Teaser Endgame

**Chapter 31**

**Endgame**

“*It is time. We complete the Labours; first chance we have, we kill the bastard*.” Final monologue of Perseus Jackson, 25 January 2007.

“*What’s the price of a Labour*?” words attributed to a very drunk God Apollo on the day of the 27th January 2007.

**26 January 2007, the Entrance Platform of Team Adjudicator, Commodus Coliseum, ‘Narcissist Island’**

The tunnel which lead them to the Coliseum had been a thing of darkness, barely illuminated by a torch every forty metres.

What waited for them, admittedly, was significantly worse.

It had been a long time since Perseus had not experienced such a suffocating atmosphere.

It was not natural.

The Suicide Squad had been on this island long enough for the humidity and air pressure conditions to be somewhat familiar, and the sensation they felt now was absolutely not one which had been there in the last days.

It felt like everyone was sweating by merely walking slowly, and all had yet to don their ‘Cyber-Hoplite’ Armours.

There was the bloodthirst too.

You could tell with a glance that the Centaurs and every monster attending had been riled up in the last hours. The savagery was too intense to not have been fabricated by the ‘High Judge’.

There would be no mercy for this last day of the ‘Games’.

A good thing he had expected none, then.

“I see the ‘ignoble host’ doesn’t intend to repeat his previous mistakes,” Ethan said in a low tone. “We’re as far from the Imperial Lodge as it is possible to be.”

The son of Nemesis had a point. While the ‘waiting platforms’ of Team Adjudicator and Team Triumvirate were huge and side-by-side, they were separated from Commodus’ throne by the entire arena.

“Someone must have told him to stop this stupidity,” Perseus shrugged the matter off.

“It is not a good thing.”

“No. Of course, I’m concerned with the Maze waiting for us.”

The presentation was rather powerful and made to play for all the theatrics of Roman gladiator games, which didn’t mean it was inefficient.

While thousands of torches and luminous screens had been prepared for the spectators and the monsters-filled stands, the Coliseum Maze was a cavernous beast of complete obscurity.

You could easily imagine it as a dark maw waiting to swallow you body and soul.

“We aren’t going to see anything if we don’t bring torches or light sources with us.”

“It seems that tonight, you’re really in the mood to point out the obvious, my treacherous lieutenant.”

“Jackson.”

Perseus clicked his tongue.

“It seems they have separated the arena into two different parts. One is the arena proper, and the other is the Maze, which covers out the entirety of the ‘outer zone’. Obviously, to reach the former, we have to fight our way across the latter.”

“Any idea what is waiting for us inside this labyrinth?”

“Save that it is guaranteed to be thoroughly unpleasant? No.”

Midnight tolled, and battle-music began to play out, under the clamours of hundreds of thousands of being eager to watch the blood flows in massive quantities.

“I am sure, however, that getting inside this mini-arena at the heart of the Coliseum is not going to be easy. I see only four large Gates, and all of them are closed.”

“And the cascade that has been flooding the moat before each Gate?”

“I think it’s some sort of super-acid.” His eyes tried to study the surroundings of these obstacles, though it was difficult, courtesy of the darkness and the distance separating him from them. “At a guess, the statues nearby are not there to be pretty. I think the reason the cyber-bows have been provided has suddenly been revealed.”

“The mini-arena itself?”

“Well, it is clearly modelled after the Labour of the Garden of the Hesperides.” This one wasn’t exactly difficult to find out. “We have a small lake, with a smaller island at the centre of it. I mean, it could be something else, but a tree of gold with golden apples does tend to reduce significantly the list of possibilities.”

“Said Labour demands to escape the vigilance of Ladon.”

“I confirm,” Luke spoke nearby.

The next steps to reach their seats – with the stands where their Cyber-Hoplite Armours awaited behind them – felt heavy and difficult. The roars of the crowd increased. The bloodthirst levels soared. Everything seemed to force your heart to pump more adrenaline into your veins.

Perseus would have wished to speak with Mark Antony and the rest of Team Triumvirate, but here, it was clearly impossible. While they were incredibly close and could hardly fail to see each other, the barrier between the two platforms was enchanted to prevent talk between the two different teams.

Commodus’ backers had truly gone all-out tonight; it was not the ‘glorious Neo Hercules’ who would have thought about a detail like this one.

“He’s trying to force us to send archers in the arena, doesn’t he?”

“Yes.”

“It is going to be bad.”

“I think we haven’t seen the truly bad stuff yet.”

The words were not completely out of his mouth yet that the entire Coliseum shook. The crowd fell silent for a few seconds, before bursting into applause.

The reason behind this sudden enthusiasm was not hard to find out. It seemed that a giant system of gears and cogs, plus some other infernal machinery had been placed into motion. Now the different walls of the Coliseum Maze had begun to *move*.

The colossal obstacles were not moving quickly, to be sure. But they moved. Both gladiator teams would have to find their way through a labyrinth which was changing constantly.

“There are times a string to find our way out without problem would not be too much...”

“WELCOME! WELCOME, GLADIATORS AND SPECTATORS, TO THE SIXTH LABOUR!”

“Here we are...at last.”

“THE RULES OF THE SIXTH LABOUR ARE SIMPLE!”

“Jackson? I have a very bad feeling about this...”

“You too?”

“VICTORY WILL BE GIVEN TO THE TEAM WHICH WILL SUCCESSFULLY GRAB THREE GOLDEN APPLES FROM THE TREE OF NEO HESPERIDES! AN IMPORTANT PRECISION: NO GLADIATOR WILL BE ABLE TO TAKE AND CARRY MORE THAN ONE APPLE ON HIM OR HER!”

This was a vicious move. Without that rule, one Demigod or Demigoddess could perfectly have achieved everything alone, provided he or she had the raw power to do so.

This wasn’t going to work here.

“SECOND IMPORTANT POINT! I AM SURE OUR FIERCE GLADIATORS HAVE SOME DIFFICULTIES OBSERVING THE TREE OF NEO HESPERIDES! THEREFORE I WILL CONFIRM THAT THERE ARE ONLY FIVE APPLES THAT CAN BE TAKEN!”

Perseus snorted.

“Okay, this time the High Judge appears to have abandoned the idea of a ‘shared victory’.” That wasn’t too surprising, that said. It had clearly been done the first time to spite him.

“THE APPLES WILL BE EXAMINED ON THE PLATFORMS WHERE THE GLADIATORS ARE STANDING: THEY WILL HAVE TO BE INTACT.”

This one felt like a trap which was going to destroy all their efforts at the last moment possible. What was it going to be? Birds cursed to feed on gold fruits? A metal-rusting artefact hidden under their respective entrances?

“THIRD RULE! THE SIXTH LABOUR WILL ONLY LAST TWO HOURS! PAST THAT TIME, THE GATES WILL CLOSE! ANYONE WHO IS LEFT INSIDE THE ARENA PAST THAT DEADLINE WILL BE CONSIDERED LOST FOREVER!”

The Centaurs bayed their support at that awful ‘game rule’.

The red-eyed Demigod didn’t move. He knew Commodus had not finished increasing the difficulty of the Sixth Labour.

“AND THE BEST FOR THE LAST: BOTH TEAMS HAVE TO SEND IMMEDAITELY TWELVE MEMBERS IN THE ARENA! NO REINFORCEMENTS WILL BE ALLOWED UNTIL THEIR ORIGINAL TWELVE HAVE SUCCEEDED OR FAILED!”

There were times when Perseus loved to be right.

Today was not one of them.

“Perseus?”

“Yes, Lou Ellen?”

“Is it bad or incredibly bad?”

The son of Poseidon opened his mouth, before stopping. Something dangerous had just began to echo at the edge of his consciousness. It was-

Though they were far away from the Lodge where Commodus had made his speech, the former Tyrant had good eyesight, and this was enough to see a thin figure revealing itself.

“*Titan*,” the leader of the Suicide Squad said coldly. “It is going to be *hellishly bad*.”

**26 January 2007, the Throne-Lodge of the Coliseum**

In hindsight, there had been warning signs.

The Lodge was a lot bigger, though part of it could be blamed on the Nemean Lionesses being commanded to stay in their full-leonine forms.

The number of seats had been wrong, though, and after several Praetorians had been slaughtered a few days ago, any gambler wouldn’t have bet for the bodyguards of Commodus volunteering to be close to their boss.

The biggest clue had certainly been the Maze and the Coliseum, however. This kind of dark, suffocating atmosphere was not the style Commodus enjoyed. Oh, the Narcissist Emperor could adapt his vices to a quantity of new gladiatorial events, but the vibes were completely different to the first Five Labours, and not in a good way.

All of this was acknowledged, and plenty of signs had not missed.

Dionysus was still unpleasantly surprised when *he* arrived in the Throne-Lodge.

“**Prometheus**,” the God of Madness did notice that no herald had announced the Titan’s presence. Apparently, even Germani had some measure of sanity.

“**But if it isn’t the second most-tortured Demigod that the Lord of Olympus finally took pity upon! Didn’t you already drown to death in your barrel, drunkard**?”

Dionysus had received an uncountable of insults directed at his divine essence since his apotheosis, and the originality of these ones was so low it might have been nonexistent.

The words were pathetic. But the power behind them managed to rile him up.

“**I suddenly understand who exactly provided the lethal artefacts which were disposed underwater during the Fifth Labour**.”

“**Good! Maybe you are not as stupid as you look, drunkard of the Twelfth Throne**.”

The former Demigod gave the Titan his entire attention.

What the hell was Prometheus doing here? This didn’t make any sense at all. True, the Titan must have given support to Commodus, both of the financial and divine resources kind.

But there had been a large sense of deniability. Taking a seat in the Imperial Lodge was absolutely the complete opposite of that stance.

“**I will remind you that I am the First Referee, Titan, son of Pain. If you dare intervening by moving a single finger**-“

“**Oh, I am not going to physically intervene in this game. I swear it on Styx herself. May she devour my essence whole and throw the ashes of my power into the Abyss below if I break my oath**.”

The Goddess of Hatred seethed and acknowledged the vow, and the earth rumbled under the power.

This was not reassuring at all.

In fact, Dionysus felt twice warier than he had been seconds ago.

“**You gave Commodus his marching orders**.”

“**I assure you, I did not**!” The Titan’s scarred face tried to present an expression of innocence. It was unconvincing in the extreme. “**I merely *advised* him. And I may have provided some of the fireworks for maximal entertainment purposes**.”

“**You hate that much the Suicide Squad and the Triumvirate**?”

Prometheus laughed. It was an awful sound; it was a cacophony of disorder.

“**Don’t be ridiculous, God of Wine. I do not hate these mortals. I merely wish to separate the weak from the strong. There is a new dawn coming, and I intend to provide some tools to the artists which will have the privilege to sculpt it into reality**.”

“**The Council will vote to hunt you down**.” And in all likelihood, his genitor himself was going to abandon his carnal activities to make sure Prometheus returned to his old prison, where the eagle would be able to tear his face apart...again.

“**Certain unpleasant issues can be tolerated in the name of my amusement**.” The Titan gloated. “**Ah, here is Neo Diana**.”

Dionysus raised an eyebrow, wondering why Prometheus had so blatantly changed the topic of this acrimonious exchange.

A second later, it was evident why the former ‘councillor’ of Kronos had done so.

The young Demigoddess was coming forwards, but not in plain clothes. Unlike the Demigods and Demigoddesses of Team Adjudicator and Team Triumvirate, the Charm-singer girl had directly donned a ‘Cyber-Hoplite Armour’.

Of course, themes were themes, so hers was the very shade of silvery moonlight.

Still, it was very unprecedented. Commodus truly intended for his ‘partner’ to descend in this ‘Maze-Arena’, in defiance of the very real dangers any contestant had to face.

What in the name of the Pit of Tartarus was Prometheus playing at?

