Penultimate Update Games of Folly

**Chapter 28**

**Games of Folly**

*Jackson had been right; after the Clash of the Titans, the Triumvirate was not willing to launch a direct assault against the Forge of All Perils.*

*Having seen the Telekhine preparations to annihilate whoever tried such a thing, I didn’t blame them for a single second.*

*Still, most of the Suicide Squad hated the outcome.*

*We were so close to triumph, but the Great Quest wasn’t over. There were more lethal dangers in the way, all because the Triumvirate leader’s was partially influenced by Love, and also because of his pride of Roman officer.*

*We were so close, and it didn’t matter.*

*If we wanted to free the God of War, we had to participate into a contest where the High Judge was a madman, and win this modern parody of the Twelve Labours.*

*I love to think that the Triumvirate acknowledged very fast that they should have swallowed their pride and accepted the exchange of prisoners soon after setting foot upon this island Commodus transformed into a vanity project.*

*But by then it was really too late.*

*The Suicide Squad had once again plunged willingly into a trap.*

*Now we had to fight our way out of it.*

*It wouldn’t have been so bad, if we hadn’t to don this ridiculous gladiator attires and parade in front of a crowd of tens of thousands half-naked.*

*And of course this time, our performance was really watched live by Olympus and every immortal wanting to keep an eye on our Great Quest...*

Chapter 27 of *Seas of Madness: Chronicles of the Suicide Squad Volume 2*, by Annabeth Chase, daughter of Athena

**16 January 2007, Grand Strategium, Forge of All Perils**

The corridor which was leading to the office had once been plain and devoid of any decorations.

Now that there were plenty of skulls and monster remains to ‘impress’ the visitors, Ethan almost missed the lack of decoration.

He knocked at the door, and was immediately told to enter.

“Good morning, my treacherous lieutenant!”

Yes, it was going to be one of *those* days.

The son of Nemesis breathed out and managed after several seconds to find some calm inside his body.

“You wanted to see me?”

“I did! I have finally chosen the forty-nine noble heroes who will come with me and participate in the so-called Twelve Labours of Neo Hercules.”

A paper flew into his hands. Ethan didn’t even bother reading it.

“Let me guess. The twenty-seven Demigods, Demigoddesses, and others who are the core of the Suicide Squad have volunteered. Then to reach the fifty threshold, you compensated with Legionnaires and the crew of the *Red October*.”

Perseus Jackson grinned.

“Read.”

Ethan lowered his eyes. The first names were what he had expected: Annabeth, Luke, Bianca, Clarisse, Dakota, the penguin duo, the surviving Huntresses, the daughters of Bellona...

These were indeed the officers of the Suicide Squad and the survivors of the battles of the Sea of Monsters.

But below them, there weren’t any Legionnaire names. There were *Telekhine* names.

“What the hell, Jackson? Okay, these sea demons have been reliable so far, but-“

“We will need them to repair and forge new weapons for us between each ‘Labour’ the High Judge tries to kill us with. And in the case the Coliseum goes into lake-mode, we will have a significant advantage.”

“We already had a significant advantage,” the son of Nemesis remarked. “Last time I checked, you swim like a dolphin and your powers include large-scale Hydrokinesis.”

“True,” the other black-haired Demigod nodded. “But there are Tasks I’m unsuited for, whereas the Telekhines aren’t.”

Ethan opened his mouth to ask, but he closed it down without saying a word. For his peace of mind, he wasn’t sure he wanted to get the truthful answers for something like that.

“Still, the Legionnaires and the crew of the *Red October* will stand idle.”

“I prefer using the term ‘strategic reserve’, my treacherous lieutenant.” The son of Poseidon cackled in an obviously fake virtuous tone.

“Seriously?”

The hilarity disappeared like it had been switched off.

“For the record, I don’t plan to lose this challenge, for a lot of reasons. But in the unlikely case we do, we will need a significant amount of power to hunt down the Triumvirate so we can free the God of War. And let’s be honest, Captain Ramius and his men are kind of useless when they can’t bring their submarine to the battlefield, which is the case here.”

“And the Legionnaires? Tribune Keller is hardly a gladiator specialist, but she and her command know how to fight.”

“They will fight as Legionnaires, yes.” Perseus scowled. “If I had the certainty the Labours involved fighting barbarian mercenaries twelve times, I would have chosen as many as I could. But Commodus believes himself to be destined to replace the God of Strength. And to make matters worse, he knows what happened last time there was someone who fought us conventionally.”

“Monsters?”

“Monsters are guaranteed, yes.” The leader of the Suicide Squad answered. “The real threats, however, are guaranteed to be more subtle. I am ready to bet quite a few Drachmas the Sire of the Drakons and some other enemies are using Commodus as their tool here.”

“Okay, I understand. But a few Legionnaires are going to be more useful if the Coliseum doesn’t go into a lake-mode.”

“In the short-term? Yes, it is likely. But I have to see further away from that, Ethan.”

The young Demigod tried to think about it, and the conclusion he arrived to-

“Politics,” he muttered.

“Continue.” Perseus said with a smug expression.

“You have saved a significant number of Legionnaires, and since they participated in the Clash of the Titans, they will be paid by our benefactors too. Should they happen to come home safe and healthy, you will have earned plenty of favours from the Third Legio and other competent factions inside the Legions of New Byzantium. But it can’t happen if they shed their blood and their lives on the sands of the arena.”

“Absolutely exact,” the mad Demigod smiled – though after all the battles and the insanity, Ethan feared nobody could be called ‘sane’ in good conscience anymore. “I will respect my part of the deal with the Third Legio, and Tribune Keller and her survivors will certainly earn each something above sixty thousand Drachmas.”

“Something above?” Ethan commented drily.

Perseus shrugged.

“Most of the Olympians are waiting for the outcome of the Adjudicator Games, to see if they have to reward us for the completion of a near-impossible Great Quest, or to pay for our funerals. The Drachmas and other rewards’ values will be decided for sure in a few days.”

And if it was sixty thousand Drachmas for Legionnaires who had only been involved in the last large-scale battle, and for an auxiliary role at that, the Suicide Squad’s members were going to become incredibly wealthy, easily the wealthiest mortals of New Byzantium this time, above the great – and few – Legacy dynasties which dominated the political life of the Roman and Greek city.

Assuming, of course, they survived the ‘Twelve Labours’ in the first place.

“Okay, I understand the logic. But this is a dangerous game we play here, Jackson.”

“The Legionnaires we have here wouldn’t have enjoyed being treated as Gallowborne, and it is not prudent to always repeat the same tricks over and over for the same adventure. In the end, the Adjudicator Challenge was always going to place the Suicide Squad in a perilous situation again, it couldn’t be otherwise.”

To his sorrow, Ethan had to admit it was a good point...as usual.

“And what will you do to prevent this ‘High Judge’ from engineering a bloodbath?”

“That’s simple, I will trigger the bloodbath before he can. Check out the last name of the list.”

Ethan did, and almost regretted it.

“How in the name of H...how by the Pit did you convince your Uncle to release him?”

Yes, the Rich One owed his nephew quite a few favours, and they had his daughter, the Lightning Thief, as one of the Suicide Squad’s officers, but that remained quite an exploit for any Demigod to achieve this!

“The ways of the Underworld are impenetrable,” the red eye of the son of Poseidon shone malevolently. And his pious tone absolutely fooled no one.

**16 January 2007, the Docks, Forge of All Perils**

The Docks were still as busy as ever this afternoon.

And it went without saying that there was a large crowd of shark monsters surrounding the *Inevitable Doom*, manipulating cranes and other heavy engines so that massive boxes could be moved in record time.

It was amusing to think plenty of the containers were not weapons this time, but food. With twenty-two Telekhines coming with them and some twenty-seven members of the Suicide Squad, the original food stocks could never have handled the demand.

And as they had to travel fast to ‘Narcissist Island’, as Grant and quite a few others had nicknamed it, foraging was not really an option. Therefore they had to bring a lot of drinks and food aboard. Annabeth was rather certain some of it would end up playing a part in a ridiculously crazy plan once more, because *that* was the Suicide Squad did.

The accords signed for the coming ‘Adjudicator Game’ may prohibit the kind of arsenal that had been fired at Tethys’ forces, but everyone knew the rules could be interpreted in a way that would leave them effectively torn apart.

And it would be a novel approach to wield food like a weapon...that said, drinks, and wine in particular, had already been used in an offensive manner several times, mainly with Dakota, son of Bacchus.

Annabeth looked at all the agitation around her, and yawned.

She had read several chronicles retelling the Twelve Labours of Hercules – the true one, not the vulgar Roman parody waiting for them at the end of the journey – and it had ensured she went to her bed very late.

Fortunately, she would have a lot of time to catch up with her sleep in the next days. The *Inevitable Doom* was fast enough to destroy most monstrous attempts to intercept them, and now with their reputation, the enemies were not really pushing each other to be the first to attack them.

Annabeth struggled to keep a yawn inside her throat, and progressively lost the ‘fight’.

Damn it, it was getting way too humid and hot in these docks, this had a somnolent effect on her.

“Jade! Do you know where is-“

The question died in her mouth, and suddenly the atmosphere became oppressive, but in a far colder way than hadn’t been there before.

The crowd of Telekhines suddenly divided itself in two, revealing a dark figure in unmarked obsidian-coloured armour.

It should have been funny, but it really wasn’t; the Telekhines generally didn’t do it for anyone but Perseus Jackson.

And even then, some of the shark monsters had to be reminded of it by their overseers or by Jackson himself.

Here they did it without waiting for any command to be voiced.

The newcomer wasn’t tall, and his armour was devoid of any sign that might identify him.

The scabbard, which must have held a short sword until recently, was empty.

Yet with every footstep he took in the direction of the *Inevitable Doom*, the impression of unease grew.

It was like this procession was a spectacle, but one celebrating the death of everyone.

The moves seemed somewhat exaggerated, bristling with arrogance, but the kind of arrogance you earned after eliminating so many enemies that you didn’t care anymore what others thought of you.

This was a monster, her Demigoddess’ senses screamed to her, albeit one hiding in human form.

Annabeth sighed in deep relief once the newcomer disappeared without a word inside the Super-Mega Yacht.

“So this is the ‘reinforcement’ Bianca di Angelo was negotiating for in the last couple of days...”

“Indeed.”

Annabeth almost jumped when the voice arrived to her ear, and she had to control herself not to strike the infuriating Demigod who had appeared on her right side without her noticing it first.

“Is it a good idea?” she growled.

“Is it a good idea to build an entire temple to my beloved sister Kymopoleia? Well, I don’t intend to build her something as big as the Pantheon. As for the rest of the issues, I will have a superb architect by my side, no?”

Annabeth didn’t know if she had to blush or strangle him.

It didn’t help that Perseus Jackson, much like plenty of boys on the Docks, had not bothered wearing a T-Shirt. And the view was really nice, she had to admit it in the privacy of her head.

“I was more referring to the problem of the mysterious killer you invited onboard. Is it a good idea to invite someone like him? I thought we were supposed to participate in a series of contests, not a display of slaughter.”

“With Commodus playing the role of High Judge, I’m afraid the idea of *avoiding* the slaughter is beyond our reach.” The son of Poseidon demolished her already well-diminished hopes. “It is going to be epic butchery, no matter how hard I try to plan around it. The real question is who’s going to do the killing, and who will be the vanquished. As I don’t fancy dying, logically, we must do our utmost to be victorious.”

“Really?”

“Really,” the black-haired Demigod assured her. “Of course, I wouldn’t have needed to use this kind of bloody contingencies if Commodus didn’t know our exact order of battle. But he does. I’m pretty sure all his backers, beginning with the Sire of the Drakons, have explained to him all the identities and the skills of our Demigods’ party. Accordingly, I must introduce a factor he knows nothing about, in the hope it will destabilise the High Judge and all the opposition.”

“And do you think it will work?”

“I give it odds around thirty percent.”

Annabeth cleared her throat.

“That doesn’t sound like a lot.” And worryingly, Perseus didn’t disagree.

“It would have been far better if my Lord Uncle had released the three gladiators I requested instead of one. I would have had far more choices, and unpredictability would be on my side. As it is, this ‘reinforcement’ is very much a one-shot asset.”

“And when the bolt will have been shot, so to speak?”

“Why, we will improvise, of course!”

Damn this roguish grin. And damn her hormones.

Lou Ellen had been completely right; she had a crush for bad boys.

And Annabeth had no idea about what she intended to do about it.

“We will leave with the evening tide.” Fortunately, the command arrived to put an end to her blushing and the emotions troubling her mind. “Please ensure the penguins are aboard within the next hour, and this time, unfortunately, they are not authorised to bring the tons of explosives they requested.”

“You mean ‘fortunately’, surely?” Annabeth tried without enthusiasm.

“I know what I said, your Owlishness.”

The daughter of Annabeth groaned loudly in exasperation.

Of course he did.

**17 January 2007, Super-Mega Yacht *Inevitable Doom*, somewhere in the Sea of Monsters**

No doubt some of the Legacies and Demigods at home would forget it in the years to come, but the Sea of Monsters was a Zone Mortalis. It was a place crawling with dangerous monsters and where abnormal weather was the norm.

Today at dawn, the Sea of Monsters had enjoyed reminding the Suicide Squad why this was indeed a Zone Mortalis and not a holiday sea resort. The storm had come out of nowhere, and in the midst of waves three times the height of the *Inevitable Doom*, they had all to slay sea snakes and giant sea monsters with all the weapons they had onboard, going from electrified harpoons to swords, and from Greek fire launchers to turret-mounted artillery.

It had lasted only fifty minutes, but it had felt like four hours, and everyone’s arms and legs were hurting of the battle.

Luke was pretty sure the Sea of Monsters was mocking them now: the sky had returned a limpid blue, and the sun was now forcing them to remove as many clothes as possible so that the tropical warmth remained somewhat bearable.

“I didn’t miss the previous Zone Mortalis, and I certainly won’t miss this one, if we happen to get out of here alive,” the son of Hermes declared to Dakota as the son of Bacchus handed him a bottle of lemon soda. The Roman Demigod just chuckled and went to deliver the bottles requested by the other members of the Suicide Squad.

“These seas are certainly something where we aren’t at our advantage,” Richard Grant agreed while removing shirt and trousers to go for a short black swimwear. “I prefer fighting on land, where we can see the monsters coming from kilometres away.”

