiser, ordering them to do exactly that.

“I’m beginning to hate this voice,” one of the Legionnaires murmured to another. In the semi-darkness of the compartment near the armoury, it was impossible to put a name on his face, and the son of Venus wasn’t going to try.

“Tell me about it...all bark in politics, but when it is time to draw the blades, it is not the monsters which must be wary of his gladius...”

“The snipers better be ready!” the veteran Centurion spoke loudly to put an end to those very insubordinate comments. “Remember the plan and we will go through the Strait without losing anyone!”

Michael was back on the deck right in time to hear the order he had known was going to come...and still he felt anxious, like it was his first battle.

“STEER TOWARDS SCYLLA!”

Michael gritted his teeth and his sword hand clenched around the hilt of his short sword.

He knew the logic. Cruiser or auxiliary ship, the result was the same when it came to one of the greatest sea monsters in existence, one which, according to the rumours, had been the most powerful child of Poseidon and led the armies of the Sea to uncountable victories.

For this unbreakable loyalty to Poseidon, Charybdis had been transformed into an abominable monster by Zeus himself – though there still were many rumours to this day that when it came to the curse, the Master of Olympus had received help from some unknown parties.

“By all the evils of the Pit...”

The comment was fully justified, for Charybdis was in sight.

Michael never stopped taking around his surroundings...but his hear beat faster and he was sweating.

He was hardly the only one.

At first, one could almost think the objects which had appeared like a particularly dangerous reef were particularly sharp rocks, the terror of navigators...or failing that, an enormous group of prehistoric sharks waiting for a feasting of Demigod flesh.

It was neither.

Those were Charybdis’ teeth, a dentition that few monsters would ever be able to equal, and thanks the Gods for that.

The rest of the body which was revealed a few seconds later was far worse.

It was a maw. The ugliest maw in a world of monsters, or if there was one uglier, the son of Venus didn’t want to watch what was worse than that.

“FIRE!” Their Tribune roared. “All Legionnaires to the battle-stations! Non-Legionnaires, stay below deck, and for the love of the Legion, do not try to go to an exposed position!”

Less than five seconds later, the *Ave Caesar*, the *Rhenus*, and the *Danubius* unleashed their considerable arsenal, while the giant eagles of the *Dominus Caelum* did their best to help giving them the most accurate coordinates for artillery targeting.

Soon enough, there was an enormous column of smoke coming from the left side of the strait, and many Legionnaires cheered.

Then the sky went completely dark, and the entirety of the good mood in the world evaporated.

Something enormous hit the port side of the *Ave Caesar*, and when it was revealed what it was, Michael screamed.

The thing was simply monstrous. It may look vaguely like a Hydra’s head...if an Hydra had suffered countless mutations, had tentacles and screaming heads all over its neck, and smelled like ten thousand corpses.

“FIRE! FORCE SCYLLA’S HEAD TO TURN BACK!”

Years of training made sure Michael and all the Legionnaires of the *Ave Caesar* obeyed.

The lightning-pilums were thrown by the dozens, and enormous machine guns entered action while some giant eagles tried to claw out the eyes of the abomination.

It was not enough to deter the monster.

A black tongue struck near the prow, and two Legionnaires were impaled on yellowish teeth, while three others screamed and collapsed as they were drowned in a torrent orange-green poison.

The second attack saw another head devour one of their Giant Eagles like it was nothing.

All around them the sea was a cauldron of violence, though it was difficult to know because it was of the storm raging in the sky, or it was because of Charybdis.

The Strait itself was shaking with the fury of the monsters and the elements.

The attacks continued, and Michael watched powerlessly as despite their precautions, Scylla’s heads had somehow found their way to one of the compartments containing the non-military personnel, and now the unfortunate souls shrieked as the monstrous maws withdrew to devour them away in the huge cavern-lair where Scylla had waited for millennia.

And then the attacks stopped...though as Michael realised, it wasn’t because Scylla was satiated with about a dozen victims, but because it had found juicier and easy prey.

The *Emporiae* was the oldest ship of the 1st Squadron, and the Centurion had voted to acquire a more modern replacement...only to see his advice dismissed from every direction.

Michael Kahale deeply regretted not having more convincing, for with its underwhelming armour and its pre-battle mechanical problems-

The *Emporiae* was slaughtered. The four heads of Scylla never stopped attacking, until the damage it caused was just too much.

The Captain of the modified oiler, or whoever was in charge of the ship now, tried to steer violently his command away before Scylla returned to finish the job.

Unfortunately, by a capricious turn of destiny, it was the moment Charybdis was beginning to suck a gigantic quantity of water.

The crew of the *Emporiae*’s tried to change course as it acknowledged the danger, but it was far too late.

There was no order which came from the command centre of the Ave Caesar, and anyway, what good would it have made?

Only an immortal could have saved the *Emporiae* by then, and the Expeditionary Force’s Centurion saw no God or Goddess intervene to help them.

The *Emporiae* left about a third of its hull against the teeth of Poseidon’s daughter-abomination, and when it was finally through them, the maelstrom of water annihilated it so fast it was as if the ship had disappeared, not been disintegrated like it was just an insignificant defeat.