**26 January 2007, the Entrance Platform of Team Adjudicator, Commodus Coliseum**

“Well, this is an unpleasant morning,” Perseus whispered.

“Jackson? We are mere minutes past midnight.”

“Yes. And your opinion is irrelevant, for democracy dies in darkness.” The leader of the Suicide Squad shook his head. “But it is irrelevant now. The presence of the Titan of Crafty Counsel is...incredibly concerning.”

It explained lot of things, all right. And it made the possible worst-case scenarios particularly unpleasant.

“The Titan just swore he wouldn’t directly intervene.”

“That just means he has already intervened, by providing our ignoble host with everything he needs.” Perseus countered. “Let’s not be naive on that point.”

“There are plenty of sources to be wary,” Bianca di Angelo agreed with him, what a nice surprise. “I see over three Centaurs being armed in a nearby tunnel. For some reason, they think shadows hide them from my sight.”

The black-haired Demigod was sure half of this team was asking the same question silently.

In the end, it was Clarisse La Rue who voiced it out loud.

“Do we change completely the order of battle for the Sixth Labour? While you correctly predicted we would need people able to wield expertly the cyber-bows, there was nothing to warn us that the Charm-song Demigoddess would take the field.”

The former Tyrant hesitated for a couple of seconds.

It was entirely possible that Commodus had been told that he didn’t intend to participate in the Sixth Labour, courtesy of the oracle-like Sire of the Drakons.

Unfortunately, there weren’t any perfect counter-moves for that. Any change he did right now was going to be paid in blood and tears later. The members of Team Adjudicator were guaranteed to be out of commission for the Seventh Labour, courtesy of their Cyber-Hoplite Armour having limited energy resources.

“I am going to make one change,” the son of Poseidon finally decided with a grimace. “Bianca, you’re taking command. Asterius, it seems you’re not going after all. We’re not going to throw two Maze specialists into the fray, after all. Otherwise, the order of battle will stay close to my original plan.”

Dakota made a sound, which could be interpreted in a myriad of ways.

“And this order of battle is? For the record.”

“For the record, we have Spartacus, our army-killer. Jade and Iphigenia will be the elite archers we need for this Labour. Leo will be the pyrokinesist who will give you some fire and light in this darkness. Drew will be the second army-killer we will deploy, because I don’t think Commodus can be trusted to deploy nasty surprises alone and unsupported.”

“And I may be able to negate the Charm-song of the enemy,” the daughter of Aphrodite added with a smirk.”

“That too,” Perseus nodded. “And to make sure we have enough sappers, minesweepers, and counter-jamming specialists, six of our Telekhine allies will go with you, as they have Cyber-Hoplite Armour which will make sure they can follow your furious pace into the Maze.”

From the corner of the eye, the powerful Demigod saw many Ares-sworn mercenaries sigh in relief. It was...wildly optimistic of them, to say the least. Didn’t they think about why he didn’t send a single one of them now?

Oh, well. There would be time to face the music later.

“This is a strong team,” Luke Castellan told him.

“The time for jokes is over, and if we don’t take this Labour seriously, then we’re all going to die. It might have escaped the vigilance of some spectators, but I seem to have heard out loud that until we grab these fake Golden Apples, we will have to send twelve by twelve our reinforcements into this inferno. Best to send the twelve who will win this Labour right away, and win in an outstanding manner.”

“It makes sense, I suppose.”

“Glad to hear you say it, my heroic lieutenant. Team Triumvirate?”

“I can’t really read on the lips of someone if they have their back turned, but it looks like Medea is going to be the leader of their twelve. By the way several members are moving for the Cyber-Hoplite Armours, I think they intend to go with five Mars-sworn mercenaries, four Legionnaires...and two girls as archers.”

Many people grimaced.

“What the hell are they thinking-“

“Unlike us, they don’t have Jade and Iphigenia as archers who are not at risk. And if they don’t send people who can use cyber-bows, you might as well prepare your team to get butchered into this dark Maze.”

“Don’t Romans have long-range options?”

“They have,” Dakota replied for him. “Overall, though, they either choose javelins, or, if the battle we fought to recover the Golden Fleece was their classic doctrine, they deploy quantity of machine guns and artillery to stop an onslaught.”

“And they can’t do that here.”

“Yes, they can’t do that here,” Perseus repeated the words. “Gladiators of the Sixth Labour, you should go prepare yourselves. I don’t think the Narcissist-in-chief is going to give us much more time before he opens the gates for the bloodbath.”

**26 January 2007, the Maze of the Sixth Labour, Commodus Coliseum**

The Maze was giving Leo some very bad memories of Forge MP-42. There were killer-automatons everywhere, and with the walls closing behind you, it felt like the battleground itself was trying to corner you.

It wasn’t too bad for now.

They had Spartacus, the Bane of Rome himself, taking the vanguard, and Bianca di Angelo, the Lightning Thief, was throwing spell after spell, destroying everything the gladiator hadn’t mangled or annihilated.

But Leo was very aware that he was the one illuminating the battlefield. Who would have thought? The automatons had night vision-optics, and they weren’t happy at all to face enemies which could see them relatively easily.

“I thought the plan called for find and reuniting with the twelve of Team Triumvirate.”

“Yes,” Drew replied, her arms transformed into swords, “and maybe if the entrances had been close to each other, that would have been easy to unite and do something about this Maze. Unfortunately, it seems the enemy anticipated that. Wherever the entrance gate of Team Triumvirate led, it was nowhere near us.”

Leo grimaced, but didn’t argue further.

What would be the point? The problem was there, and the Legionnaires of the Triumvirate weren’t going to materialise in front of them because he suddenly wanted them to.

It didn’t stop him from thinking it would be good to have more numbers. The killer-automatons were coming in bigger and bigger waves with every minute. And-

“We have made good pace.” The daughter of Hades announced. “It’s been twenty minutes, but we are incredibly close to one of the ‘Cascade Gates’ separating us from the ‘Neo Hesperides’ Tree.”

“And what’s the catch?” Jade, Champion of Khione, asked, ice covering her hair and her hands.

“The catch is that the shortest path is through this corridor, and there’s an armoured door to top it all.” The Lightning Thief said bluntly. “This reeks of a trap.”

“If there is one, we will disarm it,” the biggest of the five Telekhines assured her.

It was incredibly comical to see a shark sort of ‘dance’ within a Hoplite Armour, but the Telekhine managed it.

“Give me a fin, wouldn’t you? Ah! Yes, I see!”

One second later, poisoned arrows were shot through the corridor. How could you tell it was poison? You could smell it from where Leo stood!

“That was it?”

Two huge explosions rocked the corridor. Metallic axes fell from the top of the walls. There were some Japanese-looking weapons forming steel clouds in the air, such were their numbers.

“Yes,” another Telekhine snarked. “That was indeed it. They didn’t skip on the good old traditions. Now-“

It was the last word the shark-like monster had ever the opportunity to say, for a giant harpoon skewered him from behind, ensuring he slammed against the wall.

Leo was pretty sure the Telekhine was dead upon impact, though.

But the most horrifying part? The harpoon had not come from the trapped corridor.

It had come from behind the members of Team Adjudicator.

It had come from the zone where the Demigods and their allies had believed they were safe. If they weren’t-

“Run!” Another Telekhine commanded. “By triggering the traps of the corridor, we also activated a second set of traps all across the Maze! RUN!”

Leo didn’t need more encouragement to run. He had only made three steps when he saw the Telekhine sapper who had been working upon the disarmament methods to disappear as a giant hole swallowed him.

More harpoons were thrown. The air was filled with death once more, and a thousand killer-automatons charged in pursuit.

Leo ran, using his cyber-axe every step of the way, and didn’t look back.

**26 January 2007, the Entrance Platform of Team Adjudicator, Commodus Coliseum**

Luke Castellan was pretty sure he had vomited half of what he had eaten during the last meal when the killer-automatons finished butchering the second Telekhine.

Trapped in a pit filled dart-covered nets, the shark had been forced to wait, trapped in a crippled armour, that the mechanical monsters decided which moment was the most adequate for the slaughter.

Two Telekhines were dead in a matter of minutes. Not since the Third Labour there had been such a disaster, and this time, the Huntresses couldn’t blame for it.

“This is very bad news,” the son of Hermes said after clearing his throat.

“Yes.” Perseus’ eyes were incredibly cold, and the red eye stared unflinchingly. Unlike many Demigods of Team Adjudicator, there was no sign he had had nausea or flinched at the spectacle. “They went for our counter-jamming specialist first. I doubt it was a coincidence.”

Luke gaped.

“You mean...this isn’t...”

“I think all these traps were remotely activated by Commodus, yes.” One eye of green and one eye of red gave a glance to the smirking Narcissist Predator on his throne at the opposite end of the Coliseum. “Or more likely, he gave the command to one of his Praetorians hidden somewhere in the foundations. This was too precise, and the Telekhines should have noticed these traps. No, it was a very deadly and accurate form of execution.”

“At least they’re on the very doorstep of the inner arena, right?”

“I would have preferred them to be a bit late and have lost no one,” the son of Poseidon replied very seriously. “Twelve fighters is already too small to my taste, but now that they’re reduced to ten, the vulnerabilities increase.”

For a few seconds, the two male Demigods watched as Bianca di Angelo incinerated the killer-automatons which had tried to pursue too fast the Suicide Squad. Clearly the murderous pieces of devilish machinery had overestimated their strength; they were now burning in black flames as they spoke.

“Maybe you should have sent Miranda with them.” Luke coughed. “She could have tried to dig under the walls and tear apart their foundations.”

“Miranda is strong, but alone, she can’t do it dozens of times on her own before getting exhausted. Moreover, if I send every powerful Champion we have to a single Labour, that just means there won’t be anyone left to fight the Labour after that.”

Luke felt like someone had placed a piece of very disgusting food in his mouth. Yeah, he had almost forgotten that.

“The bloodlust levels are rising higher and higher.” Perseus decided to apparently focus on something else. “I don’t think...ah. The destroyed automatons’ fluids do not like mere oil.”

“I don’t like where this is going,” Richard Grant had returned to an aggressive posture and crossed his muscular arms.

“You shouldn’t. These are no creations of Hephaestus’ work.”

It was difficult to see all the details of the killing-automatons, but yeah, now that it was mentioned...they were all bronze-coloured, but they seemed to have their limbs and weapons in a far cruder style than what they had faced at Forge MP-42.

Unfortunately, ‘cruder’ didn’t mean ‘not dangerous’.

Luke grimaced. This was certainly one part where a certain Titan had helped Commodus.

“Team Triumvirate does not fare as well as we do.”

“Unlike Bianca, they have decided steady and cautious is the way to go. And for the moment, it works: let me remind you they have yet to lose a teammate.”

“They don’t have Spartacus and Bianca di Angelo.”

“But by pressing hard, Team Adjudicator has ensured quantities of opponents are rushing to stop the faster advance, not the one of Team Triumvirate. Of course, it may be premature speculation. Medea and her team still have a long way to go.”

“This is bad,” Annabeth spoke thoughtfully. “We did have a plan where the two teams cooperated, right?”

“This plan, much as I don’t like admitting it, is dead on target” the leader of the Suicide Squad affirmed. “We can’t exactly join forces when by virtue of different entrance tunnels, the two teams began the Labour separated by a considerable distance of labyrinth-purposed walls.”

The son of Poseidon looked at his watch. Luke did the same. Twenty-five minutes had passed since the starting order was given.

“They’re going to have to fight their way through this cascade of acid alone.” The blonde-haired Demigod who had stolen one of the true Apples of the Garden said seriously. “Fortunately, they have Bianca. It seems you made the right call on this one.”

“Bianca can triumph where many Demigods would fail despite their best efforts.” Perseus Jackson nodded. “But I still don’t like how this part of the Maze is perpetually shrouded from my sight. “Commodus is preparing something. Something incredibly bad.”