“It certainly has some appeal,” the blonde-haired Demigod spoke. “Did the storm send us far off-course?”

“According to our navigator-witch, not at all,” the son of Hercules ‘reassured’ him. “We have been pushed far eastwards than the initial course called for, but this is in the process of being corrected. We may have lost a few hours, but both the Lightning Thief and Jackson agree we will reach ‘Narcissist Island’ tomorrow. In all likelihood, it will be around two or three in the afternoon.”

It was fast. But then the *Inevitable Doom* had the engines and the Cyclops-engineering to sail at speeds that most ‘conventional’ super-yachts’ captains were only able to dream of.

“Then let’s hope we will get no storm today or tonight. We will have other problems soon enough, but please let us avoid another battle at dawn against the Sea of Monsters.”

It didn’t exactly please him that Grant began to frown.

“What? Did I mention something unpleasant?”

“No, you didn’t.” There was a pause. “But there’s smoke on the horizon.”

“Smoke?” But yes, he had only to turn his head, and there was indeed a black plume. And since the Inevitable Doom was now accelerating in this very direction, the more minutes were spent waiting, the more this column of smoke was getting bigger and more threatening.

“So there is an island there, as the maps mentioned.”

“You don’t seem pleased.”

“The maps didn’t mention a volcano.”

“Ah.”

Luke winced. Yes, that was a problem.

“I suppose that if it is indeed something as bad as the eruption we left behind on the island that was Forge MP-42, our captain will make a detour.”

This would cost them a few hours, needless to say, but the Suicide Squad could afford it, and honestly there were going to participate in some crazy challenge, and for the moment, trying to bash their heads against a volcano was not written anywhere.

But as the minutes passed, it became clear there were no mountains expelling burning rocks, lava, and other unhealthy materials for the human lungs and skin. There wasn’t a submarine mountain or some rocky outcrop barely above the waves either.

No, the smoke both Grant and him had believed to come from a volcano did not in fact come from such a natural explosive event.

As the *Inevitable Doom* made good progress, they could see an island of white sands getting closer.

It was inhabited, and could boast a city of rather elegant white houses, protected by a single set of pale walls.

Or rather this was the spectacle that had been true some days ago, because right now, the city was in flames.

“By the Holy Grenades!” Rico arrived and fatally, opened his beak. “Did they begin the festivities without me?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Dakota had returned, one soda bottle in each hand. “They have an ocean liner anchored on the other side of the island. It is likely pirates decided to attack both the city and the tourists by surprise.”

It sounded almost reasonable, especially as in the next minutes, the aforementioned ocean liner was revealed to their eyes.

It was a massive ship. Yes, the *Inevitable Doom* was essentially a cruiser in tonnage and size, but this hull was something far bigger, a true colossus of the sea.

All of it clearly was useless, for it was no warship, and the closer they got, the more evident were the signs of battle. The wind began to turn, and the Demigods began to hear the screams.

The human screams.

“Olympus, Atlantis, and the Underworld have mercy...”

Smoke obscured a large part of the island, but what Luke could see with his eyes was already enough to freeze the blood in his veins.

There was some kind of horde sacking and plundering the city, and though the details were for now unavailable, a smell of carrion and death was assaulting his nose.

“We have to intervene!” Ellen the Huntress had arrived, and her face was truly terrifying. She had a silver bow in her hands, and if looks could kill, the perpetrators of that atrocity would be busy agonising. “The crimes of these males must be punished all at once!”

“I agree,” Richard Grant voiced his support immediately. “What?” he asked when plenty of boys and girls threw him a surprised look. “Yes, I agree with the Huntresses here. Seriously, this is a war crime and something abominable. We are heroes, are we not? And we are not in danger of running out of time that badly. I think we can spend a few hours teaching a lesson to these monsters.”

“True,” the other Huntress cleared her throat. “Clearly these monsters lost their transport just as they were about to land on this island, but now they are trapped. We don’t have many missiles on this ship, but we don’t really need them. This will be *vermin extermination*, and I’m sure Lady Artemis will completely approve their eradication.”

There was a cough.

Everyone turned his head.

Perseus Jackson waved his orange tricorn at them.

“Extraordinary,” the son of Poseidon told in a voice that was only charming superficially, “everything you just said was wrong. Well, beyond the approval of your Goddess, of course.”

“Explain, now.”

Jackson placed his hat back upon his head. One could almost wonder why he bothered, given that he only wore some short swimwear.

“The monsters didn’t lose their transport; you are all able to see it.”

The majority of the Demigods and the Demigoddesses stared.

“But there’s only...oh, no.”

“Oh no, indeed. This ocean liner is the *Ixion*. If you had tried to use a spyglass to read its name, you would have known there was a problem.”

“The *Ixion*?” Annabeth asked. “Like the genitor of Centauros who eventually gave birth to-“

The expressions of incomprehension turned one by one to horror.

“Yes, the same Centauros who fornicated with mares and ended up creating the race of *Centaurs*.” Perseus Jackson declared coldly. “The *Ixion* is clearly both their transport, their base, their stable, and the means they stay hidden until it is time to launch raids. From the outside, it is clearly an ocean liner. Deep inside however, it is more likely a *stable* to *breed* the next generation of Centaurs.”

Luke couldn’t believe things could be worse, but these words proved how wrong he was.

Centaurs. Thousands of Centaurs were attacking this island, and if Jackson was right, they were only in it not only for the looting and the pillage, but also to rape and kidnap every woman they wanted to multiply their numbers.

It was a nightmare. And it was happening in front of them.

“We have to intervene.” Richard spoke. His face was way paler than it had been minutes ago, but the determination had not left his eyes. “We have to. It doesn’t matter if these are Centaurs or some other monster. There are innocent there that are losing their lives against monsters. And the *Inevitable Doom* is largely capable to sink the *Ixion* in a few salvoes.”

“You’re right, but we can’t.”

“WHAT?”

Jackson winced at the scream of the Huntress, and he was hardly the only one.

“Not so loud,” the leader of the Suicide Squad complained.

“I knew it! I knew it like you were like every male! You are a dirty pig, rejoicing at the idea of-“

“Did any of you bother watching the golden banners hoisted by the *Ixion*?” Perseus cut through the insults like he wielded a sword of Stygian Iron. “They show large ‘NH’ golden letters with a golden leonine head on a purple field.”

Luke hadn’t heard of a banner like that before today. But it didn’t require a lot of cleverness to add two plus two.

“These are the banners of Commodus.”

Perseus clapped his hands theatrically.

“Precisely,” the red eye shone in a sinister light, “the *Ixion* is one of the ships which are transporting the spectators which will soon fill the stands of the Commodus Coliseum. Attacking it would be a grave breach of the High Judge’s authority, and would likely result in penalties at best, in our disqualification at worse.”

“You mean we can’t do anything to them under any circumstances?” Jade asked aghast.

“No, of course not,” the son of Poseidon grimaced. “Should they be so stupid as to attack us, we have of course the right to defend ourselves and slay them to the last. But there’s only so much we can play with the rules here, and as you can clearly see, the Centaurs are busy invading and destroying this island. They are not interested in us, and I’m sure they have been warned to stay away from the *Inevitable Doom*.”

“This is...we have to do something!”

“Wait until the Adjudicator Challenge is over?” Perseus suggested to Ellen. “Once it is, you will be able to kill them all at your leisure. Except Chiron and the Party Ponies, pretty much every Centaur Tribe can be slaughtered with impunity. The Gods aren’t really sorry to see their numbers decrease, I assure you. The problem is mainly to kill all of them as fast as possible; when they begin to think they are going to be crushed decisively, the Centaurs disperse all over a large area, and it’s hell to hunt them down.”

“Is there really nothing we can do?” Hylla pleaded.

“Not without destroying every chance we have to ever complete successfully this Quest,” the self-proclaimed King of Pirates shook his head with what appeared to be genuine regret. “I apologise, but for today, there’s no way we can punish for the Centaurs for what they’re doing. Blame Commodus, if it makes you feel better. It is *his* fault the *Ixion* is here and has the protection it enjoys until the end of the Challenge.”

It didn’t make Luke feel better, no. And there was now the even more unpleasant question: what kind of monster Commodus truly was, to think that filling *Centaurs* like those inside his Coliseum was going to result in a formidable audience?

**18 January 2007, Super-Mega Yacht *Inevitable Doom*, approaches of ‘Narcissist Island’**

At first, it didn’t look so bad.

There appeared to be two huge forts defending the entrance of a gullet leading deeper into the island.

It seemed to be a reasonably fortified island, which seemed to be nothing of note because it was the Sea of Monsters.

This ‘normality’ didn’t last more than a few seconds.

First, they watched as an ocean liner half of the size of the *Ixion* went through the entrance of the gullet. Its name was the *Lamia*, in case anyone had any doubt about whether it transported monsters or not.

About three minutes later, Dakota realised that the forts were indeed defensive structures, but they happened to be incredibly disturbing to watch.

What he had mistaken for towers were in fact giant statues of Commodus taking various arrogant poses.

The master of the island had built them to be both monuments to his ego and support for a large amount of heavy weapons.

“You have to be kidding me. By contrast,” Drew Tanaka spat while glaring at the biggest statue, which represented Commodus wearing a Nemean Lion’s skin and an enormous bloody axe, “I think Jackson has good taste, and we’re speaking of a Demigod who loves *orange*!”

“I know,” Dakota answered. “I know!” His poor eyes couldn’t stop watching, no matter how hard they tried. “And they appear to have sculpted the Gullet to represent the ‘exploits’ of the Roman Emperor.”

The theme seemed to be ‘Commodus triumphing all the time’ when it wasn’t ‘Commodus purging the traitors’.

As always, the ‘High Judge’ had visibly ordered to be represented only as his over-muscular parody of Hercules. Except unlike the son of Zeus, Commodus was never seen wielding a mace. The Nemean Lion was everywhere, both on the banners and the statues, but Commodus didn’t seem to choose the same preferences as the true hero of the Twelve Labours: in some cases, he had a spear, in others, a sword.

The son of Bacchus wished he could say it was the lowest point of this series of traumatising sights.

It wasn’t.

Once the *Inevitable Doom* finally emerged from the gullet, Dakota grimaced because all the previous statements had been a prelude for this nightmare.

There was a Roman City waiting for them.

No.

There was the parody of a Roman City waiting for them.

It was colossal.

It also looked incredibly fake and the delirium of someone completely out of touch of reality.

There were three red-painted aqueducts which seemed to have been built not to transport water, but just present an interesting facade.

The villas facing the harbour were bloodily enormous, with gardens and tall columns, but you couldn’t see any sign of ‘normal’ housing.

There was a Coliseum. You couldn’t miss it, it was something way bigger than any monument and temple they had seen so far. It felt like Cyclops and Giants had sculpted it from the very earth before soaking it into some kind of bronze-gold shade that insulted everything artistic.

And all around it, there were giant statues to the glory of Commodus. Most of them showed the ‘High Judge’ in various gladiator armours.

“Fake,” Elvis Knight commented next to him.

“Fake,” Dakota approved. “Everything is...wrong. No city works like that. It looks like someone watched the main Roman monuments built by the Republic and the Empire, and forgot the purpose of them and everything else. Where is the Forum? Where are the baths? Where are the temples?”

“The only temple I see is this monstrosity of white and gold on the right of the Coliseum,” Michael yew pointed out. “And with the number of statues of Commodus everywhere, I think we can agree no Olympian is meant to be celebrated and worshipped there.”

“Gods, and to think we had seen some arrogant enemies before...they were all rather modest compared to Commodus.”

As if to echo these words, fireworks began to explode in the sky, and in purple light, they wrote a message that made plenty of Demigods wince or facepalm.

WELCOME TO COLONY ANNA LUCIA COMMODIANA!

“Can someone torch this island?” Ethan Nakamura reacted. “I will pay half of what I own just to see this horror perish in flames!”

More fireworks were fired, and a new purple message flared up in front of the Super-Mega Yacht.

WELCOME TO THE LABOURS OF NEO HERCULES!

“That’s it!” Richard Grant snarled. “Commodus’ head is *mine*!”

“Join the queue, *male*,” Jenna the Huntress retorted. “I want to strangle him with his own entrails!”

“As amusing as it is to listen to you,” Bianca di Angelo drawled, and half of the Suicide Squad took sheepish expressions, “we should be focusing on the opposition, no? Look on the left, floating a couple of metres above the waves.”

“That’s the Triumvirate Solar Ark, right?”

Now that they concentrated upon it, it couldn’t be missed. It was a very large carrier...and it burned with power.

“Yes, this is the *Spear of the Gods*.” The Lightning Thief shook her head. “And by its side, we have three ocean liners, and all of them smell like the lair of monsters.”

Dakota grimaced.

These weren’t small ships at all, and while the Triumvirate had a hard limit of people they could bring to this island, much like the Suicide Squad, Commodus was clearly not feeling up to restrict himself.

And the *Ixion* was not among these ocean liners. How many bloodthirsty monsters was the master of ‘Narcissist Island’ going to bring for the ‘Labours’?

“I feel,” and the son of Bacchus was glad his voice remained somewhat unshaken, “the Triumvirate isn’t going to be our main foe this time around.”

“I feel the same,” Richard Grant crossed his arms and scowled. “No wonder Jackson was certain it was going to end in butchery no matter who was chosen to be part of our fifty-strong party.”

“There’s a welcoming committee taking position,” over one hundred Legionnaires in ridiculous parade armours of purple and gold, and maybe twice as many dancers and spectacle performers.

“Let’s not make them wait,” Bianca di Angelo said simply, and no one was in the mood to argue against the sorceress.

**18 January 2007, Commodianum Harbour, ‘Narcissist Island’**

“You stand,” the herald in purple proclaimed, “before the Mighty Imperator Caesar Lucius Aelius Aurelius Commodus Augustus Pius Felix Sarmaticus Germanicus Maximus Britannicus, the Once and Future Neo Hercules.”

For a couple of seconds, it felt as if the world stopped breathing.

As if the Gods, the Titans, and the Primordials prepared for the worst scenario possible.

“Ave Aurelius!”

The world and the Gods breathed out in relief.

The former Roman Emperor, however, did not look pleased at all.