“THEIR DEATHS WILL BE AVENGED!” Octavian proclaimed. “I SWEAR IT ON THE NAME OF APOLLO AND-“

The angry seas drowned the rest of the speech.

Michael had wondered if it was Charybdis or the storm at fault minutes ago; well, his curiosity was satisfied.

It had been Charybdis.

The hellish storm was only releasing its apocalyptic fury now.

“GO BACK INSIDE THE SHIP!” The Centurion screamed as the sky and the seas decided now was an excellent moment to sink the Ave Caesar. “THE BATTLE IS OVER! WE MUST REPAIR EVERYTHING SCYLLA HAS DAMAGED!”

There were no lightning bolts, but the power of the waves and the wind power might be more terrifying opponents than the monstrous duo they had just been lucky enough to survive.

One thing was sure, however.

Given the weather conditions, Michael was pretty sure it was going to be impossible to enter the Sea of Monsters in the ‘impeccable battle-formation’ Octavian’s plan had called for.

Everything outside the lights of the Ave Caesar was darkness and the dark fury of the Sea of Monsters.

The voice he had tried to keep quiet in his head chose this moment to shoot a poisoned arrow.

*It only was the entrance of the Zone Mortalis...*

**17 September 2006, Sea of Monsters**

“By the cursed song of the Sirens, that was a hell of a storm. This was a very good idea to take refuge in this cove, Captain!”

“Aye, it was.” And since he was such a generous and kind soul, Edward returned the compliment. “And it was thanks to your work, Navigator, we didn’t throw our ship on those fiendish sand banks and the two hidden reefs which could have doomed us if we weren’t careful enough.”

“Thank you, Captain.”

“You’re welcome.”

Edward stopped talking and watched the sky.

It was magnificently blue.

It was...pure.

It was difficult to watch it and not be in awe. Because not a day ago, it had been night black, as one of the most powerful storms he’d ever witnessed had unleashed its wrath upon this part of the Sea of Monsters.

Because his men and himself had been so long denied the freedom to watch the sky and the stars, every day they could enjoy the bounties of the sea was blessed beyond measure.

“We have lost all contact with the Roman fleet, of course.” His Navigator informed him with a grimace.

Edward made a dismissive sound.

“Mark Antony is a competent Admiral, and his wife understands mortal sailors aren’t meant to command the winds and the seas.” A thin smile arrived to his lips. “I think we aren’t at any risk of dying today. The fleet must have been dispersed across the Sea of Monsters, assuming they haven’t been sunk. This was a hell of a storm, after all.”

“Isn’t it convenient, Captain? The enemy fleet is signalled to enter via the Charybdis-Scylla Strait, and the worst storm of the year chooses this moment to strike.”

“Of course it was convenient for the enemy,” Edward agreed with a vicious smile. “And yes, before you ask, I’m certain it was some divine intervention.”

“Poseidon?”

“Or one of his daughters? He has one who is all about violent storms, right?”

“Yes, Captain. But she has an unpronounceable name.”

The Captain chuckled.

“Yes, Greek names often aren’t easy on the tongue.” He touched the magical collar around his throat, the very object of the slavery imposed upon him after being returned to a human body. “But as I said, a storm like that is both a blessing and a curse. Marc Antony’s fleet and most of our allies’ ships have been cast aside by the waves, and thus interception is a doomed affair. But the enemy’s fleet will be unable to maintain cohesion and discipline too. Forget a line of battle or anything clever, boys. Each ship of the dogs of Olympus will be alone in the Sea of Monsters, unable to support each other.”

“And what does that mean for us, Captain?”

“That means,” Edward grinned, “that for all the fact we have lost centuries transformed into guinea pigs, for all the fact the Gods have given our enemies monsters of steel powered by some incredible technologies, we are not defenceless, boys!”

His crew cheered. Brave fools, all of them.

“I swear to you, my men.” His crew went silent. “We may have been enslaved by those magical collars. We may have lost an eternity on this damned island. We have been raped, tortured, and endured many heinous things from the sorceress and her apprentices. By their fault, our bodies are now old and fat.”

His was no exception. Where he had been muscled and inspiring envy and terror in equal measure, the first time the bitch had taunted him with a mirror, the horrible sight of his double belly and his missing teeth had almost let him pray the Gods that it was a nightmare.

“But,” Edward grinned, “rest assured, boys, that my resolve to gain our **revenge** has never been stronger.”

His feet slammed against the black wood of the ship’s gun deck.

“This ship,” the son of Ares known as Edward Teach hissed, and the power of his line flowed in him, “is the *Queen Anne’s Revenge*.”

His fists were raised above his head.

“We will be free. Circe will pay for what she has done to us.”

His crew was bloodthirsty. He could feel it.

“There will be many battles in this place where legends are made. If ours have been forgotten, we will remind mortals and immortals why we were feared centuries ago!”

He was Edward Teach, son of Ares. He was a pirate.

He was the pirate who had brought fleets and alliances of Demigods to their knees.

“I AM BLACKBEARD!” The Captain of the *Queen Anne’s Revenge* roared. “AND I WILL BE THE KING OF PIRATES!”

**Author’s note**: An Impractical Guide to Godhood will continue in the next chapter, whose hypothetical title may be: *Interlude 2 King of Pirates*.

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