**26 January 2007, the Third Cascade Gate, the Maze of the Sixth Labour**

They weren’t surprised on one point: Perseus had warned them it was likely a cascade of some acidic substance, and indeed it was.

The moment they had cleared the last obstacles and stepped forwards, everyone having a sense of smell could indeed ‘enjoy’ it. Iphigenia sneezed hard. Leo Valdez complained.

Spartacus was the first to react, as could be expected. The legendary gladiator threw some disassembled parts of automaton directly into the pool the cascade fell into.

The bronze-coloured metal promptly became smoking sludge.

That was...not good.

“The only way to pass through the Gate is to deactivate this cascade filling the pool,” one of the Telekhines spoke.

It was evident yes, but somehow, it had a calming effect on everyone. Of course, it helped that they weren’t under immediate attack right now.

“He’s right,” Bianca approved. “The cascade is powerful, and it acts as a natural barrier between us and the Gate. I think Achilles’ Curse would let me reach the door by myself, but all of you would die long before that.”

“I’m so glad this point was made,” Jade retorted before pointing at the statues on every side of the cascade. “The walls and the floors are bare, save for these horrors.”

It was true the stone artworks could have been a bit more...err...nicely presented? As it was, you could almost believe the author wanted to show you some sort of human-gargoyle hybrid.

“Each of the statues has its mouth open,” Bianca di Angelo told them. “And there is a sort of magical receptor in them. I believe you are supposed to shoot arrows at them, and perfect hits will result in the cascade flowing elsewhere.”

“Awesome!” Leo Valdez commented.

“By the way the receptors’ pulses are synchronised,” the daughter of Hades continued, ignoring the outburst, “I believe the twelve statues must be neutralised within ten seconds, maybe less.”

Suddenly, it didn’t seem like good news at all. There were only two archers among the ten survivors: Iphigenia and Jade.

The former didn’t seem too worried, however.

“We have a clear field to shoot at the statues-“

In a thunderous sound, more acidic substance began to flow. But this time, it was over the heads of every ‘not-gargoyle’ ornamental structure.

“You were saying?” a Telekhine bared his fangs.

“Oh, shut up, you sorry excuse of a dolphin!”

“Excuse me?”

“Stop this,” Bianca ordered. “Jade. Can you do it?”

“I can turn my arrows into magical ice, and give them enough firepower to get through, yes.” The Champion of Khione breathed out. “But doing it so quickly and without missing a target...”

One also couldn’t forget how far the mouths of the statues were. Fifty metres or so might not seem that impressive as a distance, but each target was the size of your hand. In the penumbra conditions, with only Leo’s fire to provide a big source of light, it didn’t look like an easy challenge at all.

“Go. Turn the arrows of Iphigenia first, and then shoot. We will try to provide protection for as long as possible.”

Drew waited for several second by the Frost Champion’s side, and then it began.

It was an incredibly fast shooting.

It was arrow after arrow being hurled in close succession.

The mouths of the statues closed one by one.

And then Jade missed one shot.

Not by a lot.

The arrow ripped apart the stone some centimetres to the right of the mouth that had been the target.

But it was a miss.

The ground shook violently, as machinery kept dormant went into action.

And though the cascade flow began to brutally diminish, the gears of the Coliseum didn’t stop. The targets were hit one by one, and yet nothing stopped.

Drew was almost ready for the spikes to get out of the ground, or for poisoned arrows to fall upon them in a deadly rain.

But these attacks didn’t come.

Instead, the giant pool which had been before the cascade was emptying before their very eyes.

The levels of acidic substance were recording lower mark after mark.

And as the liquid disappeared, it revealed a monumental head first.

Then more details of monstrous biology appeared one after another.

“This is impossible, they shouldn’t be-“

“DRAKON!”

A lid moved and then opened, revealing a dangerous iris of reptilian yellow.

In the distance, they heard Commodus laugh.

“TAKE COVER!”

The Drakon roared, and unfurled itself. It was assuredly not something the size of the one Jackson had killed at the Forge of Perils, but it remained something stupidly gigantic.

“DISPERSE!”

They scattered.

It was just in time, for what felt like a million tongues of shadows were hurled at the area they’d been standing.

Stone melted and grew twisted.

The flames Leo Valdez were spread faltered and died.

“THE EYES! SHOOT AT ITS EYES!”

But the irises were already half-closed, and the arrows melted in mid-flight, swallowed by the darkness.

The maw opened again.

Drew launched herself forwards, and struck.

For a single moment, her world became pain, and the daughter of Aphrodite screamed.

When Drew recovered enough to assess the damage, her eyes were prompt to inform her that she hadn’t even managed to scratch the monster’s scales.

“What is this damned species? Even the Lydian Drakons are vulnerable to my symbiote’s weapons!”

“BURN!”

But the flames of the son of the son of Hephaestus didn’t achieve anything.

The Drakon attacked again. Its claws went on to devastate everything in large radius, and as if things couldn’t become worse, shadows danced around the natural weapons of mass destruction.

One Telekhine was too slow, and stumbled in trying to avoid being impaled on them.

The next second, the maw opened.

The shark didn’t even have a single second to scream; the blast was so terrible there wasn’t even ashes left when they were able to illuminate the scene once more.

“VENGEANCE!” Spartacus threw himself at the dragon, one cyber-sword in each hand. The power of the legendary Bane of Rome was exhilarating, and for a second, Drew dared herself to hope. Spartacus was not Achilles, but maybe, just maybe-

The ‘cyber-swords’ were as ineffective as the rest of the weapons.

It wasn’t that they were sabotaged, or anything – otherwise they wouldn’t have been able to fight their way through the Maze. It was just that the scales were just too tough.

“FORGET THE USUAL PARTS LIKE THE THROAT! THE EYES! YOU NEED TO REMOVE THE EYES!”

It was easy to say.

It was nearly impossible to do in practise.

The Drakon wasn’t waiting for each of their moves; it was coiling and uncoiling, letting them make foolhardy moves, and only then counterattacking with many Demigod-killer attacks.

Drew was running for her life. Her weapons could do nothing.

The daughter of Aphrodite could see no one was faring better. Iphigenia and Jade attacked with their long-range options, but their quivers were depleting way too fast.

“I think we must retreat,” she hissed to the Lightning Thief, who was preparing some sort of spell. “We clearly don’t have the weapons to bring down this creature!”

“Out of the question,” Bianca di Angelo continued carving things into the stones while dancing to avoid a nasty Drakonic blast. “There is an army of killer-automatons waiting right behind us; their instructions are clearly to let the prime monster take care of us, but it will all change if we try to flee.”

“But-“

“And frankly, the Drakon isn’t chained down by anything; it can pursue us.”

“What are you going to do?”

“DIE IN THE NAME OF FREEDOM!”

“Give me a couple of minutes. I have an idea.”

“A couple of minutes?” Drew said aghast. “Why not an hour, while you’re at it?”

“That’s an order, Tanaka!”

“I hear and I obey!”

Drew rushed to meet the enemy.

Many other days, it would have felt good.

This was not one of these days.

She was a distraction.

The Drakon uncoiled its enormous tail, and tried to pulverise her, but it was almost as an afterthought; the explosions of the Telekhines sappers did far more to attract its attention.

“Come on,” Leo Valdez protested as his flames weakened, and the smoke was banished to reveal scales that had not even been blackened by the power of fire. “It must be vulnerable to something!”

“Ice does nothing to it!” Jade spat while trying to use multiple arrows at once...and no, while the frost did indeed create a bigger ice spear ultimately, it left the Drakon unhurt.

“DISPERSE!”

“THE EYES AREN’T A WEAK POINT!”

“THANT YOU, WE HADN’T NOTICED!”

The ‘debate’ was interrupted by what felt like they were drowning into a world of darkness.

And this time, they saw Spartacus fall.

**26 January 2007,** **the Entrance Platform of Team Adjudicator, Commodus Coliseum**

Annabeth was there when Spartacus fell.

The legendary gladiator had attacked in the direction no one would have thought to: the maw itself.

It had worked.

Impossibly, Spartacus had managed to sever several fangs of the Drakonic beast.

For the first time, the blood of the enemy had been spilled.

For a second, there had been a flicker of unease on Commodus’ face.

But it didn’t last long.

And Spartacus had advanced alone, unsupported, because the other members of the Suicide Squad had some self-preservation instincts.

There was no one to shield him when the Drakon threw another blast of dark energy, sending him smashing in what had been the approaches of the cascade gate, and which was now an antechamber to hell.

Spartacus avoided one claw. Then two.

One of his swords melted under the power of the Drakon.

Spartacus appeared to recover some of this strength.

It was just in time to see the enormous maw open straight above him.

The last sword danced and delivered a blow that a God would have felt for days.

To be sure, the Drakon felt it and was severely injured by it.

But the evil beast, be it by spite or sheer fury, found within its dark heart to finish the attack and snap its maw shut.

There was a horrible squelching sound.

And when the Drakon opened its maw again, human blood poured out, along with pieces of metal that no proper smith would ever have the skill to repair in a short amount of time.

“HA! HA! HA! IT SEEMS THE REPUTATION OF THE BANE OF ROME WAS EXTREMELY OVERSTATED!”

Commodus laughed, and the spectators laughed with him.

The Drakon opened its maw again to fire a new massive blast of dark power, the light dying under its maw-

And Hell was unleashed.

Infernal chains were summoned and acted as harpoons, impaling the limbs of the monster and immobilising him.

Enormous spikes surged from the floor, causing little damage but decreasing further the ability of the beast to avoid attacks.

Hell was unleashed without warning, and poured into the surprised Drakonic maw in the form of colossal flames where the green appeared to fight the obsidian.

The head of the giant monster seemed to inflate under the power flowing in its power.

The tail and every part of the semi-serpentine body shivered uncontrollably.

There was a colossal shriek, and the head of the Drakon imploded.

There was a sky-high geyser of magic, followed by an avalanche of bones and monster body parts.

Claws and fangs ended up projected across the entire Coliseum, with only emergency barriers preventing spectators’ deaths.

The cheers of the crowd ceased immediately.

Bianca di Angelo stood, alone, undaunted, and her expression was one of pure murder.

“Right,” Clarisse said weakly next to the daughter of Athena. “I suddenly think that Jackson wasn’t joking too much when he said that in a previous life, she conquered a bloody continent more or less on her own.”

**26 January 2007, approaches of the Neo Hesperides Lake, the Central Arena of the Sixth Labour**

“This was no normal Drakon,” Jade didn’t know if she was to be relieved or terrified that Bianca di Angelo after her titanic magical attack appeared to be ready to collapse in exhaustion.

“I don’t think it was a Drakon at all,” the young Champion of Khione admitted honestly. “For all the duration of the battle, the Drakonic part of me...it was screaming in agony. It was...awful.”

Jade shivered unconsciously. This had been one very painful and unpleasant battle, beyond the hopelessness of facing an opponent able to endure all of your blows.

“One more devilry of the Sire of the Drakons?” Drew Tanaka asked as a bridge materialised and the gate fell destroyed by the fire assaults of Leo Valdez.

“No. No, I felt his presence before, and this was totally different.”

“The Titan, then. It must have been one of *his* gifts to Commodus.”

“That would make sense, yes.”

Though for the life of her, Jade didn’t have any clue how you bred that sort of abomination. Yes, the Ice Drakon Perseus Jackson had slain had been tough, but then it had been a God-Beast, and a millennia-old Primordial Drakon at that.

This kind of opponent wasn’t found at the corner of a street. Yet Commodus had organised a Labour with one, and on very short notice.

“Anyway,” the former Huntress sighed. “I don’t hear or see anything indicating Team Triumvirate is on the way to catch us before we grab the so-called ‘Golden Apples’.”

Bianca di Angelo muttered a word. A black glyph materialised in front of her...before immediately fading away.

“The Immortal Sorceress Medea is still in the arena, but at least a kilometre away.”

“They decided to make a cautious approach, then.”