Richard smiled largely. Yes, the Usurper could ‘enjoy’ what the Suicide Squad endured on a daily basis.

“I am,” the High Judge growled, “Commodus, the Neo Hercules.”

“Are you sure?” Perseus could really beat anyone in a contest of irritation and pettiness, and he proved it at once. “Nah. You really have *inherited* some traits of your *august father*-“

You had to give the son of Poseidon credit: it had taken him mere seconds to find the chink in Commodus’ armour.

“Who truly cares about my boring genitor? I have surpassed him in every way which matters!”

They faced each other.

The contrast was rather striking.

Perseus had come in orange toga and with his orange tricorn, two things which would have ensured he looked ridiculous, if the honour guard of Commodus was not already dressed in purple-gold, making sure the Romans won the laurels of bad taste no matter how drastically Perseus attempted to injure their eyes.

Commodus, however, had transformed the Nemean Lion skin so that it became extremely similar to their X-Suits, a tight cloth revealing every muscle and every part of his body in great detail. Of course, since it was a Nemean Lion, the colour was gold, and the glint was rather metallic.

He was also far taller than Jackson. It wasn’t totally a surprise; though he had aged during the perils of the Sea of Monsters, the grinning Demigod was below 1m70. But even if he hadn’t been, Commodus would likely have been far taller than him. You could say many uncomplimentary things about the Usurper, but he was alas taller than any member of the Suicide Squad save Asterius and the biggest Telekhines. The former Caesar could boast two metres without lying, and maybe a bit more.

“You have not presented the Goddess you’re Adjudicating to.”

“Lady Isis, this is Felix. Ave Britannicus!”

Commodus smiled. It was really much a forced expression.

“Your husband had much to speak about you, Lady of Love,” the previous Roman Emperor tried to play the seducer. “It seems we have many points in common.”

This undoubtedly referred to the fact the former Egyptian Queen had come in a dress of gold.

Emphasis on the ‘had’.

Within the last thirty seconds, it had changed. Now Isis’ clothes were all about lapis-lazuli and sapphires.

“**Really? I am not aware of anything we share, in this world or another**.”

The rebuke was clear, and absolutely not subtle.

The penguins, as could be expected of them, snickered.

Commodus glared at them, but by the rules of the Adjudicator Challenge, he could hardly strike them down or inflict any sort of punishment upon them.

As much as Richard wanted to punch this claimant Usurper and break his nose, remove a few teeth, and give him a good lesson, he couldn’t. But the opposite was true too.

Their enemy – also known as the ‘High Judge’ – couldn’t touch them as long as they didn’t break the rules.

“You have to find a name for your team, of course.”

Perseus chuckled.

“Let’s keep it simple. We will be Team Adjudicator.”

“An unremarkable name,” the claimant Usurper replied before adding a single word which rang like the most terrible of insults in his mouth. “Boring.”

“If you so desire,” the mad grin was back, “I can name my Team ‘Let’s go murdering all the Roman Imperators of this Island’. I can also think of ‘Team Ides of March’, ‘Team Hera did nothing wrong’, and ‘Team Golden Kitty’.”

Commodus flinched.

Richard had to control himself not to snicker or add his own insults.

Yeah, how did it feel to have your own insults slammed back in your faces with interest?

“Team Adjudicator will be fine,” the former Emperor swallowed heavily. “I see you arrived with fifty members, all fulfilling the basic perquisites of the Challenge. You will be presented to the rest of your team tomorrow morning when they will arrive.”

“Excellent!” when Jackson smiled with only his red eye opened, it was honestly pretty disturbing. “I suppose we will be able to organise a few training sessions in the Coliseum before the Adjudicator Challenge officially begins?”

“You most assuredly will not,” Commodus immediately denied him. “I have prepared a gladiator school next to the glorious Commodus Coliseum.”

The vindication on his face told without ambiguity that the terms employed had not been chosen by accident. The son of Marcus Aurelius really saw them as nothing but gladiators for his grand spectacle.

“These will be your living quarters when you do not participate in *my* Games.”

“The Adjudicator Challenge,” the son of the Earthshaker drily corrected.

“The Twelve Labours of Neo Hercules,” Commodus glared at him, but it didn’t last long. There weren’t many people capable to stare at the madness in Jackson’s eyes, and it appeared that whatever megalomania inhabited him, the Roman tyrant had some life-preservation after all.

The Lord of the Suicide Squad grinned.

“As long as we don’t lack for comfort!” The threat was veiled, but definitely here.

“You won’t. And you can be assured Team Triumvirate has been given rigorously an identical gladiator school to prepare itself! Now I’m sure you have made a long travel. Take everything you need from your ship, and Alaric will escort you to your Ludus. Dismissed!”

By the stunned expressions of the honour guard and the other members of the Commodus delegation, this had not been part of the plan.

But apparently, whatever the scheme had been, it had been scrapped.

Commodus had evidently no wish to stay near Perseus Jackson for too long.

It was a good omen.

Unfortunately, Richard had a feeling this was just the first skirmish, and the real battles against this megalomaniac Emperor would not begin until they had to fight in the arena of the giant Coliseum...

**18 January 2007, Primus Ludus Magnus Commodus, ‘Narcissist Island’**

Commodus was hardly known as the most competent Roman Emperor in history, but here you had to admit, his assurance they would not lack for comfort appeared to be nothing but the truth.

They could not go outside of the Ludus – better known in English as a ‘gladiator school’ – without breaking the rules, but the facilities had been built to motivate them to stay inside. It was a three floors-high rectangular structure, and all the comfort and the luxury of the twenty-first century had been added to it.

The rectangular courtyard with its training arena and the porticos with the Greek-styled columns would not have shocked the Empire-era gladiators by any means.

On the other hand, Perseus was certain the gladiators who had fought when Commodus was still Emperor had not access to fridges and the kind of modern kitchen that they had been presented during the visit.

There was much to complain about the self-proclaimed Neo Hercules, like his ridiculous divine name and other things. But Commodus really wanted them to be in top shape for his gladiatorial games. The refectory was large, built to present a friendly atmosphere, and they had around two dozen cooks in their service able to satisfy everyone’s appetite. And it was just one thing among many. The Ludus had a Roman Bath Complex, in addition to the showers of the private bedrooms, and it could largely fit every member of the Suicide Squad all at once, while keeping the genders separate. There was an infirmary – the *saniarium* – and of course the armoury-arsenal where all armours and weapons would be kept, the infamous *armamentarium*. The summum choragium was the hall where you kept all your costumes and accessories which did not qualify as weapons and armours.

There were plenty of other rooms, ranging from a special washing room to game rooms and map rooms on the upper floors. Their bedrooms were all on the first or the second floor; the ground floor was essentially for the gladiator training and equipment – and yes, everyone had realised how the pretence that it was a ‘mere’ Challenge had dropped in the first minutes.

Commodus wanted a series of bloodthirsty gladiator games.

Who was Perseus to deny him?

“And this,” Alaric, their Guide and Overseer finished, “is the morgue.”

Yeah, this one was greeted by a lot of teeth-grinding and hostile expressions.

This was awfully predictable from Commodus.

This didn’t mean that if ‘Neo Hercules’ gave him the opportunity, the former Tyrant was going to miss the opportunity to engineer a few tragic accidents.

“I see.” He answered for the entire Suicide Squad. “I believe we will choose our own bedrooms in the next hours. Is there anything else?”

The brown-bearded Germani suddenly looked ill-at-ease, but he nodded.

“The Mighty Imperator Caesar has prepared the schedule for the glorious Twelve Labours of Neo Hercules. I have been instructed to deliver it into your hands, personally.”

He uttered a counter-curse to be certain, but the document was not cursed or enchanted in any way. It was papyrus, incidentally, not paper or parchment. For once, it did not feel like an insult.

Perseus broke the Nemean Lion Seal and began to read.

It was quick.

***Twelve Labours of Neo Hercules***:

*20th January: Official Opening Ceremony, First Labour, Second Labour, Third Labour*

*21st January: Rest*

*22nd January: Fourth Labour, Fifth Labour*

*23rd January: Sixth Labour, Seventh Labour*

*24th January and 25th January: Rest*

*26th January: Eighth Labour, Ninth Labour, Tenth Labour, Eleventh Labour, Twelfth Labour*

Seven days, and twelve Labours.

It felt...*fair*.

Undoubtedly, it was anything but true; meeting Commodus only once had been enough to confirm that.

“There’s a trap somewhere,” Richard Grant grumbled when he handed the son of Hercules the papyrus and took a minute to read it.

“Yes, of course.” The son of Poseidon agreed easily as the Germani Praetorian left hastily. “The question is which kind of trap. I think you are far likely to know more than me when it comes to this part of the mythology. Any bright ideas?”

“Nothing that comes to mind,” the son of Hercules answered with a grunt. “With the megalomaniac calling each challenge a Labour, I think we’re going to have to fight plenty of the beasts my father once had to deal with, but that was a given before Alaric gave you the schedule.”

“We could try to convince the Germani to tell us his master’s secrets.” Ethan remarked. “It isn’t against the rules, no?”

“It isn’t,” the former Tyrant was pleased by the ruthlessness of his treacherous lieutenant. “But I’m afraid it’s kind of useless. This Alaric knows a bit more than we do, but his pool of knowledge is extremely limited. Commodus knows he will be often in contact with us, and he will have acted in consequence. In my humble opinion, the only being on this island who knows everything about the Labours is the master of the island himself.”

“And we can’t touch him,” Jade’s unhappiness was not feigned at all.

“And we can’t touch him.” Perseus conceded. “Annabeth, please copy the schedule before sunset, we will have to analyse it after dinner.”

“What do we do now?” Leo Valdez asked, trying to hide that a bit of smoke was still coming out of his ears, and unquestionably failing in the process.

“I think it’s time to choose our bedrooms for our stay here, Amigo! And you better make sure to select one which will neutralise fire damage and other types of spontaneous combustions!”

Still, Perseus was wincing deep inside.

Seven Days, Twelve Labours. What was he missing?

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You couldn’t really complain about how spacious the living quarters were. The bedroom alone was three times the size of what you were given in a normal New Byzantium Barrack after you were claimed. You had a bed large enough for three or four teenagers, a large wardrobe, a desk, and it was given with the heating and the air conditioner to regulate the temperature as you wished.

You couldn’t keep weapons here – the armoury on the ground floor was made exactly for that – but there was a private bathroom adjacent to the bedroom, with a shower, a small bath, a toilet, and everything you might need to feel clean, including towels, soap, shower gel, comb, and more.

No, Michael wasn’t going to complain about the size of the private quarters.

He could complain about the lack of taste, however.

This bedroom in particular was the colour of blood.

Yes, a very nice vivid crimson that was perfect to remind him of human blood.

And then there was the statue.

“Don’t glare at it like that, my insane bard! It is just a boar statue!”

“I hate it.” The son of Apollo saw no reason to lie.

“For your personal knowledge, my musical lieutenant, it is a copy of a famous boar statue one can find in the Uffizi Gallery of Florence.”

“And why the Hell it is here?”

“I thought it was evident.”

“Well to me, it is not! Explain.”

“This bedroom, much like the others, I might add, is dedicated to one of the Labours of Hercules.”

“Oh,” Michael Yew winced, “you mean-“

“You chose to open the ‘Room of the Erymanthian Boar’, yes.”

“That’s...err...” the words failed him. Commodus had adopted this theme for everything? How crazy was this Roman Emperor?

“That’s quite the dedication, yes,” by the way Jackson looked at the boar statue, there were in all likelihood some recording devices hiding nearby. “Any other questions?”

“Why are the sheets, the walls, and by Olympus, the toilet painted in *that* colour?”

“According to some rumours, the Erymanthian Boars have an impenetrable skin which can be best described as ‘blood shade’.”

“And is it true?”

The red eye had an eerie colour any time he looked at it, but this time it seemed it was a mirror for these living quarters.

The son of Poseidon shrugged.

“I must admit my ignorance on the matter. I’ve never met an Erymanthian Boar before today.”

The blonde-haired Demigod didn’t know if his poor head was to be relieved or afraid to hear that.

Relieved. It had to be a relief that even with his insane adventures, there were things even the children of the Big Three didn’t meet, right?

“Wait a minute. *An*? Not *the* Erymanthian Boar? I thought they were unique monsters!”

“They *were* unique monsters, my bard lieutenant. When Grant’s father dealt with them the first time.”

“Oh, by the Gods,” he moaned, “they *bred*.”

“Plenty of them were already breeding long before a certain son of the Master of Olympus was born, my friend. The Stymphalian Birds, the Mares of Diomedes and several others were hardly singular monsters.”

His expression must have been especially filled with despair, because Jackson decided to tone down a bit the bad news.

“They are not common monsters, of course. I mean, except the lesser breeds of Hydra which spread everywhere, but the Lernaean itself is extremely rare. Commodus himself certainly had to search for decades before having the opportunity to find a Nemean Lion, defeat him, and claim its skin for himself.”

“He didn’t gain any points with the Huntresses by wearing it.”

“He lost plenty of it, you mean. The servants of the Goddess of the Hunt *loathe* Hercules, and now they have diverted part of the hatred towards him.”

One could hear the shouts of some of these servants a few metres away.

“I suppose I better go and see what angered them,” the child of the Earthshaker grinned.

“Probably the same lack of taste this bedroom suffers from?”

“Or a private quarters dedicated to Commodus himself, with statues of the Roman Emperor in the bathroom killing sea monsters?”

The black-haired son of Poseidon snickered.

“Now that you have said it, it certainly sounds like something our host would do.”

“I’m so glad to hear you say it.”

“Yes, yes. Do you take it?”

“What?”

Jackson inclined his head with a mocking expression.

“The bedroom? Do you want it or not?”

“Oh...yes, yes, I take it. It isn’t like the decoration will be better elsewhere, really.”

“Good. Now I think the touristic tour of the Ludus has consumed enough time; we have to descend to the refectory. Unpacking will have to wait after dinner.”

“I hear and I obey,” the son of Apollo said dramatically, giving a last glance of disgust before leaving and shutting down the door.

Seriously, Commodus? Everyone knew you wanted to usurp Hercules now, but this was no reason to throw your awful artistic tastes in everyone’s face!

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“I’m a bit reassured to be honest.”

“I’m sure you are, my drunken lieutenant, but about what?”

