Teaser 2 Games of Folly

**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 red 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 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.