“Look at your armour’s main characteristics, Jade.”

She obeyed, the tone of the daughter of Hades as imperious as ever, and-

*Time since Sixth Labour beginning: 35 minutes 24 seconds*

*Energy reserves of the Armour: 48%*

“Oh, hell,” and yes, she may have uttered a few curses after that.

“Oh, hell indeed,” the Lightning Thief replied. “It is as Jackson feared. Our armours were made for simulations of true battlefield, not the insane high-intensity of the Maze. We have some time to spare, but if we aren’t be careful, our Cyber-Hoplite Armours will run out of power before we return to the entrance platform.”

Jade grimaced. That would be really, really bad.

“But enough about that,” the black-haired Demigoddess commanded. “We can’t afford to wait the Triumvirate; we will see what we can do about them once the main objective is in our hands.”

“Can we do anything for them?” Drew asked as the two Telekhine specialists left verified that there weren’t more unpleasant surprises left near the destroyed ‘Cascade Gate’. “We just lost Spartacus and two more of our Telekhine allies. There are just seven of us left and-“

“We suffered significant losses, but we must go ahead.” Bianca spoke in a voice that was no Charmspeak, and yet it was something that gave you the urge it couldn’t be disobeyed. “The more Labours we succeed at, the greater the chances of the Final Plan to be our triumph.”

“Yes.”

“All right.”

The members of the Suicide Squad went forwards, as the Telekhines and Leo had preceded them. Then came Iphigenia, Drew, Bianca, and Jade took the role of the rear-guard gladiator.

It was calm.

There wasn’t any sound of battle.

It was too calm.

The mini-arena – a location that had been magically expanded to be as big as the field for a game of soccer – was as silent as a grave.

“It feels...weird, and not in a good way.”

All nodded at Leo Valdez’s words.

The arena, in appearance, was simplicity itself. Most of it was swallowed by a lake which was troubled by no underwater current and no wind. What awaited in its depths, Jade couldn’t tell, for this was a dark liquid which hid its content, and no, bringing a flame next to it did nothing to solve the problem.

At the centre of the lake, a tree of gold had been placed, atop a ridiculously tiny island. As the ‘High Judge’ had told them, there were five ‘Golden Apples’, no more, no less.

“Are the fruits cursed?” This was her first question, as everything reeked too much of the bait-trap combination someone like Commodus would love.

“Actually, no, they aren’t,” the closest Telekhine answered, snorting at her expression of surprise. “Yes, Champion, it surprised me too, but it seems these fruits are exactly what they appear to be. There are made of pure gold, and so is the tree. There is no magic imbued in them. Whatever trap was prepared here, the gold tree and its apples are not part of it.”

“It’s the lake,” Bianca di Angelo intervened.

“This is my opinion too,” the second Telekhine bowed. “Not being able to peer into its depths is a very bad sign. But I must insist all my instruments tell me this lake is empty. And at this distance, unless the lake is kilometres-deep, there’s no way too fool them. It can’t be a living being which plays the role of guardian of this ‘Tree of Neo Hesperides’.”

“That leaves all the non-living possibilities,” the daughter of Hades darkly reminded the armoured shark. “I presume this is not water filling this lake?”

“It is part water, mixed with another substance. But what exactly the substance in question is, I’m afraid I won’t be of any help. If I take samples-“

“No, please abstain. We don’t know if touching the lake will be enough to trigger whatever new trap Commodus has prepared to kill us. Jade?”

The Champion of Khione breathed out, having a good idea of what was coming.

“Let me guess. You want me to do the ice rope tactic and go grab a Golden Apple?”

“Exactly.”

The former Huntress had hoped it wasn’t the case.

Nonetheless, it made sense to test that before other, more desperate options were attempted.

Jade focused, and poured power into one more arrow.

To her pleasant surprise, it hit the upper branched of the gold tree effortlessly. There was no resistance too as she poured more ice between the projectile and her bow, and even less when she created her own ice tree to stabilise the rope.

“Prepare to intervene if something goes out of the lake to attack me.”

Crossing with the ice rope was child’s play. Jade wasn’t going to try to run over it, there was audacity and there was stupidity, but using only arms and legs like an agile monkey left her able to give glances to the placid black lake.

No attack came. Needless to say, the Champion of the Second Queen of Hell didn’t like that at all.

Preparing herself for the worst, Jade grabbed a golden apple.

Nothing changed.

Jade frowned.

Her fingers almost went to grab a second one, but she remembered the limits in time. If someone tried to grab a second Golden Apple...the trap might be there, ultimately, some kind of inactive alarm the Telekhines were unable to locate.

Jade crossed back the lake.

“You did a fantastic job!” Leo cheered on, bringing plenty of smiles on some faces, half of them carnivorous. “Okay, I think that with my fire, I can’t exactly use your ice rope, but-“

There was a flash, and her rope broke before turning into black dust.

The arrow she had stuck into the golden tree dissolved like it had never existed.

“What in the name of my Goddess was that?”

“It was...magic,” Bianca di Angelo looked in every direction. “Seriously powerful magic...and...I don’t know...it felt *ancient*.”

“Oh, come on! We can’t be that unlucky!”

“Don’t be stupid, Valdez,” the Lightning Thief said tersely. “Luck has nothing to do with it. There’s something hostile there testing us. We were told we needed three different gladiators to grab the three Golden Apples, correct?”

“Correct,” Jade presented one of the fruits in question to the gaze of the others, before placing a small layer of frost protection around it. The Cyber-Hoplite Armours, evidently, had no such precious parts called ‘pockets’.

“Then it stands to reason each of the Golden Apple must be crossed in a different manner.” The daughter of the King of the Underworld said in her royal voice.

“And...how are we going to...hey!”

Give it to Bianca di Angelo, she wasn’t the kind of Demigoddess to prattle for hours. The moment she had finished speaking, the Lightning Thief began to levitate, her feet shrouded by small spheres of shadows.

Her progression several feet over the lake was slow, and visibly, it cost her a lot of energy. But it worked.

Soon enough, the second Golden Apple was in her hands. The return journey, however, was clearly tiring their leader for the Sixth Labour. Several times, Bianca almost collapsed. And in fact the moment she was back, the girl who had stolen once the Master Bolt fell upon her knees, and grimaced.

“There’s something in this lake...something that fought my magic,” the Demigoddess gasped. “I don’t think it is alive...it must be some kind of artefact.”

“That...” the Telekhine before her raised a fin. “That is a very big problem, no?”

There was a second pulse of magic, and the streaks of shadow magic the daughter of Hades had left over the lake were banished as if they had never existed.

“It is.” Drew spoke. “Because unless I miss my guess? We have just exhausted all our options that included going above the lake. Let’s face it, at least two of our company would have no problem swimming fifty metres, but since we are pretty much sure there is something awful ready to attack us there...”

“But we need to find a way to cross.”

“Well,” the first Telekhine opened his fanged maw, “usually, I would recommend the construction of an improvised bridge, but clearly, there are no construction materials anywhere, and the same could be said of the place where we fought the not-Drakon.”

“Couldn’t we use some of the statues?”

“No. They aren’t tall enough, and I don’t think I could paste them to form some kind of bridge. I am a Telekhine, not a magician.”

Some pair of eyes fell upon Bianca di Angelo.

“Forget it,” the dark sorceress shook her head. “I need to save my strength for the return journey.”

“In that case, I don’t see how it can be achieved. I’m afraid-“

The next seconds would be a long and vivid nightmare in Jade’s head for the rest of her mortal life.

The lake erupted with no warning.

The black waters seemed to boil, and a magical bubble emerged slowly from its depths.

It was powerful.

It felt wrong immediately.

It was wrong.

It was...a book?

No, it was *the Book*. It was wrong, wrong, wrong-

***COME!***

Jade screamed. She was joined by many voices.

The entire world seemed to become madness itself.

The Drakonic part of her told her to flee.

But she couldn’t.

She couldn’t do anything!

She couldn’t do anything save watch Iphigenia step forwards, slowly, her Cyber-Hoplite Armour somehow walking on the surface of the black lake.

And suddenly, Jade realised the horrific nature of the trap.

“NO! NO! FIGHT IT!”

But Iphigenia didn’t seem to hear her supplication.

She continued to advance.

The Huntress stopped before the book.

***DISROBE. YOU ARE TO BE BARE BEFORE ME.***

Jade prayed her former sister was going to resist. That she would challenge this demonic artefact. That the growing blue-green ‘bubble’ engulfing the book would diminish.

That all of it would soon cede and stop the nightmare.

The Cyber-Hoplite Armour fell into the lake, broken beyond repair.

“NO! RESIST!”

Someone shook her arm.

“We have to go!” the Telekhine snarled. “What is going to happen-“

“We have to save her!”

“We have to save ourselves first!”

**READ!**

The unnatural book opened, though no mortal hand had touched it.

Iphigenia, to her terror, obeyed.

The first words make her ears bleed.

Jade screamed again.

A cyber-spear went flying.

A Telekhine had thrown it.

It stopped metres short of its target.

The weapon was disintegrated by an explosion of blue-green magic.

And then the shark imploded, spraying them with a show of gore and monster flesh.

“FLEE! FLEE YOU FOOLS!”

“RETREAT! RETREAT IMMEDIATELY!”

“But Iphigenia...the Golden Apples!”

“FORGET EVERYTHING AND RUN! RUN AWAY!”

Jade closed her eyes and did as she was told.

She fled, even as the litany of damnation resumed, and the entire world seemed to fall into madness.

**26 January 2007, the Throne-Lodge of the Coliseum**

There were campaigns and great events where Dionysus had been extremely proud to be recognised as God of Madness.

It wasn’t the case today.

No, today, it was nothing to be proud at all. It was just something that allowed him to mitigate the collateral damage.

And it wasn’t a lot.

The members of the Suicide Squad finally fled from the arena. This was...not good, but a small consolation.

They were completely powerless against the power that had arisen from the lake.

If they had stayed, they would have all died. And no, the presence of Perseus Jackson wouldn’t have changed anything.

Dionysus was the only one who could face these heights of madness, and not be driven insane by it. This was his burden, for alone of all the Olympians, he was already mad.

“**Perseus Jackson called your protégé ignoble, Prometheus, but you are worse than him by several leagues**.”

“**Oh come on! I just brought forwards this artefact so that the Lost Princess could achieve her dreams**!”

If you had any doubt about it left, yes, the Titan was a malevolent monster. Several males and females of his race were brutes, destruction incarnate, and worse things, but only Prometheus, as far as the Olympian knew, had that urge to debase you until there were no differences between malignant sociopaths and your own essence.

Prometheus deserved a thousand times the tortures his genitor had inflicted upon him.

If he could strangle him, Dionysus would do it in a heartbeat.

But he couldn’t.

All he could do was erecting a barrier between the arena and the outside world, so that the sounds didn’t come out, and the vision of what was happening wasn’t clear at all. Madness had to be contained, otherwise they were going to get hundreds of thousands of deaths, and that was likely an optimistic estimate.

The incantation ended.

Something metaphysical snapped, the last embers of Artemis’ protection being shredded.

The Primordial Book seemed to pour more of its magic into a baleful aura.

And then the prehensile appendages came out of the book.

Dionysus thought that for a fraction of a second, the poor girl realised what she had done. What kind of damnation the malice of ancient beings had forced her to embrace.

But there was no escape, no salvation to be found.

Two of the green-blue appendages, extending as hyper-long tentacles, neutralised her arms, while an even bigger appendage invaded her mouth. In all violation of the law of physics understood by mortals, it looked as several metres of muscular mass disappeared into her throat.

And then the book began to dissolve.

The tentacles faded away; the magic that kept the levitation active had used all its power.

The Primordial Book was no more.

Iphigenia fell into the lake.

It seemed the contact with the water and the black oily magical reagent was particularly cold, for the naked girl resurfaced within a couple of seconds, spluttering and shouting insults.