“Given how obsessed Commodus is about the Twelve Labours, I almost expected him to serve us some Hydra meat at dinner.”

This was a good one, and Perseus wasn’t the only one to laugh.

“It is true his obsession has grown a bit out of control.”

“A bit?” Clarisse snarked. “Jackson, he’s barking, raving mad! And he was already a narcissist and a psycho before he was killed the first time.”

“He is.” The former Tyrant acknowledged. All Tyrants were eccentric, it came with the job, but Commodus was truly an excellent example why incompetence and absolute power should never be tolerated together. “I’m really not surprised everyone was trying to assassinate him by the end of his Caesar reign.”

And without the blessings of Apollo, the conspirators would have succeeded far earlier, but that was something to debate another day when they weren’t so many witnesses around.

“That said,” the leader of the Suicide Squad continued, “don’t forget that while Commodus is impatient and a prime narcissist, he is not devoid of some sort of cunning. When he descended to fight in the arena as a gladiator, the games were rigged in advance one way or another. And this was in general with a very limited amount of time. Here, he was easily granted weeks, maybe months, to make his plans.”

“You don’t think it was prepared in the last month or so, then,” Luke said as he watched Asterius empty another massive plate in record time.

“My heroic lieutenant, have you seen the size of this Coliseum? Even in the era we live into and supported by modern machinery, you do not build something the size of a giant stadium in mere weeks, and this gladiator island is way bigger than a giant football stadium. This doesn’t account for all the machinery underneath it to make the Games possible, naturally. No, Commodus may have seized the opportunity presented to him a platinum tray by others, but the construction of everything must have begun *before* the Master Bolt was stolen.”

“Charming,” Bianca di Angelo replied in an unsurprised voice. “How do you think are our chances?”

“It is difficult to say for now when there is so much we ignore about our host’s ambitious plans.” Perseus said truthfully. “I should have a better idea after the first day and three Labours.”

“Assuming we’re still alive after them,” Leo muttered.

“Assuming that, yes, and speaking of which,” he smiled, and the son of Hephaestus looked very afraid, “we have to train you to make sure you don’t try to burn us along with the Enemy, Amigo.”

“You were just telling us tomorrow will be a resting day!”

“I promise I will only test you for two hours, and we will begin very late in the morning or very early in the afternoon. Satisfied, Amigo?”

“No.”

“Too bad,” but he wasn’t going to send an uncontrollable pyrokinesist in the arena with others. Valdez had to have some control, or he would stay on the sidelines for the Adjudicator Challenge. “And for the love of the Gods, don’t try to get out of the Ludus while I’m sleeping. The guards are vigilant, there is an advanced magical detection system monitoring our moves, and I don’t want to spend my time tomorrow convincing the Germani Praetorians that your head need to remain attached to its shoulders.”

And on this, everyone began to leave the refectory. It had been a long day, and it had begun with a storm and several sea monster attacks; the weakest members of the Suicide Squad were looking dead on their feet.

If they survived this last adventure and some really wanted to stay as part of the Suicide Squad, they really would have to step up their training.

Anyway.

Perseus returned to the first floor, where his bedroom awaited.

And yes, the decoration was really sub-par.

The ‘Bedroom of Lernaean Hydra’ would not have been his first choice in normal times, with all its dark green and tarnished silver, plus the scales...but it wasn’t normal times, and the rest of the bedrooms on the first floor were anything, worse. The one with the Nemean Lion theme was shiny gold from the toilet to the pillows, and he would never enter it unless his life was at stake.

That the Nemean Lion was the animal Commodus had chosen as a symbol was another good reason to avoid it. If the penguins wanted to claim it themselves, then it solved the problem too.

That was when he realised that while his bag had not been unpacked, the wardrobe was already filled with clothes. Feminine clothes.

Clearly, someone had claimed the room while he was away speaking with Michael.

“This is a room for two, right?”

The door shut down behind him, and there was the familiar sensation of a magical lock being activated.

“It is. Our host left it to us to decide, in the end.”

Perseus turned to look at Lou Ellen. The daughter of Hecate was smiling predatorily, and though the former Tyrant of Helike had never found himself in this kind of situation in a previous life, he wasn’t stupid enough to not recognise the signs.

“Are you sure?”

“If we win this Challenge, I will likely be away to learn magic on my half-sister’s island for a long period of time. If we lose, we will die. Yes, I am sure.”

“There is still a problem,” for once, his legs felt uncomfortably weak. This was really not a situation he was used to, though he would never admit it in public.

“If it’s about contraception, don’t worry, my half-sister anticipated that. Magical seals are perfect for Demigods.”

And then the blonde sorceress slowly let her black robe drop to the floor, revealing she wore nothing underneath.

For once all rationality snapped in his brain, and the next thing he knew his lips were on her lips, and his tongue was intertwined with her tongue.

Then the storm of passion struck and engulfed them as everything was passion and pleasure.

**19 January 2007,** **Primus Ludus Magnus Commodus, ‘Narcissist Island’**

When they entered the refectory to take their breakfast, Bianca smiled.

It must be said that Lou Ellen Blackstone was walking in a very funny manner this morning.

It was almost hidden for someone who didn’t know her, courtesy of walking hand-in-hand with Perseus Jackson, but the former Dread Empress had known what to look for.

It must also be said that the green dress was far less daring the black seductive robe of yesterday. It had long sleeves, a high collar, and was conservative, which was good to hide any...physical indiscretions.

The evidence of the ‘guilt’ was significant. But she had learned patience.

Bianca as a result waited for them to begin to drink their fruit juice of the morning before speaking in an idle tone.

“You know, if you wanted to enjoy yourselves so much, the bedrooms have a magical ‘private mode’ you can activate when you want.” The daughter of Hecate coughed violently, barely managing to not spit everything out. Jackson took it far more calmly and serenely, unfortunately. But the blush of his lover more than compensated for it.

“Damn it, Lightning Thief! You did it on purpose!”

“Absolutely,” the daughter of Hades shamelessly admitted. “Consider it retribution for the fact I had to cast a Sound-Dampening Enchantment on your room one hour after you began. You know, when it became clear you weren’t going to stop anytime soon.”

The blonde Demigoddess turned into an interesting shade of red.

“I forgot, and I have a feeling-“

“Was it good?” Drew Tanaka interrupted her with all the subtlety of an elephant charging into a porcelain shop.

The daughter of Aphrodite was thrown a few disapproving looks, which were all ignored with the haughtiness one could expect from the lineage of Love.

“Yes,” Lou Ellen replied. “It was wonderful.”

“Good! Now did you try the positions-“

The next seconds saw half of the Suicide Squad blush like tomatoes and try very hard to pretend they weren’t listening to.

And the expressions on the Huntresses’ faces were things to behold.

“Drew, enough,” the Lightning Thief managed to utter after a couple of minutes. “It’s their private love life-“

“You didn’t say the same thing last night when listening to your fellow sorceress’ screams of pleasure.”

There were days when you regretted the fact you couldn’t crucify someone. When she was Triumphant, this insolence was not tolerated!

Alas, Drew was the Champion of Persephone, and untouchable unless she wanted to reignite the feud with one of the Queens of Hell.

“I might have laughed a bit.” In fact, she had done more than that, but she was not going to say it aloud before such a large audience. “Now that the horizontal dancing of our love birds has been mentioned, we are going to have to check the training of everyone.”

“Go ahead,” Perseus encouraged her as he began to devour jam, eggs, yoghurt, and plenty of other things placed within striking range of his mouth. “I will join you in ten minutes. And since Leo was complaining about training with me this morning, I think he will be more than happy to have you as his instructor.”

No, he wouldn’t, the son of Hephaestus was terrified of her...but Bianca wasn’t going to object the decision.

“And the others?”

“Check the Huntresses’ abilities with their long daggers. I would love to believe the arena will authorise long-distance projectile bombardment, but it’s most likely it won’t. And we have-“

Martial horns began to clamour in the distance.

War horns echoed against the walls of the Ludus, and soon they were joined by quantities of other musical tunes, some coming from trumpets and other brass instruments.

It was loud.

It was absolutely murder on her ears.

It definitely felt like the lack of taste of Commodus applied not only to decoration, but to music too.

“What now?” Richard Grant asked with a grim expression.

“I could be wrong,” Perseus winced, “but it seems our ‘reinforcements’ have arrived.”

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Though many of her memories were fragmented, Hera remembered enough to know she was an expert in discourtesy and humiliations.

Mainly because Zeus had been busy doing everything possible to ensure their marriage was worth as much as a single counterfeit Drachma, given how often he ended in mortal women’s bed.

But the former Goddess of Marriage had to admit, neither her husband nor any Olympian had ever shown their lack of respect to anyone by eating a sandwich and masticating loudly.

“Are they allowed to do that?” the Emperor Penguin to her left asked in a voice filled with admiration.

“It’s Jackson,” she whispered back. “You can bet he has read integrally the rules of all Adjudicator Challenges just to be sure he can show his disrespect like this.”

And the worst part was that Hera was sure he had an already-made excuse. Indeed, they had disturbed him during his breakfast, no?

That breakfast was generally served two hours earlier and Jackson had been late because of his...nightly activities wouldn’t matter.

“The sorceress is smirking a lot wherever you look in her direction.”

“I know,” Hera grumbled, wishing a certain penguin stopped talking. How was the comical fin duo still alive with these big beaks, by the way?

At the moment, the Queen of Seasons was definitely trying to think about something else. It was already unfair that her previous marriage had been a sham, but what was it recently about everyone suddenly having nights of passion when she had been denied them for so long?

Zeus. It was Zeus’ fault.

Yes, everything should be blamed on Zeus.

“Lord Captain of Team Adjudicator?”

The poor Praetorian was visibly stunned by Perseus Jackson’s audacity. His troops were in parade formation. Everything was ready for the arrival of the ‘reinforcements’.

And the son of Poseidon never stopped eating his huge sandwich.

“Go ahead,” the infuriating Demigod grinned after he swallowed what he had in his mouth. “Don’t let my breakfast stop you.”

“Yes...ahem...this is...never mind, Lord Captain.” The Germani had certainly been prepared somewhat before their arrival, but whatever training they had been put through, it was absolutely insufficient when it came to Perseus Jackson.

“Presenting to you, some of the proud allies you are going to fight next to in the arena, Team Adjudicator!”

No one laughed when the first cages were moved into the Ludus.

The small metal prisons were moved by automatons of bronze shaped to imitate some Spartans of Antiquity, but this wasn’t what attracted the attention.

No, that ‘honour’ was given to what was inside the cages.

“Err...” the penguin lamentably commented in surprise, “they aren’t monsters? I would have expected them, not men.”

“They are monsters,” Hera frostily corrected. “Monsters hiding behind human faces and skins.”

There was much Hera didn’t remember of her divine life. Her current body couldn’t handle the power and the memories, she guessed. But she didn’t need most of that to recognise the people in the cages for what they were, despite having never seen these specific prisoners before.

“What?”

“These are the war dogs of my son. Or is it war boars? I sometimes forget how we are supposed to call these degenerate butchers.”

“You mean-“

“Yes, there are mercenaries in the employ of the God of War.”

You knew it just by looking at them. The cruelty in their eyes, the raw aura of violence their body was soaked into. Many of them could have been considered good-looking despite the scars otherwise. As it was, Hera wanted to do nothing but remove their eyes every time they looked at her.

“I was promised fifty members as reinforcements,” the leader of the Suicide Squad was giving Alaric a stone-cold expression, which spoke volumes of how little he ‘appreciated’ the ‘reinforcements’. “Yet I see only thirty-three cages and men.”

“The Mighty Imperator Neo Hercules apologises, but the transport moving the rest of your reinforcements had a little incident. Nothing that will be problematic for the Games of tomorrow, my Divine Lord assures you! It has just caused a few hours of delay.”

“I see.”

Apparently, the Praetorians of the Narcissist One could notice Jackson was not in a good mood.

“Err...the men in front of you have all sworn to participate in the Games. They have been captured in the Middle East and various battlefields of Africa.”

Where they were undoubtedly busy looting, pillaging, and waging wars in the most brutal ways possible, now that Ares was unable to oversee their actions.

Assuming, of course, they hadn’t begun the atrocities *before* Ares was defeated by Tethys.

“They are all eager to defend the cause of Team Adjudicator, so that their divine patron will be freed at the end of the games!”

Perseus stared silently back...for good reason. Yes, as far as lies went, this was not a subtle one.

“Should I open the cages?”

“Absolutely not,” Perseus replied immediately to her relief.

“WHAT?”

Suddenly, thirty-three mouths which had waited patiently began to pour insults and vulgar comments.

Some of them were rather crude. A few were in languages Hera wasn’t speaking. And plenty of them she could understand, and her worst apprehensions were very much justified.

“**Silence. Kiss the ground at your feet**.”

The earth felt like it was shaking, and the sun seemed to lose in radiance.

Thirty-three of the most dangerous mercenaries Ares had taken in his service shut down their ugly mouths, prostrated themselves, and kissed the ground.

Many Praetorians of Commodus were terrified by the display of power.

Well, it looked like the briefing on Jackson’s abilities had been far from complete, or they hadn’t listened in the first place.

One tried to clear his throat nonetheless.

“They are-“

“I know who they are.” The son of Poseidon interrupted him. “This one is the Colonel Ross, son of Deimos. Wanted for countless war crimes in at least two dozen countries, and plenty of Olympians have put several large rewards for his elimination.”

The Earthshaker’s child let the War-sworn mercenaries prostrated for long seconds before releasing his power.

“A *third* Gallowborne Division?” Ethan Nakamura sighed.

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Jackson answered tersely. “The Gallowborne units are all about redemption. I see nothing there worthy of it. Yes, ‘Colonel’?”

“We were promised our liberty,” the man who had to be the ‘Colonel Ross’ mentioned earlier growled. By Olympus, this was quite a nasty monster. His face and most of his body were covered in scars – as he had been authorised to wear only a cloak and a loincloth, you could see a lot – and his bloodthirsty eyes raised plenty of alarms in her head. “We fight in the arena and we will win for you. That was the deal.”

“You will win your liberty, don’t worry. But I want to sleep soundly at night, and it is not that I don’t trust you...just joking.” A cold grin showed up. “*I absolutely don’t trust you, bloody swords of the War God*.”