“**I don’t know what you were given to bring this book here**,” Dionysus said coldly. “**But I hope it was good for you. You have just earned yourself a nice torture session and the loathing of pretty much deity having some honour**.”

“**And what if I told you I just wanted to help this girl become the Prime Contractor of the Dreaming One**?”

“**Then I will answer that one day, you will receive the fate your former King the Titan of Time did, and it will be completely deserved**.”

Prometheus merely chuckled.

In the mean time, Iphigenia had tried swimming to reach the island of the golden tree.

She almost was there when the transformation began.

Dionysus felt his fists tighten, and it took an incredible effort of self-control to not turn into his divine form and incinerate the mortals present in the Throne-Lodge.

He couldn’t break the rules, alas.

Only those inside the arena could intervene...and they didn’t have the power or the resistance to madness to survive more than a few seconds.

Worse of all, now, there wasn’t anything that could really be done.

The seed was inside the former Huntress.

The arms promptly changed into the same prehensile appendages which had seized her later, complete with suckers.

The body was altered beyond comprehension, the human colour being abandoned for the blue-green colour that was typical of the servants of the Dreaming One.

The eggs were ripped apart. The bones vanished.

Powerful muscles replaced them, bathed in the divine power of the Abyss.

The hair began to fall in droves.

Iphigenia screamed...for not too long, for soon, her mouth disappeared too.

Second after second, the former servant of Artemis lost her humanity.

The legs had been completely transformed, and they were now completely replaced by six octopi-like tentacles. Many suckers soon emerged to cover them.

In fact, the comparison with octopi was not exactly wrong: not as the head inflated to look more and more to take the attributes of one.

Yet there were differences, for this was not a giant octopi being created. In fact, it looked like the Dreaming One wanted to give birth to something that could pass as the hybrid of said cephalopod and a human.

The breasts of the girl who had been called Iphigenia became bigger. While the ears were removed, many smaller tentacles emerged from the sides of the head, giving her something close to the hair that had been taken from her moments ago. The eyes of the octopi were on different sides of the body, but the transforming girl still had hers in the same location.

There was something akin to a void which swallowed everything.

Dionysus blinked.

“It is over.”

And indeed, it was.

Minutes ago, there had been a girl, a former huntress. Now the being which was close to the island could no longer be called that.

She was something inhuman. She was the Prime Contractor of the Dreaming One.

If she had a true name now, it was not one that mortal tongues would be able to speak without losing their sanity first.

Iphigenia had become the vision the Primordial of the Sea and the Abysses had wished for her; no longer a human; no longer a Huntress; instead something given immense powers and octopi-hybrid abilities to survive where *he* called her from.

***I WILL REMEMBER!***

The arena trembled.

Prometheus’ smile abruptly took a holiday.

The ‘Gold Tree of the Neo Hesperides’ and its remaining apples were transformed into goo before you could say ‘Titanomachy’.

The new Prime Contractor plunged into the depths of the lake, which had suddenly turned the colour of her body.

There was an explosion, and the new servant of Pontus was gone.

For at least a good minute, no one spoke.

Even for a God and a Titan, it was just a bit too much.

The public seemed to not agree, but then Dionysus had shielded them from most of it.

Someone cleared his throat.

It was Commodus.

“Well,” the Narcissist Emperor said with an expression that was only the shadow of his usual smiles, “I don’t think anyone is going to win this Labour.”

**26 January 2007, the Entrance Platform of Team Adjudicator, Commodus Coliseum**

Perseus knew he had done some really bad things in his life.

He was a villain. That sort of things came with the job.

And no, the former Tyrant wasn’t going to apologise for them.

Cities had burned. Armies had been routed. Entire provinces had been stripped of food. Many Names had died, their lives cut short by his magnificent plans. Heroes had cursed his name, hopefully long after he was dead.

As Kairos Theodosian, he had certainly not been a hero, and unless someone was particularly delirious, he wasn’t one of the ‘good guys’.

All of that was true, he swore it on his soul.

But in this life or the other one, he had never done something so abominable as using this kind of damnation-incarnate artefact.

Perseus had never been *that* insane...or evil.

Yes, it was evil. Evil for the sake of cruelty and evilness.

One could argue that Iphigenia had been destined eventually to become the servant of Pontus after the Clash of the Titans, but there had been a key word: eventually.

It could have happened in a century or in a millennium. Time meant nothing to a Primordial, and Iphigenia had eternal youth.

But Prometheus and Commodus had engineered...*that*.

“I am going to slow them,” the Lord of the Suicide Squad leashed his anger, though he was sure that by his acidic tone alone, many around him weren’t fooled. “Strangling the bastards with a carpet isn’t going to be enough to satisfy my revenge lust, I think.”

“Explosives, Boss?”

“No, Rico. It would far quicker than these bastards deserve...”

Richard Grant cleared his throat.

“Yes?”

“I think things are really beginning to turn very badly for Team Triumvirate.”

“Uh,” Perseus returned to watching the Labour. “Yes, they are. It seems cutting down massively the number of gladiators is the order of the Labour.”

In many ways, it wasn’t too much of a surprise. For all the madness and the evil it implied, Prometheus couldn’t use a Primordial’s artefact for every Labour. The Adjudicator Games wouldn’t survive long...it was already a near-miracle they weren’t dead; a miracle and Dionysus’ intervention.

Commodus had to eliminate them here and now; the number of Labours remaining after this one was merely six.

“They are laughing now,” the son of Hercules informed him.

Perseus didn’t waste his saliva asking who the ‘they’ were. There was no need to.

“Let them laugh for now.” It wasn’t exactly like he could pour gold in their throats to stop their hilarity. “I see the Centaurs were unleashed against Team Triumvirate, not Team Adjudicator.”

“That and a true horde of monsters,” Richard added. “The good news, as far as I can tell, is that Bianca has decided to rush reinforcing them as fast as she can.”

“She probably thinks that now that this Labour is a failure for us, it would be best to save what we can from this disaster.” The son of Poseidon answered. “But the help might not arrive in time.”

To be sure, Team Adjudicator had faced a lot of enemies recently, and at the beginning of the Sixth Labour, Spartacus had slain thousands of killer-automatons.

But Team Triumvirate didn’t have Spartacus.

They did have Medea, but the Immortal Sorceress was not fighting the same way.

She needed time for her spells to gain potency, and of course, she was truly the only army-killer of her team of twelve; she didn’t have the equivalent of Bianca and Drew to support her.

In normal circumstances, this could have been negated somewhat.

When you were cornered into one of the blind alleys of the Maze, with thousands upon thousands of enemies relentlessly attacking, it assuredly couldn’t.

The Centaurs shooting their poison-soaked arrows was just one more bad news in an ocean of drawbacks.

Three Mars-sworn mercenaries had already been torn apart.

And of course, because it could always get worse, the improvised torches were snuffed out.

Team Triumvirate was cornered in a place with no escape, and all the enemies had night vision while the humans didn’t have it.

‘Bad’ didn’t just begin to describe the full picture of it.

“**See**,” he ordered to the world, and the Demigod was given the insight he wished.

As a result, Perseus saw Medea clench her jaw.

He could read on the lips when the Immortal Sorceress ordered her subordinates to use the advance mode of the Cyber-Hoplite Armours.

He knew that given the same array of bad options, he might have chosen the same.

But Perseus also knew it was the wrong choice.

The Princess of Colchis charged along with the surviving Triumvirate Legionnaires.

Between cyber-swords, magic, and sheer ferocity, they carved a respectable amount of carnage.

The ‘Promethean automatons’ at last were depleted. Plenty of monsters, be they snake-like or the mechanical variety, fell and did not get up again.

Unfortunately, that left the Centaurs.

They had not rushed into the melee with the others, and the Cyber-Armours were hardly perfect protections. Commodus had made sure of that, by leaving hips and other things completely uncovered.

The Legionnaires began to die.

They reaped an absurd number of enemies for each life they lost, but the Mars-sworn mercenaries had already perished, and they were only four Legionnaires in this Labour.

And in the middle of this chaotic battlefield, Medea was far too busy to notice that the two girls marked as ‘Neo Thespiades’ had frozen and weren’t fighting anymore.

One of the two clearly realised what was happening, that her helmet was showing her things that weren’t the reality. But that was too late. She tried to sever her own throat, but the Cyber-Armour refused to obey.

The Charm-song arrived less than ten seconds after that. Resistance crumbled, and the two girls raced away, answering the music that would eventually turn them into Nemean Lionesses.

The last Legionnaire still alive and Medea had of course by then realised what happened, and stopped the advanced mode of their helmet...for all the good it did, which was none.

“Jackson! Do something!”

Before one asked, yes, it was a Huntress speaking.

“Your confidence that I can do something is absolutely admirable, but let me remind you that as long as the twelve members of Team Adjudicator are not dead or returned, I can’t descend in the arena myself.”

“Drew and Bianca are almost there,” Lou Ellen pointed out.

“’Almost’ is not good enough,” the former Tyrant replied.

For as he spoke the words, the last Legionnaire was falling, the wounds taken making sure that if he didn’t see a Healer in the next ten seconds, death was a guarantee for him.

Medea was alone.

Alone, and the Centaurs had evidently had enough of the archery stage, because they drew cavalry sabres and went to full gallop.

Medea cast a powerful spell.

And the ground opened mere metres in front of her, showing a sort of...a disk covered in Greek symbols.

“Expect the worse from them, and you won’t be disappointed...”

The sole positive silver lining you could find was that it was not something imbued with a Primordial essence.

No, it was ‘merely’ a cursed item that activated when certain pre-conditions were fulfilled.

Like right now.

Medea screamed.

She had every reason to.

The Cyber-Armour protecting her was gone, and as she stood upon the corpses of some centaurs she had just terminated, her entire body below the navel was melting, while three very much alive Centaurs’ were swallowed by something that materialised as an ink-filled pit.

Commodus was laughing, evidently.

There was nothing they could do to stop it. There was nothing *Perseus* could do.

The rules were the rules.

And that was cold comfort indeed.

He could only watch with his lone red eye as the body of the Princess of Colchis stopped to be entirely human.

To be clear, above the navel, she still was completely human.

But below it, the magic of the artefact was shaping her into something different.

Something *equine*.

A long black tail. An entirely black-sculpted body that you could only find on horses and their cousins. Golden hooves.

Medea screamed a last time, and then the shock of the transformation knocked her unconscious.

The transformation was over, though, and as far as Perseus could see, it had been solidified into something stable and permanent.

She was-

“ALL HAIL THE CENTAUR QUEEN!” Commodus gleefully and maliciously screamed to the cheering crowd. “ALL HAIL QUEEN MEDEA THE CENTAUR QUEEN! CENTAURS...HAVE YOUR WAY WITH HER!”

“YES, IMPERATOR!”

A first Centaur moved...and he disappeared into black flames.

Then a second lost his head, and a lot of his body, severed in so many parts Perseus didn’t manage to properly count them.

“I believe a change of program is in order,” he heard the girl who had been Triumphant hiss angrily. “All of you: **DIE**.”

The surviving monsters tried to escape. They were not fast enough.

**26 January 2007,** **the Entrance Platform of Team Adjudicator, Commodus Coliseum**

“It was a freaking disaster,” Lou Ellen didn’t know why it had come out of her mouth right now, but it had. Maybe it was watching the members of Team Triumvirate Adjudicator die one by one and watching it without being able to raise a finger to help them.

“Yes, it was.”

Perseus’ hand was in hers, and the words, strangely, brought a small measure of comfort.

After watching Bianca and the rest of the exhausted survivors coming out of the Maze, the daughter of Hecate believed everyone was in need of reassurance and happiness.

“I wouldn’t have sent Iphigenia if I knew what awaited them in the depths of this lake.”

“But you didn’t know.”

“Right now, it is, as the proverb says, very cold comfort, Lou Ellen.”

To this, there was no clever argument coming to mind.

Team Adjudicator had sent twelve of its members in the Maze of the Sixth Labour.

Only five had come out, and the wounds of the sole and only Telekhine survivor were so severe that until they got the Golden Fleece to heal him, the shark was for all intents and purposes out of the game. As for the four others, all were completely exhausted. Bianca di Angelo had been running on black fumes for too long, Drew and Jade were nearly comatose, and Leo had required a stretcher once he was extracted from his armour.

Those were the five who had survived the Sixth Labour. Seven had not returned, and six out of said number were dead. As for the seventh, the blonde Demigoddess knew that whatever she had become would not have any interest ever in being part of the Suicide Squad again.

All of that for a failure.

Team Adjudicator had not won the Sixth Labour. The cost had been atrocious and bloody beyond belief. Arguably, it had been worse than the Third Labour. That particular fiasco had been the fault of the Huntresses; here you couldn’t blame anyone for it, save the architects of the slaughterhouse.

There had been no way to win. Not with the twelve they had sent to near-certain doom.

And in the case you were tempted to say ‘it couldn’t get worse’, well there was Team Triumvirate to tell you that on that point, you were definitely wrong too.

Nine dead. Two girls kidnapped, and Commodus had departed the Imperial Lodge five minutes ago, meaning they were soon going to be raped and changed into Nemean Lionesses, not necessarily in that order.

And Medea...Medea’s transformation had been so brutal that Drew and Jade had had to carry her in turn, because the Immortal Sorceress had not woken up yet.

“All of this for false Golden Apples we won’t ever use.”

“Never say, never.” Her boyfriend snarked.

“Don’t tell me you’ve found a way to turn it against a Titan.”

“No, but I’m still searching,” Perseus grimaced. “It’s truly an unpleasant assessment that the Titan of Crafty Counsel did not earn the Domains of Malice, Calamity, and Catastrophes by mistake.”

Yes, and suddenly, Lou Ellen Blackstone very much had become an ardent supporter of the theory ‘Prometheus tried to screw both sides during the Titanomachy’.

“Whoever gets too close to him is rewarding by only ruin and despair.”

“Accurate.”

“The communication device?”

“It’s done.”

It was not hard to guess why Perseus had demanded she discreetly placed this tracker doubled of a phone onto the lieutenant of Mark Antony.

“Good.”

“Can you reverse her transformation, for the sake of my curiosity?”

“I have not had the time to study it, but probably not,” the son of Poseidon shrugged. “Undoing certain animal curses is not exactly a specialty of mine in the first place, and I am going to hazard a guess this one has not been made to be easily reversible. Moreover, I don’t even know who created this artefact in the first place. It’s not your half-sister; she hates Centaurs too much for that.”

“True. She has the means, yes, but...she wouldn’t do something like this.”

Circe had a lot of flaws. But she was a daughter of Hecate, and a protector of women. Transforming a woman into a female Centaur when there were thousands in the stands...it was just evil.

“That doesn’t explain why the Centaurs were so...”She honestly didn’t find the words to complete the sentence.

“So monstrous?” Perseus tried, earning himself a nod. “In this case, I think it’s very simple. There have been only a handful of female Centaurs over the centuries. It was a cursed transformation that targeted only the males in the Age before the Mist, and no female Centaurs can be conceived the natural way.”

“Oh,” and just with this realisation, the nightmare seemed to have no end. “You mean Medea is at the moment the only female Centaur in the world.”

“Yes, it is exactly what I believe. Thus the...particularly impolite and horrid behaviour of the spectators.”

Lou Ellen didn’t turn her head to see what her boyfriend referred to. The Sixth Labour had been bad enough, thank you very much.

“They want her, and not in a platonic way.” This wasn’t a question.

Perseus sighed, and for a couple of seconds, the look in his eyes was very, very old.

“I wondered how Commodus could possibly convince more Centaurs to volunteer to fight in the arena after the first group of ‘reinforcements’ was eliminated with extreme prejudice. Now, I know.”

Commodus had almost certainly promised that whichever Centaur participated in the elimination of the Suicide Squad would be able to ‘have his way’ with Medea.

“The Narcissist Predator is truly irredeemable.”

“No argument there,” the leader of the Suicide Squad clicked his fingers several times extremely fast. “Well, this was a disaster, but what is done is done. I have a far better measure of the assets that have been brought to kill us, and the Titan for whatever reason has revealed how he traps his victims.”

“Any idea what wait for us in the Seventh Labour?”

“Some ideas, yes. To start with, the arena-handlers are going within a few minutes to empty all the tainted liquid of the now very cursed ‘Neo Hesperides Lake’.”

**26 January 2007, the Throne-Lodge of Commodus**

Returning to a humanoid body always brought some moral comfort.

Of course, Panther knew that she was no longer human. The more days passed, the more she embraced her true nature.

Give it a few more weeks, and the former Lieutenant of the Hunt knew the last parts of her humanity would be utterly broken, discarded as if they mattered nothing.

And once that happened, unfortunately, complete acceptance of her slavery wouldn’t be long to come.

Panther resisted. All the girls resisted it.

But it was a completely unfair fight, with the magic of the ritual gnawing at their souls, memory after memory, deed after deed.

The hatred of Commodus burned bright for the moment; this was the only positive thing for the day.

The rest? It was monstrous crime after monstrous crime.

Commodus had left her with nine other sisters, but he summoned the rest while he left.

He wanted half of them to be here when he ‘broke’ the two new girls who had been caught into his latest trap.

Panther hated him with a passion for it.

Unfortunately, there was nothing to do but wait.

Nothing to do but observe. Nothing to do but hope that this time, it wouldn’t work.

But since they had arrived to this island of narcissism, hope never lasted long.

About thirty seconds after she had thought it, two new minds joined the telepathic gestalt link which connected all the Nemean Lionesses to another.

Panther felt their horror as their minds broke under the transformation. She saw their eyes open, terrifyingly feline, to acknowledge that the fate of the New Thespiades had become theirs too.

Eighteen had become twenty.

The victories of Team Adjudicator during the Fourth and Fifth Labours seemed to have occurred an eternity ago.

Commodus losing his temper, the ridiculous humiliations, the name of the ‘Imperial Circus Plan’...all had felt like the comedy had begun, and soon their slavery chains had broken.

But the greater monster had come.

Prometheus.

Titan of Crafty Counsel.

He had come, with a hoard of cursed artefacts, plenty of monsters which made you instinctively wary just with a glance, and everything had changed.

He had come with twisted advice, and he had convinced Commodus to *listen*.

Panther had been witness to how inventive and annoying Jackson could be.

But she didn’t know if the son of Poseidon could win against that kind of evil.

“**No need to give me that kind of fierce expression, young Lioness**,” the Titan faked a complaint as false as his character. “**I am merely a messenger**.”

Panther wished she could have told him to stop lying, but it was denied to her.

Thus she continued to glare.

She hated him. Panther hated the Titan for all the crimes he had committed. The former Huntresses wished to eat the entrails of the Titan. He deserved it alone for engineering the monstrous transformation of Iphigenia.

“**People these days have no humour**,” but the sardonic smile completely contradicted the words. “**Let’s see if the Seventh Labour will be able to change that**.”

Panther shivered. This Titan was just evil incarnate.

**26 January 2007, Council Room, Olympus**

Apollo had to be honest: with Zeus back and in charge, the God of the Sun had thought there would be far more explosions and strikes of the Master Bolt.

But there hadn’t been. In fact, only two holographic screens had been pulverised so far, which was honestly kind of impressive, given how bad the Sixth Labour had turned out.

Yes, it was rather good, and Apollo as such had decided to stay quiet; you counted your blessings, and all of that.

But in every council or assembly, there was someone who disagreed with that. And today on Olympus, it was his little sister.

“**Perseus Jackson must be punished**!”

“**For what**?” Athena was the one to answer. “**He sent a pretty good team in the arena. It isn’t his fault the Titan planned things to achieve a bloodbath. And honestly in the end, if there had to be beings to be sacrificed, Spartacus and the Telekhines were definitely it. They have no political support anywhere**.”

The few sentences were a reminder that yes, Athena could be incredibly cold when she wanted. Of course, the presence of Prometheus wasn’t going to bring out the best of her, but here, her grey eyes were definitely frightening.

This didn’t stop his little sister to seethe, though.

“**He sacrificed one of my Huntresses too in the process, in case it escaped you**!”

“**Did he**?” Poseidon asked. “**I had almost forgotten the artefact Prometheus used; I sincerely doubt my son or any mortal present in this Coliseum remembered its existence. And I certainly didn’t see it coming. I think it would be a bit unfair to blame any Demigod for something that they weren’t informed about...and that they hadn’t any defence against, even if we gave them some warnings beforehand**.”

This wasn’t what Artemis wanted to hear, clearly.

“**You are letting him get away with this**?”

“**Perseus Jackson**,” Aphrodite began lustfully from her place on Hephaestus’ lap, “**decided to not lead the team who participated in this Sixth Labour. You can criticise him for that, Huntress. But the moment he wasn’t one of the twelve of Team Adjudicator, he couldn’t intervene or salvage anything. Everyone here knows that**.”

“**He could have**-“

“**We Gods were unable to intervene in this tragedy**,” the Goddess of Love didn’t glare at his sister, but she wasn’t far from it. “**If you really think it was different for the Demigods, I advise you to re-read ten times the rules of the Adjudicator Challenge**.”

“The Titan pushing your Huntress into the tentacles of the Dreaming One is a hard blow,” Athena had yet to utter Prometheus’ name, and if Apollo was willing to gamble, he would say the Goddess of Wisdom would not utter his name before the end of the Council. “But it is the Titan’s fault, and arguably Commodus’; no one else is guilty for their crimes.”

“**Indeed**,” Zeus finally reacted with a growl. “**This Titan is perfidy incarnate. I should have listened to my dark brother and imprisoned it within a dedicated prison somewhere in the Underworld...but I wanted to punish him myself**.”

“**I take it another imprisonment is in order, then**?” Hermes asked with a smile.

Both Poseidon and Zeus groaned simultaneously, in a splendid display of brotherly unity. Yes, really.

“**Ordering the punishment of this Titan is not the problem**,” the God of the Seas spoke at the invitation of his brother. “**Catching is, however, definitely is. The first time we made a serious effort to hunt him, it took several centuries to corner him and drag him back in chains to Olympus. Arguably, he’s lost a lot of his Domains and power now, but his cunning and his viciousness have not diminished at all. For all his taunting in the lodge of Commodus, I have no doubt Prometheus has already over a dozen escape routes, most of them we have no clue about**.”

“**We are definitely going to try to arrest him, and this time, Hades will be in charge of making sure he never sees the light of day again**,” Demeter spoke, her face intimidating in the extreme, something helped by the large scythe in her right hand. “**But it is going to take time. Time we may not have. Prometheus did not decide to reveal his presence today because he felt taunting us was something he desired**.”

“**Yes**,” Athena echoed. “**He is leaving his cloak of anonymity behind because he is ready. He must have gathered monstrous allies behind his banner of strife. Commodus was only a useful tool to test the waters. Something worse is coming**.”

It said a lot about how accurate all the Olympians considered the analysis of the Goddess that no one wished to continue the exchange for five entire minutes.

In the end, it wasn’t anything on Olympus that convinced someone to speak again; it was the changes to the arena which was located half a world away.

“**They’re sending new monsters in the Maze**.” Hermes sighed. “**And unless my eyes are failing me, there are twelve Laistrygonian Giants leading the horde**.”

“**Most of the Giants of this breed can’t see in the dark, don’t they**?” Poseidon frowned.

“**They can’t**,” Athena confirmed. “**But they have a hyper-evolved sense of smell. They will be able to track a Demigod ten kilometres away with their noses alone. Their ears also are far superior to those of mortals**.”