This time, none of the thirty-three mercenaries were stupid enough to talk back.

“If you behave yourselves, tomorrow morning, you will be left out and given a shower, and the opportunity to choose your equipment and some of your favourite weapons. Fulfil the terms of your contract without trouble, and I will be generous. Try to betray me, and I assure you that you will beg to die in the arena rather than face what I have in mind as a punishment. Am I clear?”

There were some grunts, nods, and bitter words of approval.

Nobody in the Suicide Squad was idiotic enough to believe the thirty-three mercenaries were on their side.

Commodus had very much thrown at them ‘reinforcements’ that were going to be potentially bigger problems than the enemies of the ‘Labours’.

“Bianca, I’m told you have experience in handling significant numbers of prisoners.”

“Can’t I save the time and crucify them here and now?”

Plenty of Ares’ servants waited for the joke to land. They would wait for a long time.

“Unfortunately, there is to be no lethal violence in the Ludus, I’m afraid. Don’t worry, the Challenge begins tomorrow.”

The red eyes turned towards the sweating Germani Praetorian.

“Anything else?”

“The Mighty Neo Hercules is graciously inviting you to an audience with the Captain of Team triumvirate this evening.”

“Assure your Lord Felix that I will be there.”

And Jackson resumed eating his sandwich.

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“Higher! You want your shield to protect your head, not your feet! Higher!”

Leo tried. He really did.

But it wasn’t enough, the sword came and-

He conjured a fire ball. Unfortunately, it missed completely and the next second, he was disarmed.

“That was instructive.” Jackson removed his sword after leaving it for a second against his throat.

“Shouldn’t you give him a hammer like mine?” The black-haired son of Nemesis proposed. “When I allowed him to wield mine for a few exchanges, he fought far better.”

“It’s the symbol of his father, naturally it gives him a boost.” Perseus snorted, as Leo stood and tried to not complain about how much his muscles were aching. “But if he doesn’t know the basics-“

“I am immune to fire, no?”

Leo knew instantly it had been a mistake to interrupt, oh yes.

“First of all, Amigo, everyone knows Magma beats Fire.” Everyone knew that? Really? “So I would rather say you’re immune to all fires that aren’t stronger than yours, which isn’t the same thing as ‘complete fire immunity’. Then there’s the little fact that immune to flames or not, plenty of opponents have claws, swords, fangs and other weapons that aren’t made of fire. If you are hurt by them, I assure you that you will feel it, painfully.”

And the son of Poseidon sheathed back his sword.

“But as my treacherous lieutenant said accurately, you fight far better in several circumstances. And we happen to lack time to forge you into a capable fighter. Thus I must give an order I already feel I will regret: give Amigo a hammer and a shield.”

“Err...thanks?”

The incredibly powerful Demigod looked at him with amusement.

“I just hope I won’t need to send you in the arena. You are not ready.”

That was good, because Leo *knew* he wasn’t ready.

He was the engineer, not a gladiator!

“But for the love of the Gods, raise your shield higher. Your flames can do a lot of damage to someone who underestimates you, but you have to think of defence, Amigo. If you don’t, someone is going to separate your head from your shoulders within ten seconds of a duel beginning, and I assure you that the Heart of the Forge is useless in these circumstances.”

“I will try my best.” He promised.

“Good! Now Ethan, please call Jade, I want to see if fire is stronger than ice.”

“This training area is way too small to test something like that!” Luke Castellan protested, from the position where he was speaking with two Telekhine smiths.

“No, it’s perfect for-“

The trumpets and the brass instruments, thankfully, played the awful music once again.

Saved!

“It seems the basic training preparations must be interrupted for an interlude,” Jackson grinned. “A pity lunch was several hours ago, or I would find another sandwich.”

“You’re having way too much fun tormenting the Praetorians of Commodus.” Michael Yew accused him. At least the son of Apollo now remembered to don clothes in the last days.

“Let’s see the positive side of the situation: if they had something valuable to reveal to stop my actions, they would. Conclusion: they really know nothing of importance.”

“Okay...”

“I believe I saw the automatons once again. And the music is awful, but it may be to cover the ruckus of the cages.”

“Splendid,” Elvis Knight grimaced. “More butcher-boys of the War God?”

“No,” Annabeth Chase shook her head, forming up a line with the Minotaur on her left and Leo on her right. “If these were more War-sworn mercenaries, Commodus would have sent them with the other thirty-three criminals.”

Leo knew better to ask now what could be worse than the evil killers of Ares. The Sea of Monsters had showed them that it could already get worse.

One by one, the fifty Demigods and monsters of Team Adjudicator formed up in three uneven lines, with Perseus Jackson and Lou Ellen Blackstone in front of them.

The Praetorians strolled in like it was a military parade, again.

Leo didn’t know why they bothered. Training for that to perfection meant you didn’t forge tools or train for something else.

And it wasn’t like the Suicide Squad officers were impressed.

Many Demigoddesses like Drew and Miranda were snickering. Anne Bonny was disparaging their helmets, saying they should have gone for proper hats. Asterius the Minotaur was glaring at a few of them threateningly. Bianca di Angelo was conjuring black glyphs that the parading Praetorians tried to stay far away from, choreography be damned.

The amusement abruptly ended when the first cage came into view.

When this morning they had seen the first War-sworn mercenaries, it had been difficult to guess who exactly they were looking at.

This time, there was no such trouble.

Though she had been disarmed from her miniature arsenal of weapons, the ranger-of-the-woods clothes were in good condition, and everyone was familiar with the man-hating glare.

This was a Huntress of Artemis in the cage.

Leo heard Perseus groan loudly.

“Sometimes, I really hate myself for being right.”

There was a tiny possibility it was an anomaly, or so the son of Hephaestus tried to convince himself.

It ended when the other cages appeared, and other Huntresses were prisoner inside.

“How by the Pit did they manage to take so many of them as prisoners?” He heard the daughter of Athena mutter angrily.

“The rest of your reinforcements, Lord Captain of Team Adjudicator,” Alaric informed the son of Poseidon when all the cages were in place. “Like the men of this morning, I can assure you that all of them have agreed voluntarily to participate in the Games of their own free will.”

“Your master has a gift to find very dangerous gladiators.”

The Praetorian chose – wisely, in Leo’s opinion – to not answer this comment.

“Do you want to leave them in their cages?”

The mad Demigod chuckled.

“I have to admit I’m tempted.”

“JACKSON!”

The shouts had come not just from the seventeen cages, but also from Ellen, Jenna, and Kimiko.

“But I suppose that as amusing as it will be, the political issues don’t make it worth it.” The son of Poseidon grinned and was very close to delivering some maniacal cackling. “However, before releasing them, they will have to swear to drop all weapons in the *armamentarium* the moment they return from the challenges. I won’t tolerate arrows being thrown right and left.”

“Why should we trust you, *male*?”

The sheer hatred in the Huntress’ voice almost convinced Leo to take a step back. Yeah, suddenly he was remembered how bad the Huntresses sent with them had been until the elimination of so many girls in the Drakonic battle convinced the survivors to tone down their anger.

As for the Huntress herself, she had a rather early adult appearance, something around seventeen years-old? It was strange, the girls like Jade all looked younger as long as they were in the service of Artemis.

Second weird point: the Huntress had silver hair. Was it because of the stuff of the Triumvirate and the Moon? Or was it-

“No. *Panther*?”

All noise abruptly stopped in the Ludus.

Whatever had been supposed to happen, no one had foreseen it.

For who had gambled one of their penguins would be the one to break the line and advance until he was in front of Jackson?

“Boss,” the saboteur penguin-extraordinaire pointed waved a fin. “The one you just insulted you happens to be named Panther. Panther Kowalski. She is my eldest sister. And a Huntress of Artemis.”

“My condolences,” the Lord of the Suicide Squad of course had to say it.

“Thank you, Boss.”

One cage shook. Maybe because there was a very angry Huntress inside?

“You’re lying. I have a pathetic and sorry excuse of a Legionnaire brother and he’s not-“

“You were already dying your hair at ten in the hope our parents would authorise you to join the Hunt,” the penguin ‘helpfully’ revealed.

There were a few seconds of silence.

“Rico.”

There was a parody of military salute from the small penguin.

“Panther.”

“Rico.”

“Panther.”

“RICO!”

“May I advise keeping her in the cage, Boss? We’ve not always seen each other eye-to-eye, funny that, eh?”

“RIIIIICCCOOOOOOOOOO!”

Perseus Jackson turned his head towards them, and on his face was one of the most devilish smiles it was humanly possible to make.

“My friends, forget the sandwich. I need popcorn! Tons of it! Now!”

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In the end, he only had the time to eat half a bag of popcorn before the tender reunion of brother and sister descended to a tolerable level of decibels.

And it didn’t take more than fifteen minutes for every male Demigod and Telekhine to regret having opened the cages.

Perseus couldn’t say he was surprised by the latter point. Unlike the existence of *Panther Kowalski*. The former existence had genuinely been unaware Rico had a sister, and one who joined the Hunt to boot. But the son of Poseidon could understand why the subject had never come up. This wasn’t something you boasted about when they were servants of Artemis nearby.

Anyway, now that Suicide and Huntresses looked like they were able to stand in each other’s presence without someone – of the Huntresses, of course – taking it as a provocation and trying to begin a battle, it was time to speak of a very thorny issue.

“My friends, we have a problem and plenty of complications. Lend me your ears.”

“And you love that.” Jenna muttered.

“You wound me terribly.” He gasped theatrically. “But no. Given the choice, I prefer to make the life of my enemies complicated. Anyway. We have a problem.”

“We have one too,” the silver-haired Panther Kowalski bit back. “You are in command of this operation, which is-“

“If you think I am going to let a Huntress de facto take command of Team Adjudicator, dear feline female lieutenant, you clearly have missed a few chapters of this Quest.”

“You are a male.”

“I win. I also end up producing results. By my actions, the Master Bolt was recovered. Thanks to my stratagems, the Golden Fleece was taken back. With a force assembled my tireless efforts, the God of the Forges was freed from the Titaness’ captivity.”

Most of the seventeen Huntresses looked like they wanted to object, but couldn’t. As the old saying went, victory excused a multitude of sins.

“Now that this point has been mentioned, we have indeed a problem. I now have the certainty Commodus is readying a weapon to use against your Goddess.”

“Continue,” Kimiko spoke.

“The arrival of our reinforcements was the last clue I needed.” Perseus shrugged. “If the myths are true, the Lady of the Hunt asked first her father for twenty Nymphs who would end up being known as the first Huntresses.”

There had been sixty daughters of Oceanus too, but those could be safely discarded; they were for the safekeeping of Artemis’ temples and other duties.

“I believe Commodus intends to cast a ritual which will cause great harm to the Guardian of the Moon. The symbol is strong, and the precise number at this very moment ensures it can’t be a coincidence.”

Panther Kowalski laughed in his face. Perseus wished he could say he was surprised.

“Nice try, male, but this can’t happen.”

“Really?”

The silver-haired Huntress scowled.

“To begin with, the counting fails. Even disregarding the traitor,” her eyes were the definition of contempt itself when they glanced at Jade, “we are not twenty, we are twenty-one. To my seventeen Huntresses, I add Ellen, Jenna, Kimiko and Iphigenia.”

“Iphigenia doesn’t count,” Perseus replied. “No matter how many vestiges of her allegiance remain, she has been touched by the Dreaming One, and this is drowning everything else. Commodus has many flaws, but he will never be that stupid. No one will try to cast a dangerous ritual with Iphigenia involved in it. This would just be a very painful form of suicide, and that’s if the caster is lucky.”

Yes, he had thought of it plenty of times in the last hour.

“And as further proof this is what he intends, I humbly guess that your group wasn’t seventeen-strong when you were ambushed.”

“There are two teams on this island! Our sisters must be prisoner in the other Ludus!”

No, they certainly weren’t. Commodus was many things, but he wouldn’t let any Huntress fall into Team Triumvirate’s custody. Not if the traces indicating the presence of an Immortal Sorceress were confirmed.

“How many?”

Panther Kowalski had no choice but to grimace and move on.

“We were a bit above forty when this old trap of the Orion’s days triggered and many of us collapsed before being able to shoot a single arrow.”

This smelled like the Sire of the Drakons had given away their position to Commodus. There could be other explanations, however. Perseus didn’t know exactly the identities of everyone backing this narcissist of Emperor, after all.

“Our Goddess remains too strong for this male to have a chance.”

“Thus the indirect attack,” the former Tyrant noted. “You’re the companions of the Goddess, her favourites, and her handmaidens. She gave you a tiny amount of power when you each swore your vows. You’re the ideal avenue of attack for someone impatient and operating in a disadvantageous rapport of strength.”

“What is he going to do, then?”

“I don’t know,” Perseus honestly admitted. “Your presence is just the confirmation I needed to know the Goddess of the Hunt is one of his targets.”

“Then you’re useless!” The older Huntress spat.

Note to self: the brainwashing of the servants of Artemis was extremely effective. Panther Kowalski was a young Huntress – Rico was hardly an immortal penguin – and yet she spoke like half of humanity deserved to die at her feet.

For the sake of Rico if no one else, Perseus hoped this silver-haired Huntress was going to stop being such a man-hating killer before it was too late. Otherwise she was going to end dead exactly as fast as Phoebe and the others, or worse.

“I propose another course of action. We kill the guards, storm out of this island, and put an end to these ridiculous ‘Labours’ before they started!”

Oh great, the Huntresses had decided to be stupid.

“You can’t.” He pleasantly told them. “You swore a vow to participate in the Adjudicator Challenge, remember?”

“We didn’t swear it on the Hell River!”

Perseus chuckled hearing this spectacular amount of naivety.

“Commodus didn’t force you to swear on it because there was no need to. The moment you agreed, the magic of the Challenge binds you, and it is backed by the High Judge, meaning Commodus himself, but also the Domain of War, the two newly created Domains of Love, the Domain of Smiths, Fire and the Forge, and via them, all the power of Olympus and the Triumvirate.”

It was really funny how certain Huntresses gaped. Yes, they now could fully understand the sheer magnitude of their mistake. Much like the mercenaries of Ares, they had thought they could make a promise and promptly back off the second they saw an opportunity to escape.

Alas for them, it didn’t work like that.