“**They are going to be the trackers**,” Apollo grimaced. “**And we have what? Something like six hundred Centaurs joining up this murderous game**.”

“**Commodus has found one of the rare things that will make sure the rapists will ignore an army worth of fatalities**.” Artemis murmured. “**Vile bastard**.”

“**His** **servants are replacing the H-30BR acid that was separating the Maze from the inner arena**,” Hephaestus told them. “**I think they are throwing some sort of super-fertiliser, and though it’s not my area of competence, seeds of carnivorous plants are going to follow**.”

“**I don’t see really the point**,” the God of Speed admitted.

“**My son will be unable to participate in this Labour**,” the God of the Forges said aloud. “**And the same thing will apply to the daughter of Hades. A lot of ‘gladiators’ who could unleash fire on a whim are not available anymore**.”

“**Damn. Commodus and his ‘ally’ are not playing around anymore**.”

This was an extremely accurate realisation, Apollo acknowledged.

The sums of efforts poured into this Coliseum were already significant for the Seventh Labour; when you added what the Sixth Labour had already demanded, it was just madness on a divine scale. Tens of millions of Drachma must have been thrown out of the windows, be it for the transport of monsters or the resources each ‘trap’ demanded.

“**The Suicide Squad better have an incredible good plan**,” Athena emotionlessly said, “**for I see Commodus has been given more artefacts capable of inflicting animal transformations to the unfortunate souls which will be caught in them**.”

Apollo wasn’t going to disagree with her. Okay, for a God, this Labour was not that big a challenge, but for a mortal, it was murderously difficult.

“**Does anyone have any idea of what kind of Labour this one is modelled after? I must admit I am not an expert on them, but I genuinely don’t have any idea what kind of reference the ‘High Judge’ is using**.”

“**I have no idea either**,” Hermes shook his head. “**But this is not**-“

A thousand torches suddenly began to burn, creating a perfect circle of fire which marked the limit of the not-so-small arena at the heart of the Coliseum.

It was a rather spectacular entrance, all told.

It was an *individual* entrance too.

The lake had been emptied, the arena returned to a more ‘classic’ mode, and there was only a single being in the centre of it.

It was a woman.

It was a woman armoured in the same Amazon-Hoplite Armour that had been delivered to both Teams before the Labours of the night began.

There was a notable difference of equipment, though.

She wore a belt.

No, Apollo had to say the truth: she wore *the Belt*.

“**It is the first Girdle of the Amazons, it has been lost for centuries**,” Poseidon commented with evident surprise. “How did even Prometheus could-“

A spear appeared in the female warrior’s hands.

“There are only two types of warriors: the Amazons and their prey!”

Apollo placed his head between his hands and groaned.

“**Oh no. They somehow found *her***.”

“**It is possible they found an impostor**,” Artemis said unconvinced. “**You would have to be crazy to**-“

“ALL MALES MUST BE CRUSHED UNDER MY FEET OR DIE!”

Aphrodite snickered.

“Yes, that’s Otrera, all right. They’ve rejuvenated her somehow.”

“Err...”Hermes cleared his throat. “We’re speaking of the First Queen of the Amazons, right?”

“**The first woman to ever wear the sacred Belt, yes**,” Apollo winced. “**And at the risk of saying obvious, a truly bloodthirsty woman who held the title of Bride of Ares for a very long time. But I think that if she is on the other side today, her loyalty to my half-brother may be a bit in question**.”

At least in her case, there weren’t a lot of doubts about what Prometheus had promised to her. Otrera lived to fight powerful opponents, including Demigods. A promise to fight the growing legends of the new Demigod generation was a lure she wouldn’t resist.

Apollo swallowed heavily.

It was not going to be something pleasant to watch.

**26 January 2007,** **the Entrance Platform of Team Adjudicator, Commodus Coliseum**

Richard had to admit, it was really funny to see someone else get betrayed. And Jackson had nothing to do with it, which was definitely a first.

“**OTRERA**!” Ares roared, and despite being in his cage, the power was sufficient to make plenty of monsters and other spectators faint. “**WHAT ARE YOU DOING SERVING MY ENEMIES**?”

“Isn’t it evident?” the treacherous Queen of the Amazons laughed while opening her arms and raising her weapons to the sky. “I found a far better patron to serve. One who remembers I exist. One who isn’t fleeing at the sight of challenging opponents. I am the First Queen of the Amazons! I am the ultimate female warrior! I deserve to crush males! I deserve to lead an army! And you...you can’t offer me any of these things anymore.”

“**You have betrayed me**.”

“No, you betrayed me first! I won a thousand battles in your name, and I was only rewarded with your silence! Now I have vanquished ten of thousands of opponents, and I am promised the place that is mine by right!”

“**I WILL KILL YOU, YOU TREACHEROUS BITCH**!”

Fortunately for everyone, Commodus decided to cut the sound coming out of the divine cage-prison.

It was probably the sole and only good thing the Narcissist Predator had done since they had entered the Coliseum after midnight.

“Right,” the Hoplite-armoured Amazon turned her eyes in direction of the platform where Team Adjudicator waited. “Now that this worthless God has been told the truth, hear me out. I was promised great foes to slay. Don’t disappoint me! Fight your way through the Maze, and enter this arena. I am waiting for you!”

“And at the risk of saying what must be incredibly evident to all,” Commodus intervened, “the goal of this Seventh Labour is to recover the legendary Belt that Queen Otrera is wearing at the moment we’re speaking. The methods employed are unimportant; recover the Belt and return to your entrance Gate before the deadline of two hours results in some unfortunate souls being trapped forever in the Maze.”

This was really bad. Okay, there was no Drakon hiding somewhere this time, but the monsters pouring into the Maze were far more numerous and stronger.

Richard didn’t have a clue of how it was possible to escape the myriad of dangers. It had already bad for the Lightning Thief, and the daughter of Hades had Spartacus as back-up...

“The Interlude is over. The Seventh Labour will begin in five minutes.” With the way Commodus was gloating, it was clear the Narcissist Predator was already salivating about the number of deaths it was going to cause. “Don’t be late! Oh, and before I forget...”

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**Scores after 6 Labours**:

**Team Adjudicator effectives: 72**

**Team Triumvirate effectives: 60**

**Labours won by Team Adjudicator: 3.5**

**Labours won by Team Triumvirate: 0.5**

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The monstrous crowd exploded into cheers. Cheers then became insults. Insults were followed by support for the monsters of the Maze to spill an ocean worth of Demigod blood.

“This promises to be amusing,” Perseus Jackson noted, “but perhaps not in the way they hope.”

“Jackson, please tell us you have a plan.” Elvis Knight pleaded.

“I have a plan.” The leader of the Suicide Squad clapped a single time in his hands. “Annabeth?”

“I calculated it, yes. It isn’t exactly complicated, after two hours of watching the Maze around.”

“Then it is decided.” The grin returned, and the red eye shone malevolently. “We are going with Plan L.”

Richard wasn’t familiar with that specific plan. But the way Bianca di Angelo cursed despite her exhaustion told him that for his peace of mind, maybe he was better off not knowing certain things.

“Really?”

“Really, Grant. You look like you are a bit suspicious.”

“The opposition is as strong as during the Sixth Labour, at least from what I can see. And I’m pretty sure the Narcissist and his ally have prepared quantities of new stratagems that can result in very painful deaths.”

“Oh, that was a given.”

The Lightning Thief groaned again.

“Are you going to really go with it?”

“My dear,” the grin of the mad Demigod seemed to become wider and wider by the second, despite it being physically impossible. “It is important to respect the Rule of Three.”

The eyes turned quickly towards the daughter of Hecate by his side.

“With your permission, of course, Lou Ellen.”

“I consent.”

Richard rolled his eyes as the sorceress kissed shamelessly the son of Poseidon.

“The order of battle for the Seventh Labour?” Clarisse asked formally, trying and failing to not show her amusement.

“I am descending in the arena, of course. The First Queen of the Amazons is an opponent that deserves all my *respect*.”

Oh yeah, that was incredibly bad...for Otrera. Seriously, the ex-Bridge of Ares didn’t know what she had just triggered.

“Lou Ellen and Annabeth are going with me,” the legacy of the Earthshaker continued with a far more deadly voice. “Colonel Ross! You have one minute to choose nine of our mercenaries to accompany me.”

This last decision raised plenty of eyebrows. Yeah, there had been six Telekhines participating in the previous Labours, but their sapper and other specialist skills had been essential to disarm an absurd number of traps. Yet Jackson wasn’t even taking one today? Something was definitely different. And when you added the little issue of the defences guarding the entrance of the arena where Otrera waited, and the reality none of the mercenaries were armed with cyber-bows...

“Are you sure, Jackson? This seems like a very risky gambit.”

“Doing non-risky things will lead us to a similar outcome as the Sixth Labour. We will bleed. Many members of Team Adjudicator will die. And unfortunately, given how badly Team Triumvirate is getting butchered, it is incredibly likely that within one or two Labours, Mark Antony will have no choice but to send his female members to the arena. This must not happen.”

“Well, you are the one who is going to lead them in the arena.”

“I know. Is Commodus laughing per chance?”

“No.” One glance was enough to be certain about that. “I think he has learned by now that you aren’t bluffing.”

“Good,” the Slayer of Drakon nodded. “It’s time to remind him that we have survived every Labour so far, and we will survive them again.”

**26 January 2007, the Maze of the Seventh Labour**

It was far easier to locate another team when you could coordinate with it.

That much had not been in doubt to Marcus Antonius, but of course, there had been the obvious problem of how to coordinate in the first place. The enemy had been very prudent in making sure they could only speak and touch each other in the arena, and of course the entrance gates were kilometres away from each other.

But as trackers and phones had been hidden and then found, Team Adjudicator and Team Triumvirate could find each other.

It was still difficult.

Distances didn’t disappear just because you wanted it to, and the Maze was filled with very hungry monsters.

It took close to thirty minutes to see Perseus Jackson with his own eyes, and by then, the Captain of Team Triumvirate had lost two of his men.

The other team wasn’t unscathed either; it was only eleven members who were there to greet him. And sign nothing was really easy, Perseus Jackson was waiting for them by cleaning his cyber-sword, a weapon he had apparently used to slay a Laistrygonian Giant. The expression of surprise on the ugly face told clearly that the monster hadn’t seen his death coming.

“You have suffered a loss.”

“The poor man is still under the Giant,” the Demigod replied with a smirk. “I told him to get out of the way, but for some reason, plenty of people always disobey me at first. Honestly, it’s like they have a death wish.”

Perseus Jackson jumped from the Giant’s corpse.

“Do you agree to a truce?”

“I do.”

It wasn’t like they had a chance left of triumphing if they decided to fight against the Suicide Squad. The Labours being completely modified by the Titan Prometheus were just too difficult for mortals to survive while also fighting other enemies at the same time.

“Good. It’s time to win this Labour.”

“We have used one-quarter of the required time already,” one of his Legionnaires pointed out.

The son of Poseidon shrugged in a carefree manner.

“During the last Labour, Bianca di Angelo tried a quick rush towards the arena. It clearly didn’t work. I believe a change of tactics is necessary. And for this, I have two secret weapons.”

“Oh?”

But the black-haired Demigod refused to say more, and began to run. Needless to say, the warriors of both teams followed the accelerated pace as fast as they could.

The Second Augustus of the Triumvirate noticed quite early that contrary to his first thought, it was not the infuriating and mad son of the Seas who was giving the directions; it was the daughter of Athena.

The remaining members of Team Adjudicators were merely there to provide the muscle, or in the case of the sorceress, the destructive spells to massacre the monsters.

There was one minute and a few seconds of pursuit.

Then the leading Demigoddess stopped without reason.

It wasn’t an alley without exit; and there weren’t any monsters incoming.

“It’s here. I am sure of it.”

“Hmm...mark it. I need a few seconds to catch my breath.”

And to the consternation of plenty, the girl went on to...draw a paint spray and draw a shiny red cross upon the wall in front of her.