“It doesn’t matter if the Adjudicator Challenge hasn’t officially opened.” Perseus said aloud to avoid other people of his Team having idiotic ideas. “Trying to flee and outright refusal to participate does count as a forfeit, leaving the High Judge an enormous amount of power to punish the oath-breakers. In many ways, doing what you propose is as bad as someone trying to climb out of the arena or somehow trying to bail out of a ‘Labour’ before it has officially ended.”

“And what happens in these cases?” a younger-looking Huntress asked.

“You’re most likely going to end up cursed. The most probable outcomes are that you end up as an animal or some sort of monster. The Adjudicator Challenge will continue, and nobody, not even your Goddess, will be able to change you back, because the Curse will be ultimately a team effort.”

Perseus sighed.

“I may be wasting my saliva and my time, but please, if you think doing something stupid is the solution, talk me about it *before* jumping. In all likelihood, it’s stupid, and it’s going to end in tragedy, but that way I will be there to stop you before you commit something you will regret for the rest of all your life.”

Perseus didn’t need to be a genius to know the Huntresses were not listening to him. Not truly. Not the seventeen that had been brought as ‘reinforcements’.

Yes, Commodus had played a master-stroke here. If the servants of Artemis had been here all along, ties could have been forged, and some rational relationship created.

But here out of the twenty, seventeen had never met him before, and it was virtually certain Artemis had thoroughly poisoned the well by presenting a truly hostile version of events about this Quest in the Sea of Monsters.

Never mind that the Huntresses were supposed to be their executioners if they faltered.

No, it was too late to salvage something.

They were going to have to go blind in the arena, and pray that the next days were going to afford opportunities to recover.

“Jackson?” Ethan Nakamura drawled. “There are Praetorians in the courtyards. They mentioned something about an Imperial Divine Audience, or something else.”

“Tell them I am on my way.” The complications were really coming in impressive numbers today. “Asterius.”

“Yes, short one?”

What was it about everyone trying to shoot him literally or metaphorically today? You lost your virginity, and suddenly everyone seems way too pleased to mock you!

“You are coming with Lou Ellen and I to this audience. We need a dangerous bodyguard to make the Germani Praetorians afraid.”

“Yes, short one!” The Minotaur was suddenly far more enthusiastic, for some mysterious reason. Curious, no?

“This discussion isn’t over, Jackson!” Panther Kowalski barked.

“It is, because believe me, the next one promises to be worse.” Perseus wasn’t sure of many things, but a meeting with Commodus? It was sure to generate plenty of bad news.

**19 January 2007, Commodianopolis’ Command Room, the depths of the Commodus Coliseum**

Commodus was definitely a megalomaniac.

Lou Ellen didn’t think there were many peoples who would contest it if they had all the evidence in front of their eyes.

Unfortunately, like many past Roman Emperors, he was megalomaniac *and* paranoiac.

The tunnels under the Coliseum they were led into formed a massive maze, and though there was little magic registering to her senses, there was an astounding quantity of dangerous weaponry, both of the conventional and unconventional kind.

Several Demigods had wondered where the true army of Commodus was, since the numbers of Praetorians and other defenders appeared too low.

Well, they were here.

They were hidden in the depths of the Coliseum, protecting the only thing Commodus truly valued: his own life.

With all the heavily armoured doors, the monsters and the automatons, it would take an immensely gifted assassin to get close to Commodus.

The progression ended with a lift propelling them deeper into the foundations, and at last, they were introduced into the inner sanctum of the High Judge.

Nearly to the same second, a second lift similar to theirs opened, and Mark Antony marched out, her half-sister Medea by his side, and their trio was completed by a hugely muscular Legionnaire playing the same role as Asterius did for their trio.

They merely glanced at each other, before refocusing on the throne room and its owner.

Quite ironically, the place was of far better taste than the Ludus and everything on the island above their heads.

There were two symmetrical fountains, some plants, and quite a few mosaics. Yes, they represented the Twelve Labours, but for them not to would have been too much to ask.

There were plenty of armchairs, couches, and comfortable furniture, coming in red and gold colours.

And at the end of it, Commodus was waiting, the hood of the Nemean Lion upon his head, his body appearing as if he had been painted in gold by the tight costume.

His seat was more akin to a couch, sculpted to look like a sleeping lion.

Interestingly, there was another platform next to his couch-seat, but the location was empty. This wasn’t the only issue, of course. A room as large as this one should be able to receive two hundred visitors, yet there was no one but Commodus.

The Praetorians had stayed inside the lift.

The former Emperor of Rome was truly alone, and it wasn’t an illusion.

“Ah, the Captains and guests!” Commodus smiled, and this was not a charming expression. “The Referees are on their way for tomorrow, and thus I see no reason to delay anymore! All the spectators are ready and have their blood fully pumped up!”

One could almost wonder if Commodus had known what destruction the Centaurs and other monsters would cause when he invited them. His excitement was genuine and almost childish...but Lou Ellen was almost sure that the answer was yes, thousands of people had been sacrificed just for Commodus’ amusement.

“And once the ceremony will end, the First Labour will begin immediately, I suppose?” Mark Antony asked in a deadly voice.

“Exactly!” Commodus clapped his golden hands. “Though you will have to choose immediately who among your Teams will compete beforehand, of course. I may generously give you a clue or two, if you are polite.”

“Will those not participating be allowed to watch from the stands?” Perseus voiced the question before she could.

“Regrettably, no,” Commodus chuckled with a ‘nice try’ silent gesture. “The gladiators who don’t participate will wait in the Team’s waiting rooms under the Coliseum. You will miss nothing of the Labours, I assure you! We have excellent TV channels with journalists paid exorbitant sums to comment the event! But I thought it best to avoid temptations of gladiators suggesting or elaborating strategies for their weak-minded comrades.”

Yes, that sounded exactly like something her lover would do.

And the Triumvirate representatives didn’t exactly protest it was unfair, either.

“Now then, the main rules. Whoever wins the greatest number of Labours, wins the Games, and to the winner goes the spoils. To compete, a Team has to keep its Captain alive and healthy enough to descend in the arena. The Team must also have one other member able to fulfil its duties of gladiator.”

By the magic of her mother, this was just insane. The teams were both one hundred-strong! Commodus wanted everything to continue up to the death of the last fighter!

“The Games must not be interrupted by a few light wounds, in my opinion.” One could really wonder how many gladiators Commodus had killed just in his first life, when he was Emperor.

“That’s clear,” Medea spoke icily. “Is that all?”

“No, of course not.” Commodus smiled viciously. “We have to keep things interesting! And I had a superb idea to spice up the Labours! If one Captain descends in the arena, the other must follow!”

Gods, the megalomaniac really wanted to see blood, didn’t he?

He had enforced a law which made sure both Teams would prioritise the survival of their Captain, and then he made sure both would be competing at the same time.

“You mentioned we had to choose who would participate in the First Labour,” Perseus took her right hand in his left, but aside from that, showed no emotion or reaction whatsoever. “Does it mean that we can’t send reinforcements in the arena once a Labour is ongoing?”

“You can send reinforcements,” Commodus affably declared. “But it depends on the Labours you will struggle with. In some, you will be denied the possibility of sending reinforcements at all; in others, you will only be able to select additional gladiators if all the original ones are incapacitated or dead.”

This meant a single Labour could be a monumental slaughterhouse.

“There may be Labours where I will decide if minimal or maximal numbers of gladiators must be committed for the glory of the Games. Evidently, it will depend on the performance of the gladiator themselves!”

Why did it feel that Commodus controlled everything, playing with their lives from start to finish?

“Naturally,” the narcissist-megalomaniac Emperor continued, “we don’t want a Labour to bore the public to death, so each time, there is a hard limit of three hours. At the end, after consultation with the two Referees, I will announce the Winning Team for this Labour. If no one completed it to my satisfaction, there will be no winner, and clearly the next gladiators will have to do far better next time!”

Commodus laughed.

No one else did.

Trust her on this: be they of the Triumvirate or the Suicide Squad, they weren’t smiling.

“We accept these victory conditions,” Mark Antony said. By his grim expression, the Roman was beginning to understand what a huge mistake it had been to give this authority to Commodus, who was abusing the hell of it. “I presume that no help from outside sources will be legal once a gladiator walks in the arena?”

“You presume correctly, though there will be an exception,” Commodus grinned, revealing a sort of...necklace? It had a bronze chain and a small golden symbol at the centre of it, anyway. “The Vote of the Public!”

This had to be a hallucination, right?

“The vote of what?”

“Press the golden button three times, and your adoring public and my divine persona will vote to send you an item that may save the day!” Commodus exclaimed like it was his birthday come early. “It will depend on your popularity, of course. Displays of cowardice and ignoble treachery may end up souring the tempers, and instead of an unbreakable weapon, you may end up with rotten tomatoes and other useless things! Ha!”

In other words, it was a joker that may end up as a burden. Or metaphorically speaking, it should be a rope to hang around their throats.

“We might introduce other fun things in the next days, but for now, the Vote of the Public is the only help you will have as a gladiator!”

Lou Ellen had a bad feeling, given how enthusiastic Commodus was about the whole thing.

It was going to be a good idea to not use this kind of ‘Joker’ for as long as they could, lest they regret it very, very fast.

“But we can enter your Coliseum with all the weapons and protections we want.”

“Marcus Antonius!” Commodus feigned to be shocked. “You stand in a Coliseum dedicated to Neo Hercules! Adequate weapons and armours are necessary!”

And here came the execution axe...

“The summum choragium and the armamentarium of your Ludi are going to be stocked up in a few minutes, naturally. You will be expected to use these resources; my Praetorians will control your armours and weapons before allowing you to pass the Gate leading to *my* arena.”

“And what kind of armours are we speaking about?” Medea insisted.

“Why, for the men, the honourable and most remembered twelve types of gladiatorial standards imagined by our glorious Empire, of course! Provocator, Murmillo, Secutor, and the nine other *armaturae* of true gladiators; I leave everything up to you! Don’t say I don’t leave you plenty of choices!”

Lou Ellen was not a specialist when it came to the gladiatorial fights, but she had a feeling it was going to end with a lot of half-naked Demigods and mercenaries in this arena.

And they didn’t know yet what the maniac had in mind for the women.

She cleared her throat.

“And the gladiators who happen to not be males?”

“Why,” Commodus began with a fake generosity that gave her the urge to kill him on the spot, “I am particularly merciful and feel traditions are necessary. All virgin warriors will be graciously allowed to don costumes of Ceryneian Hinds! And the non-virgins will be provided the choice between several other costumes perfectly attuned to the theme of the Twelve Labours of Neo Hercules!”

The Huntresses were all going to be in a murderous mood, and Lou Ellen had a feeling she was going to feel the same once she had the opportunity to watch the costumes.

By the Pit, the end of this Great Quest couldn’t come fast enough!

**19 January 2007, Primus Ludus Magnus Commodus, ‘Narcissist Island’**

Jade sighed.

“I withdraw everything I ever said about your suits being indecent, Jackson.”

“Does it mean I can expect a promise there won’t be any more complaints for several years?”

The Champion of Khione snorted.

“No.”

“Ah, well, it was worth trying,” the massive grin told you clearly how ‘disappointed’ the insane Demigod was.

The former Huntress returned to the examination of the indecent costume. Unfortunately, it didn’t happen to change into something acceptable while her eyes were away.

“What is the point of sending us something like that?”

“Provocation,” Perseus answered while resuming the drinking of a bottle of fruit juice.

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me correctly, Jade. Bianca and Lou Ellen were honest; the only magics in this cloth are the ones who were involved in the creation process plus a single enchantment. It is not like an X-Suit where the purpose was to provide its wearer a phenomenal resistance against the cold and Cold-empowered Curses. This is not supposed to be some piece of conventional armour. This is a ridiculous costume that has no purpose but to anger the Huntresses we have in this Ludus.”

Jade grimaced.

“If that was the true goal, then I must say it achieved it in a few minutes.”

Panther Kowalski and all the others had noticed the Hind costumes long before Perseus Jackson and Lou Ellen Blackstone returned from their audience with Commodus.

Their reaction had been...bad.

Thank the Gods, Bianca di Angelo, Miranda Gardiner and herself had been watching, and as a result nothing had burned. The Praetorians hadn’t been assaulted. The Ludus was intact.

“Yes.”

Jade looked again at the costume, trying not to sigh.

As befit of something trying to imitate the Ceryneian Hinds of Artemis, it was something silvery in shade, but here ended the respectability.

The material used was incredibly revealing, even compared to the X-Suits, which looked almost opaque in comparison.

The silver cloth was near-transparent. And unlike the X-Suits, which were only to be donned in a battle where the frost iguanas and a Drakon would be the only spectators, here they were speaking of tens of thousands of spectators just on the island, with Olympus and many other deities watching.

Yeah, it was far worse than any suit Jackson had ever handed to them. To start with, the son of Poseidon had never forbidden them to don more clothes over the X and S-Suits.

Here Commodus had done so.

“The other enchantment detected is the one which allows only virgins to don it, I suppose?”

“You suppose correctly.”

It might not seem so bad saying it. Unfortunately, you had to look the costume in its totality. First, there were the golden antlers fixed to the ‘hood’ of the costume, which would in effect act like a doe mask once the wearer would push it against her face.

After that, it got worse. There were plenty of holes which left everything above and between their breasts exposed. The hips were naked too. This rapidly turned the ‘Hind-Suit’ into something really indecent and obscene.

It exposed a large portion of their legs. How much of the back’s wearer was naked was best not thought about.

And once you had considered this, there was the impractical aspect. The X-Suits had nice, practical boots, ideal to fight and run. The ‘Hind-Suits’ had parody of hooves to place your feet into, essentially making them high heels without support. That would allow a girl to fight thanks to the ingenious way it spread the weight of someone, but it certainly wouldn’t be *practical*.

It would be indecent, ridiculous, and impractical. Obviously.

It would turn anyone who wore it into parodies of Ceryneian Hinds.

“I hate Commodus.” Jade voiced. “Gods, what a pervert!”

“He is not a pervert, believe me.” Jackson replied. “He is a *predator*.”

The former Huntress shivered, which was a rarity these days, since the cold didn’t bother her anymore.

“I really feel like using by bow at the end of this thing to kill a certain Emperor.”

“If it can make you feel better, I doubt you are among his targets.”

Jade raised an eyebrow.

“I am still a virgin, Jackson,” unlike Drew, Reyna, Hylla, and Lou Ellen, she had not lost her virginity.

She almost regretted it now. That said, the feline costumes that had been presented to the non-virgins were not exactly good alternatives.

“But you are a Champion of a completely different Goddess than the Hunt, and she also happens to be a Queen of Hell. The symbolism doesn’t work, and besides, you’re part of the House of the Underworld now. Therefore acting against you is tantamount to declaring war to Hell.”

“The same applies to Miranda and Drew, I take it.”

“Of course.”

That was mildly reassuring. Obviously, it didn’t prevent them at all from getting killed in the arena, but with the Ice Drakon’s power flooding through her veins, Jade was far tougher and able to heal from wounds that would have killed her when she was a Huntress.

“There has to be an alternative, though. Surely the Emperor had to give one?”

“There is one. I call it barbarian-style.” Perseus didn’t look very amused as he said it. He breathed out. “A loincloth and some sandals.”

Jade closed her eyes for several seconds, muttering over a dozen insults under her breath.

“At this point, we might as well go naked, for all the good that it does.”

The child of the Earthshaker didn’t answer. There was no need to.

“Panther and the others are way too arrogant.”

“I know. And before you say it, yes, I am well aware they aren’t going to listen to me in the arena under pressure. Whether I am personally present or no, they won’t obey my commands.”

“But the Hind costumes-“

“Forget the costumes,” Perseus cut her words ruthlessly. “Seriously, forget them. Aside from some mild symbolism, the costumes don’t really matter. They are a provocation, nothing more. It is a column of smoke to blind the Huntresses and plenty of women who will play the gladiator role. Commodus wants to act against an Olympian through her servants. If it is indeed his plan, he must force them to foreswear the Goddess at some point. And the greatest factor which convinced you to do so inside the Forge of All Perils is not present here.”

“Yes, the Olympians don’t have the right to intervene in an Adjudicator Game; we all know it.”

And unlike oaths on the Styx, the Gods and Goddesses would definitely be heavily punished for their transgressions.

“Commodus will strike soon, then?”

Jackson winced.

“That depends entirely how long the narcissist loves to play with his prey, I fear.”

**20 January 2007, Commodus Coliseum, ‘Narcissist Island’**

Commodus had promised them the spectators would be ‘pumped-up’ for the Adjudicator Challenge.

You had to give it to him, the Roman narcissist had respected his part of the deal.

When they left the silence of the tunnel that had taken them directly from the Ludus to the Coliseum, it was like they were had been struck by a hundred sonic bombs.

The ruckus was near-impossible to imagine.

There was braying, shouting, hissing, and applause. There were more flashes than any human could count. There were pyrotechnic displays and electronic boards announcing countless advertisements.

It was an assault on all their senses in light and noise.

But what put you into alert was the smell.

It was something easy to recognise.

The smell of monsters, both the animal and the human kind. It was a smell present in quantities never encountered before.

And it was felt for good reason.

The Coliseum was beyond gigantic, easily one hundred thousand spectators, and it had been filled until there wasn’t a single seat empty.

For a monster chronicler, it was a living dream. Empousai cheered in frivolous clothes next to lesser Gorgons. Scythian Dracanae had purchased tickets to find themselves next to Hyperborean Giants.

And obviously, there were Centaurs. A lot of Centaurs, the greatest crowd of murderous hooligans of the world, assembled in a single location. They easily filled a quarter of the stadium, with a large colony of Lamias on their right, and some very ugly Cyclops on their left.

If Zeus used his Master Bolt here, there would be a neat decrease of the monstrous population for a few months, to be sure.

The former Tyrant forced himself to stop thinking about it for now. As amusing as it would be, it had no chance of happening right now.

“But first, there’s of course the Opening Ceremony...”

Perseus barely listened to the speech, to be honest. Commodus was praising the only person who mattered in his eyes: himself. All the while food and alcoholic drinks were thrown to the spectators and especially the drunk crowd of Centaurs.

Panem et circenses; civilisation had hardly changed a lot in two thousand years. The big difference was by now, in addition to the public, millions more could watch the butchery on live TV.

Like the gladiators of old, they were paraded for the pleasure of the crowd. As a result, one could accurately say the expressions of the Huntresses in his Team were mirrored by Team Triumvirate. Medea, Princess of Colchis and Immortal Sorceress, looked especially murderous for the affront that had been done to her; it wasn’t every day she had to wear a Leopard-themed suit revealing all her curves, to be sure.

Perseus was more interested by the composition of the rival Team, to be fair. Unfortunately, it was quite difficult to know which part had been chosen by Mark Antony, and which had been ‘volunteered’ by Commodus. There were plenty of mercenaries, that much was a given. Some felt like they had been chosen by the Roman Aspect of the God of War.

But there were plenty of female warriors too, and a majority of them were in Ceryneian Hind’s costumes. This...had not been anticipated. Perseus had assumed the Huntresses were the prime targets; why else would Commodus bother creating this trap? But there were way too many young warrior women here; he counted more than twenty-five before stopping.

“A lot of child soldiers here,” Lou Ellen commented behind him.

“For this one, Commodus can’t really be blamed. He wasn’t the one who sent us on extremely dangerous Great Quests, no?”

And he stopped at that for the critics; there was an enormous concentration of power in the upper levels of the Coliseum. The Olympians and other immortals couldn’t intervene, but they had the possibility of watching, and many of them appeared to have accepted their invitations.

“Perverts,” he heard a Huntress seethe somewhere in his procession.

Perseus admitted she had a point.

While the noble Marcus Antonius had brought plenty of adult gladiators for the Adjudicator Challenge, there were plenty of underage competitors. And as Commodus had chosen to impose his ridiculous costumes, everyone showed a lot of flesh to the point it was *incredibly* indecent.

As a Provocator himself, Perseus had been given a short gladius of Celestial Bronze, and a large oval shield. There was no pectoral, no other form of armours for his torso. He was bare-chested, and his back was completely exposed as well. Sandals and shin guards were for the legs. The helmet was for the head. To protect his modesty, there was a belt and some kind of super-loincloth.

“Of the benefits to bathe in Drakonic blood or in the Styx,” the black-haired Demigod whispered. Sure, you had one Achilles’ heel that would cause your demise if you were hit there, but at least your opponent had to search for it. The rest of the gladiators were horribly vulnerable everywhere, and they didn’t have anything to stop the blades and the other weapons aiming to end their lives.

The musical cacophony exploded even more out of control as the Gods made their entrance.

Isis marched out with dignity, in a simple lapis-lazuli robe. As he wasn’t petty, Perseus had left her with some manacles to symbolise restraints.

It was quite the opposite with Ares; the Triumvirate Team had to bind him with the heaviest chains they could, because the God of War was absolutely not cooperative.

Well, at least it was quite a spectacle.

Commodus could be counted to exploit the situation, and he did.

As a consequence, it was no less than four elephants which dragged Ares in the arena, under the imprecations, vociferations, and insults of the monsters.

Clearly, Ares had made quite a few enemies in the last millennia.

There were flashes of light below the Emperor’s Lodge, and Dionysus appeared, instantly throwing quantities of grapes into the crowd. The God of Wine had come dressed for drinking; he had a barrel and plenty of jars levitating behind him, and his hair were the colour of grapes.

“**Yo, Perseus!”**

This served an appropriate answer, of course.

“Ave Dionysus! Those about to unleash the Circus salute you!”

The crowd loved it, obviously.

So did the red-skinned half-giant next to the Olympian.

“Bring me, skulls, brother!”

Perseus saluted again, as the two Teams began to form up in lines facing the outrageously decorated part of the Coliseum – naturally, it was where Commodus was waiting.

“The two Captains have accepted the rules of the Games!” Commodus declared to his bloodthirsty public. “The Twelve Labours of Neo Hercules are about to begin! Does someone have something to say before the gladiators compete for a contest that will remembered for the next centuries?”

“**I do**.” The bloodlust levels skyrocketed. You had three choices to guess who had just spoken, and the first two didn’t count.

“Oh? Go ahead.”

“**I would tear the head of this mongrel of *Master Equites* myself**,” Ares hissed, “**but the rules prevent me from doing so. Yet my servants are not so limited, and I recognise many of you mustered on the sands of this arena**!”

The eyes alone made clear that no, being a God didn’t prevent you from being a monster.

“**Carve his flesh, strangle him with his own entrails! Before this Challenge is over, I want to see Marcus Antonius dismembered corpse at my feet! Those who will accomplish this deed will be rewarded beyond their wildest dreams! Gold, jewels, properties, women, I will make them Kings for removing this pest! And those who fought for him**,” Ares’ grin was best found on the head of an apex predator. A very vicious apex predator. “**They will be the first to suffer my wrath. I AM THE GOD OF WAR! BATHE IN HIS BLOOD**!”

It took several seconds for Commodus to clear his throat.

The Roman High Judge wasn’t looking shaken, but there was a hint of nervousness there.

Yes, he had not expected that kind of...enthusiasm.

Isis, on the other hand, clearly had. The sovereign contempt for the other God was evident to all. She threw a kiss to her husband, and the adoring look let the former Tyrant speculate that maybe, Mark Antony had been affected more by Lust and Love than he had accounted for.

Yes, the two had a marriage bond, and Isis’ husband was a mortal...this led to irrational decisions.

“THEN LET THE GAMES BEGIN!”

Cages of Law and Magic materialised around Ares and Isis, separating them completely from the reality. Slowly, the two prisons began to levitate above the sands, and they gained altitude until reaching about twenty metres above their heads.

“Now,” all the cameras now focused on Commodus, who was grinning maliciously, “I am pleased to say I received a lot of suggestions for the First Labour.”

The screens and the magnification of the images ensured Commodus was impossible to miss on his ‘Nemean Lion-themed’ throne.

He wore only the skin of the Nemean Lion, transformed to present him as a golden immortal.

But for the first time, he wasn’t alone. There was a throne next to him, one which had never been seen before. *This* throne was sculpted in a silver material, and artists had done their best to represent Hinds and woods upon its surface.

The throne wasn’t empty. There was a young woman upon it, and she was in one of the Ceryneian Hinds costumes. She was very young; she couldn’t be possibly be older than sixteen. And Commodus groped her when the cameras came nearer. The young girl moaned.

“You were right,” Jade acknowledged. “A predator, indeed.”

“Unfortunately, we can’t do anything about it *for now*,” Ethan spoke, but his words were a promise that Commodus was now on the hit-list of the children of Nemesis.

“Traditionally, when the Games opened,” Commodus spoke again as the reactions of the monsters faded away, “the High Judge of the Games could ask for a trial, if he felt the gladiators may not be able to handle the opposition waiting for them. I propose to perpetuate this tradition! Team Adjudicator! Team Triumvirate! You have accepted to descend in the arena to face the greatest Labours I could think of! I acknowledge your bravery, and I give you this clue! Damnatio Ad Bestias!”

It was not a tradition, it was a method of execution.

Perseus’ Latin needed some work, but the words just uttered could be best translated as ‘condemnation to beasts’.

It was entertainment for the spectators, yes. For the runaway slaves, the criminals, and the Christians sent to face the lions, felines, and other natural predators the Emperors unleashed, it was not exactly as funny for some reason.

“I thus ask for twelve brave gladiators of each Team to stay in this arena!” Commodus raised his hand. “And may the best blades triumph!”

Yes, it went without saying that the High Judge was not going to say which kind of beast they were going to face during the First Labour.

Why wasn’t he surprised?

Thankfully, this was why he had a contingency for this.

Perseus broke formation, and walked up to the man that only arduous negotiations had allowed to get out of Hades’ realm.

“It is time.”

“Yes.” The man was hardly a great conversationalist. A pity, for there was so much to learn about him. But his services hadn’t included monologues and battle-tales, alas. “Orders?”

Perseus didn’t hesitate.

“Take eleven mercenaries of the God of War with you. Kill the twelve members of Team Triumvirate, and everything that stands in your way.”

Everyone wanted a bloodbath.

Fine! Perseus had good news for them.

They were going to watch one.

**20 January 2007, the Waiting Room of Team Adjudicator, under the Coliseum, ‘Narcissist Island’**

The waiting room was huge, like everything in this God-forsaken Coliseum. It had dozens of TV screens in high-definition, a bar, a restaurant area, several fridges to serve cold drinks, and many, many chairs, couches and sofas of all kind.

Dakota knew this for a good thing, because in a few seconds, the ‘Team Adjudicator’ divided itself in four big sub-groups. There was the Suicide Squad itself. The Telekhines were essentially the second group, and they were the only ones to stay close to Perseus Jackson, as he was their benefactor. The third was the Ares-sworn mercenaries. Those professional killers moved to the bar, and began to order a lot of drinks from the smiling personnel of Commodus.

And then there was the fourth group, which happened to be the Huntresses. They stayed away from everyone. They glared at everyone who wasn’t part of their little club. There also happened to be a minor change: while Ellen and Jenna had returned to the fold, Iphigenia and Kimiko hadn’t. Maybe it had all to do with the curses they were suffering from?

Dakota didn’t feel like asking the question to them, honestly.

“Does the girl next to Commodus remind you someone, my drunken lieutenant?”

“No,” the son of Bacchus was surprised by the turn taken by the conversation. The First Labour was about to begin, it wasn’t like Jackson to be distracted on something so minor. Okay, Commodus was awful and likely should be in prison for molesting someone two thousand years younger than him, but-

“I have the strangest feeling I met her before,” the son of Poseidon was unusually thoughtful. “Yet I don’t remember where.”

“Maybe you met her doppelganger somewhere,” he suggested.

“Maybe,” but you knew by the tone that Perseus wasn’t convinced at all. “Where were we anyway?”

“The indecency of the costumes,” Dakota reminded the younger Demigod, trying to not roll his eyes. “I felt like a clown when we paraded in the arena, and I sure as the Pit wasn’t the only one.”

“Strange, I thought you were trying to avoid looking at the lovely backsides of the Ramirez-Arellano sisters. Aren’t they ravishing in tiger costumes?”

“Go get them, tiger!” Rico Kowalski of course had to cackle immediately after.

Dakota blushed. A groan and a glance later, he tried very hard not to look in the direction of Hylla and Reyna.

“I blame you for everything, you know.”

“Blaming me for what?” Perseus, naturally, tried to play the ‘innocent’ persona. “Life is short you know. We Demigods have to enjoy life when and where it is possible.”

“Do you really want to add ‘peerless match-maker’ and ‘Wedding Adjudicator’ to your list of titles?”

“It would be something to add to my already significant list of exploits.”

The worst part? That repartee was not a lie at all.

The twelve gladiators of Team Adjudicator forming again a line perpendicular to the Imperial Lodge of Commodus brought this debate to an end.

Less than five seconds later, the twelve gladiators of Team Triumvirate faced them, doing their best to appear threatening and deadly.

“Mark Antony committed plenty of Mars-sworn mercenaries directly for the First Labour.” The leader of the Suicide Squad commented with a grin.

“Can you blame him? Their God urged them to cut his throat. Besides, you did exactly the same.”

“Not exactly,” the son of Poseidon contradicted him. “I sent eleven servants of the God of War to the slaughter, yes. And I sent the one who is going to win this Labour.”

Dakota swallowed heavily. What kind of monster-

The thought was discarded as Commodus once again rose from his throne.

“The selections are over, and everyone is in position! It is time for the First Labour to begin!”

The Coliseum shook slightly as tens of thousands of Centaurs and monsters loudly celebrated.

“The choice of opponents was of course difficult, because there were so many potential candidates! So much talent! So much ferocity! So much dedication to turn the sands of this arena red!”

Plenty of Centaurs brayed in approval. The Lamias hissed.

Everywhere it was carousal and madness, bestiality unleashed and worse.

“But those are the Labours of Neo Hercules! Average opponents simply wouldn’t do for these legendary Games!”

If you just looked at his face for these seconds, you would almost believe Commodus wasn’t speaking of carnage and death.

The golden gates on the opposite side of the Imperial Lodge began to slowly open.

Dakota had a very, very bad feeling.

“Thus, I, Neo Hercules chose the most prestigious opponent. The very animal species which fought a true war against Mankind, and nearly won!”

Something walked out of the darkness. It was tall, and advanced in a curious manner.

“I speak, of course, of the noble Emu!”

Dakota immediately facepalmed, followed by half of the Suicide Squad, and countless others, both in the Waiting Room and outside of it.

“Jackson! This isn’t funny!”

“I completely agree,” the red eye stared at the screen. There was no smile on his face. “Look at the Emus. Observe it attentively.”

By now, there were four or five of the ‘birds’ out of the tunnel.

They didn’t seem bothered by the crowd or the noise. In fact, they didn’t seem to watch anything but the gladiators arrayed in the middle of the arena.

“What are we supposed to look at?”

“The glint of their beaks, their talons, and their feathers, of course.”

Dakota frowned in incomprehension. After a few heartbeats though, he realised Jackson had a point.

“It is almost as they’re made of metal,” the son of Bacchus muttered. “But that’s impossible. Ostriches and Emus aren’t made of metal...”

“Unless you are crazy enough crossbreed your Emus with Stymphalian Birds,” Perseus Jackson finished. “And I’m willing to gamble a million Drachmas that is exactly what Commodus did.”

Dakota MacDonald became really, really afraid. A few Emus were hardly a threat. But if the Emus had natural beaks and feathers of metal, in addition to the man-eating voracity of the Stymphalian Birds, it was suddenly entirely something else.

“And do you know why the joke existed in the first place?”

“No?”

“Emus can reproduce extremely quickly and migrate in huge numbers.”

Five Emus were soon joined by ten, and then fifteen.

More came in the next seconds, watching carefully the gladiators, their future foes.

No, they weren’t watching them like they were their foes. The Emus were observing their *prey*.

“I have called this First Labour,” Commodus proclaimed, “THE SECOND EMU WAR!”

**20 January 2007, Apollo Sun Palace, Olympus**

Several powerful ideas coursed through Apollo’s essence at once.

The first was that he, of all people, should have expected this. Had he not in old times noticed the obsession of his lover when it came to the battle-ostriches? Ostriches. Emus. The two species were close enough they were essentially the same. And breeding them with Stymphalian Birds was the next insane step, if you were a madman.

The next idea was to acknowledge there were one hundred and twenty-eight Emus in the arena. So far.

Once this was mentioned, there was a clear and ruthless realisation. The gladiators mustered to face these Emus were completely screwed. Because yes, the Emus appeared to have inherited the ability of the Stymphalian Birds to bombard their foes with metal feathers.

It would have been easy for a proper Legion to counter.

But it was not a Roman Legion they were against, was it?

It was gladiators.

And Commodus had given true weapons to them, but he had not allowed true armours.

All of them, from the murmillones to the single fisherman-like retiarus, carried helmets and parodies of armours. Two-thirds of them were completely bare-chested. Maybe if they had been authorised to play as Samnites, it would have been different, but it was not to be.

“**Fools**,” his sister commented next to him with evident disdain.

Apollo blinked.

“**I thought you would be a bit more supportive, sister. After all, if these gladiators fail, Perseus Jackson may have to send your Huntresses to replace them**.”

“**If he does that, I will disintegrate him in person once this Great Quest is over. What**?”

His expression must have been more serious than he thought.

“**For many reasons, most of them likely related to the fact I killed him, one of Commodus’ targets is *you*, little sister**.”

“**I am the eldest sibling, Apollo. And if this bastard of Emperor thinks he can grope me like he did his girl, I will sever both his arms and his legs, and then I will feed them to him, piece by piece**!”

When she was in this mood...it was better to not pursue the subject.

The bombardment of metallic feathers began in the arena.

It was murderous and extremely efficient.

Emus were incredibly fast, and in a charge like this, the feathers reminded him the mounted archers of Carrhes which had annihilated Crassus’ Legions.

It was a death rain.

Four gladiators fell immediately, their flesh torn apart by dozens of feathers finding their mark.

“**If they don’t do something quickly, it is going to be a one-sided massacre**...”

It was a lone circle of twenty-four gladiators, encircled by a tide of Stymphalian-crossbred Emus.

Well, twenty now.

It could end only one way, and the Sun God could hear the bloodthirsty whinnying and the screams of the monsters anticipating the destruction of the two Teams.

This was when the Dimachaerus of Team Adjudicator removed his helmet.

Apollo frowned. Why would someone do something so stupid?

He-

Apollo recognised the man.

He recognised him!

The Dimachaerus’ two short swords changed, called out of a power that was not of this time.

The gladiator screamed.

Every immortal who had watched the Slave Wars remembered this horrible litany of hatred and grief.

The fury and the sorrow provoked by the Roman Republic, all imbued in a single Demigod body.

“DIE WELL! KILL THEM ALL!”

“**Spartacus, son of Nemesis**,” Apollo murmured.

“**Hades allowed this insanity to happen?**” His sister asked aghast.

“**Clearly, he did**.” One did not escape easily from the maximum-security prison where the rebellious leadership of the Slave Wars had been imprisoned.

Thus the likely outcome was that the Lord of the Underworld had deliberately released Spartacus.

Something the Emus were about to regret, if they had the ability to do so.

In a single spectacular jump, the legendary rebel gladiator jumped, hacking his way through a rain of feathers.

There was a slash of raw destruction.

Two Emu heads fell.

“COME ON, ARE YOU NOT ENTERTAINED?”

Each word was accompanied by a new bird dying.

Some Emus decided to test their talons against the swords of Spartacus. Maybe they thought that since those were made of metal and the range was theirs, it would be more efficient.

They regretted it quickly and permanently.

The crowd of monsters screamed its approval.

Antaeus, the Second Referee, was shouting something about Blood and Skulls.

All the surviving gladiators of Team Triumvirate and Team Adjudicator followed into the fray. The dice had been cast; they had tied their destiny to Spartacus.

The black blood of the Emus and the red blood of the men sworn to Ares-Mars darkened the sands.

More Emus poured into the Coliseum.

All order ceased to be.

The First Labour unravelled into an orgy of blood, raw violence, and willingness to cause as much pain as possible.

“KILL! KILL! KILL!” The spectators cheered and encouraged the slaughter.

This was madness. And if it was really an advance warning of what certain enemies of Olympus intended, it promised nothing good for the years to come...

**20 January 2007, Waiting Room of Team Adjudicator, under the Commodus Coliseum, ‘Narcissist Island’**

In the end, Jackson had been completely right about the numbers.

Commodus had sent three waves of monstrous Emus against the gladiators, each of them over one hundred strong.

The original Labours of Hercules sounded very tame in comparison to this near-impossible challenge.

By the beginning of the third wave, Spartacus had been the only one standing.

Miranda had often wondered if some past wars had not grossly overestimated the exploits of the men called ‘heroes’.

Now watching one of them fend an army of man-eating birds trying to end him by beaks, feathers and talons, the daughter of Demeter knew they hadn’t been.

In fact, it was evident some history records had been completely purged or outright fabricated.

Spartacus hadn’t received a serious wound during the first two waves of enemies.

This wasn’t luck.

This wasn’t someone relying on well-executed tricks or cunning plans.

This was just experience and skill, leagues above what a ‘normal’ Demigod should be able to wield.

Miranda was both fascinated and repulsed by it.

Some of it might have to be with the monstrous part that was now part of her.

As Champion of Calypso, she was now feeling things differently now.

“He is the son of someone of the Olympian Council, right?” she tried to confirm.

“Wrong,” Perseus answered. The son of Poseidon had taken the central couch with Lou Ellen curled up against him, and most people chose to ignore. “He is a son of Nemesis.”

“What?” On the TV, one Emu was used as a mace to stab the others for a few seconds, before Spartacus recovered the blades he had ‘forgotten’ in other Emus’ corpses. “But he is-“

“If given the time to develop his or her talents, any Demigod can reach an incredibly high martial proficiency,” the Earthshaker child assured her. “Ouch! That must have hurt.”

Plenty of Emus had just lost their legs, among other things.

There was truly a disturbing amount of corpses now, and some of the birds were breaking the attack to try to feast on the lifeless gladiators and their unfortunate fellow Emus.

They paid for it, of course, as no quarter was ever given.

“I suppose at least we know why you had so many difficulties convincing the Rich One to release him.”

“With the two others in my team,” Perseus proclaimed, “these ‘Games’ would have been a series of one-sided triumphs from dawn to dusk.”

Foreigners might have taken it as an arrogant boast.

Miranda believed him.

Spartacus was pulverising the Emus, winning this First Labour by himself. The other gladiators had just been cannon-fodder that had barely lasted mere minutes and accounted for less than a dozen Emus.

If there were two more like him, but with complimentary abilities, victory would indeed have been nearly certain.

There weren’t more than three Labours per day until the final series of Labours; the Suicide Squad could have relaxed and let the legends of the past show how good they were.

This was just fantasy now.

The last Emus fell one by one.

But it was clear Spartacus was slowing down.

“The Power of Vengeance is leaving him.”

She certainly didn’t miss how wary Ethan Nakamura looked watching the butchery.

“Everything has a price, and the Goddess of Vengeance is not one to cheat.”

The crowd didn’t care, though.

They had been on the side of the Emus when it began, but now it was obvious they had changed of allegiance.

“SPARTACUS! SPARTACUS! SPARTACUS!”

They were maniacal. It was a choir of madness urging for more deaths.

It was a clamour which could plunge the world into an era of blood.

Fortunately, it ended.

The last Emu lost his head to the twin blades of Spartacus, and fell on the corpse-covered arena.

Spartacus raised his blades in triumphed and *howled*.

The entire Coliseum exploded in celebrations and shouts of approval.

Needless to say, the Referees’ celebrations didn’t take more than three seconds.

Fireworks were launched all over the arena, and some screens changed, as famous video games’ music played out.

**The Twelve Labours of Neo Hercules**:

**TEAM ADJUDICATOR: 1**

**TEAM TRIUMVIRATE: 0**

“It has the merit of being clear,” Grant intervened, crossing his arms in a posture everyone had learned to recognise. “One Labour done, eleven to go.”

“Yes,” Dakota grimaced. “But I don’t like at all how easily the other gladiators went down. They had many flaws, but they weren’t unskilled.”

“My men were veterans,” the scarred ‘Colonel Ross’ confirmed, scowling furiously.

“And it looks like the hero of the hour has exhausted his strength,” Perseus didn’t bother looking at the Ares-sworn mercenary.

Which was certainly true: the fluidity and the lethal aura that had shrouded the legendary rebel gladiator were gone.

Spartacus was saluting and leaving slowly the arena, but Miranda suspected that it was not because he wanted to enjoy the laurels of his victory.

It was simply the fastest he could now move.

**GLADIATORS OF TEAM ADJUDICATOR: 89**

**GLADIATORS OF TEAM TRIUMVIRATE: 88**

“A bloody affair,” one of the penguins spoke for them all. “We can’t afford to lose that many gladiators for every Labour.”

“I’m sure this is part of Commodus’ plan,” the son of Poseidon spoke calmly, emotionlessly, the only sign of human affection being his right hand held tight in Lou Ellen’s two. “I had to use one of our strongest gladiators immediately, removing it from the field for the next two Labours. And both Teams lost naturally a lot of fighters.”

“In that case, maybe you should have better plans!” Miranda was far the only one who glared when the Huntress once again insulted him.

“In some situations, there are simply no good choices, *Panther Kowalski*.” Perseus Jackson informed her in a very cold voice. “These Labours are a trap, in case you haven’t noticed. I certainly wasn’t aware that Commodus had crossbred Emus with Stymphalian Birds and had over three hundred of them ready for today.”

“Besides,” Reyna Ramirez-Arellano intervened. “If you hadn’t sent Spartacus, in all likelihood, the first twelve gladiators would have died and then it would have been necessary to send twelve others, easily doubling the list of those killed in action.”

“WHAT?”

“We have to win,” Perseus Jackson gave a respectful nod to the daughter of Bellona. “And if it hadn’t been Spartacus, it would have been Bianca, Lou Ellen or myself. Since no one else has the skill to prevent hundreds of metal feathers from hitting, we would have needed Demigods with the power to resist this onslaught.”

“I may have been able to,” Drew Tanaka said.

“Alone, unsupported, and surrounded by hundreds of carnivorous Emus?” the leader of the Suicide Squad drily.

The Champion of Persephone grimaced and closed her mouth.

“At least we won this first round.”

“Yes, it would have been far worse if we lost.”