Had the Suicide Squad finally succumbed entirely to the madness?

“You better provide an explanation for this, Perseus Jackson.”

“I thought it rather simple, oh, Marcus Antonius.” The grin was demonic, and the armour now appeared as it had been painted orange before the Labours of the night started. “If we can’t surprise our ignoble host and his patron, we are dead. The only question is how long it will take.”

“This is a pessimistic-“

He just had the time to begin properly before being rudely interrupted.

“Pessimistic nothing, it is the painful truth. We’re up against the traps of a Titan who was playing that sort of games when my divine father wasn’t even conceived. In one hundred contests, we lose one hundred times. We must change the game. Use Domains that the mighty Titan never understood, and as a result was never able to wield.”

“The Titan, if he is as clever as you think, will have taken contingencies against some of his greatest mistakes.”

“True,” Perseus Jackson conceded. “But there’s one point in his disfavour, one that Commodus was courteous enough to inform me of. They were short on time to build this Maze.”

“And how it is supposed to help us? Medea tested the solidity of these walls. I assure you they didn’t exactly build anything with foundations of rubber or something equally ridiculous.”

“No, they didn’t. On the other hand, they didn’t have the time to test it against an enemy. Thus it is my pleasure to introduce them to the favourite Domain of the Goddess Athena, saint protector of this Great Quest: MATHEMATICS!”

And the mad Demigod slammed the palm of his right hand against the red-painted cross of the wall.

There was a massive shockwave.

The earth rumbled.

Fissures sprawled out.

And the giant wall...a giant section of the wall where Perseus Jackson had struck fell away.

“Fine, you may know-“

Marcus Antonius stared, speechless.

For the first wall had not just merely collapsed away from both teams and opened a new opening.

It had fallen against a second wall, toppling it, and bringing a second massive collapse.

A third followed.

It was like watching this giant series of domino competitions where the goal was to bring a maximum of those little objects falling one after another.

Except here, it was the giant walls of the Maze which fell one after another, burying hundreds, maybe thousands of monsters under the rubble and the destroyed walls.

And as the last wall fell, suddenly, the carnivorous plants which filled the moat before the ultimate wall of the arena were revealed.

Perseus Jackson had created them a direct avenue to advance towards their objective, and by the way the Maze stopped moving, he certainly had broken important machinery in the process.

The crazy young man cackled.

“Yes, Mathematics are truly an incredibly dangerous weapon in the wrong...pardon me, the right hands.”

The daughter of Athena chose this moment to run in his arms, and kiss him on the lips in a manner that was certainly not innocent at all.

“Err...my Lord?”

“Yes, Centurion?”

“I thought it was the other blonde who was his girlfriend? Did I miss something?” the aforementioned blonde sorceress, of course chose the moment to get close and kiss both on the lips while they were in a deep embrace. “Never mind.”

“Young love,” Marcus Antonius drawled, looking upwards towards Isis, who gave him a serene smile. “Well, I acknowledge my error. The plan clearly worked, and the thirty minutes were indeed well-spent.”

The Captain of Team Adjudicator had clearly waited not just for him, but also for the daughter of Athena to find the coordinates which would allow them to play this unconventional domino-like game of utter destruction.

“The monsters are coming, Caesar. Many were killed, but those who survived couldn’t exactly miss this...this *mathematical offensive*.”

And unfortunately, it looked like the ones who survived outnumbered those who had been slaughtered.

It was a horde of hatred, an army of fangs, claws, hooves, and many other beastly attributes that was coalescing between them and the arena where they had to collect the Belt of the Amazon Queen.

“I certainly hope your second weapon is as potent as the first, Perseus Jackson.”

“It is not nice to doubt, Imperator!” the Demigod cackled again, temporarily abandoning the arms of his girlfriends and the kisses. “For I am blessed and cursed with glorious purpose! I am the Adjudicator of Love! And though the rules of this Challenge prevent me from experiencing the full power of the divine, there is nothing that can prevent me from letting my opponents to feel the full extent of it!”

A sword was pointed at the enemy charging to kill them all, right as a pentacle of magic appeared under his feet.

“I am Perseus Jackson, self-proclaimed Champion of Love!” the Lord of the Suicide Squad laughed. “Watch Goddess of Doves, for once again, an army marches against me! Yet I am a tide of Chaos which will bring down all of creation! Great are my sins, yet the time of Wrath hasn’t come! **LUST**!”

Pink lightning tore apart the reality.

And the horde of monsters-

The horde of monsters stopped.

It stopped for only a second.

Then each monster part of it turned against each other, in the throes of ecstatic pleasure.

The overwhelming assault was no more; now it was just madness incarnate, and the Centaurs and the other beasts were doing things that were absolutely prohibited in all civilised nations.

“My Imperator?” one of his Legionnaires called him.

“Yes?”

“We all respect you very much, and everything...but please, do not send us against Perseus Jackson again.”

Marcus Antonius did not let his eyes wander off the spectacle of unnatural behaviour that was happening several hundreds of metres away. But the words deserved an answer.

“I think, Decurion, you might be far wiser than I ever was.”

**26 January 2007, the Amazon Arena, Commodus Coliseum**

The carnivorous plants, frankly, were pretty much disappointing.

Perseus had imagined at least seven tricks to get past them, but it seemed the hellfire of Lou Ellen was simply enough to burn them to cinders.

“Annabeth. Lou Ellen. You need to guard our backs. Two Legionnaires of the Triumvirate will go with you.”

“I can’t help with the Amazon Queen!”

Perseus smiled.

Annabeth blushed.

The taste of her lips on his had been amazing, of course. And if he had done it in his previous life, there was a distinct possibility he would have been too distracted to wage wars against the rest of Calernia. And no, this wasn’t the curse of Lust speaking. Wait, he couldn’t afford to be distracted right now. Future Perseus would have to deal with it.

“I’ve no doubt you would give me a set of very dangerous options, and the same goes true for Lou Ellen. But I really need two competent Demigoddesses while we try to recover the Belt. During the previous Labour, our ignoble host didn’t send any reinforcements because it was always part of his plan to usher the damnation of Iphigenia. This time, it is very much not part of his plan to let us get so far in a well-rested state. And it appears Commodus has realised that sending non-mechanical enemies is a bad idea against me. There’s a small army of killer-automatons on the way; the dozens we dealt with right now were just the vanguard.”

“You will still need everyone you can to defeat Otrera.” The daughter of Hecate gave him a very determined expression. “I know a trap when I see one, thank you very much.”

“It is a trap, and the First Queen of the Amazons being alone is supposed to make us overconfident.” The sentence was said in a murmur, and with presenting his back to the sophisticated cameras so that they couldn’t read on his lips.

“In that case, wouldn’t it be better if we try to convince the enemy it was successful?” The Second Augustus of the Triumvirate stepped forwards. “I will leave six of my Legionnaires with your rear-guard. They will hold until relieved.”

The former Tyrant thought about it for a moment. This was...acceptable. Lou Ellen and Annabeth were capable of handling that amount of soldiers if betrayal occurred, and if it did, well, there were contingencies ready to decapitate the Triumvirate before the Suicide Squad faced worse problems.

“The suggestion is acceptable, but needs to be slightly amended. Four Legionnaires, and not a single more.” The legacy of the Earthshaker added a few words in German that made the Roman pale extremely quickly. “Let’s move!”

The arena itself had not changed at all since they had left the ‘waiting platform’ over one hour ago.

It was an arena, in the Latin sense of the word: the floor of the Coliseum had been covered in black sand.

The heart of the Seventh Labour had been built to be vaguely oval-shaped.

The circle of torches was perfectly circular, however.

In the centre of it, the Amazon Queen waited for them.

Perseus felt this reminded him of-

Ah.

So that was the trap. It was...rather impressive.

The black-haired Demigod looked upwards. Nothing. The walls? No, they were bare, and an illusion couldn’t last that long without a sorceress to power it.

Under their feet? This was the only solution.

It was rather clever, actually. It was just sand.

Black sand.

There was nothing magical about it; it hid your tracks perfectly, and no one was paying attention to it.

“Are you going to wait for one hour here, Legionnaires and Demigods? I am getting dangerously bored.”

“Queen Otrera,” Perseus bowed like he felt some respect for the dangerous butcher that had once been sworn to Ares, thinking furiously about the final phase of his plan. “It seems you have something we need to recover before leaving this arena. Since I am of course someone extremely polite, I offer you my eternal friendship in exchange of your Belt.”

“No.” The First Queen of the Amazons replied immediately. “Seriously, son of Poseidon did you really think it was going to work?”

“I lost nothing by trying,” Perseus chose to adopt the behaviour of offended dignity. “Besides I’m sure that before the end of these Labours, someone will accept my eternal friendship!”

“You’re completely and utterly crazy,” the former Bridge of Ares retorted, speaking truly with all the sincerity she had in her heart.

“You are a dangerous sociopath.” Perseus tried a charming smile. “We all have our little flaws, no?”

Otrera moved.

Her reputation was not usurped; this was an incredible fast attack.

One of the Triumvirate Legionnaire died before managing to raise his word in time, the cyber-spear piercing his throat and emerging from the back of his neck a second later.

“What do you say, sworn gods of the War God? Aren’t you tired to serve unworthy masters?”

“I said,” Perseus mused, “that my **Rule** extends to this arena. The Age of Heroes won’t die today. I won’t tolerate it. **BEGONE**!”

It was all about convincing the Amazon Queen she couldn’t win it the conventional way.

The shockwave Perseus threw about, all things considered, was far more powerful than the one he had unleashed to trigger the collapse of the Maze’s walls.

Otrera, First Queen of the Amazons, was thrown away like a rag-doll, and went on to smash against the walls.

Her helmet was going to end by loss and profit, but it had saved her life.

She removed the thoroughly broken piece of armour, revealing hair between half-blonde and half-silver in colour. The eyes, however, were pure black.

These were the eyes of something far more dangerous than War.

“It is not too late to accept my eternal friendship, Queen Otrera.”

The Amazon spat blood on the black sand.

“You think I am defeated, son of Poseidon?”

“I think you are not strong enough to resist two more attacks like the one I hit you with.”

The Amazon Queen was strong, that much couldn’t be said against her, but the strength she had been with had not been good for her health, to say the least.

The former Tyrant went on to make a few swirls of his sword to showboat.

“What will it be, your Majesty? My eternal friendship first, or your Royal Belt?”

Perseus didn’t know the woman. But he knew when someone was about to take a terrible decision from which there was no return possible.

For Otrera, First Queen of the Amazons, this moment had clearly arrived.

“I choose your deaths! I choose to deny War! I choose a world where I stand above all predators, be they monsters or no! **SIRE**! I accept the gift you wish to change my body with!”

The black sand was thrown away, revealing the dark glyphs which had been hidden under it.

The same ancient glyphs, in fact, that Perseus and many members had seen in the Forge of Perils when Nocturna was truly born.

The air became colder.

The same horrible power which had been conjured before was coming.

“Did you see it coming, son of Poseidon?” Otrera laughed. “Now, oath-breakers of War, know that the same power can be yours! Turn against Ares, and you will be given more power and loot than in your wildest dreams!”

Naturally, the cyber-swords and the cyber-axes of the mercenaries promptly decided to change their allegiance. The butchers of Ares had turned against him.

“Did you see it coming, son of Poseidon?”

“Of course, I did.” Perseus said truthfully. “And I must say I am not impressed.”

**26 January 2007, the Throne-Lodge of Commodus**

It was *that* power.

Dionysus wouldn’t have believed if he wasn’t here to feel it.

Damn it. Had Prometheus and his accomplices learned nothing in the last millennia?

They had just lost all their wits.

There were a million good reasons why no one had dared using *that power*! The Olympian Council was not that wise, but even in the most desperate situations, no God or Goddess had asked to unlock the protections of *that place* in order to unleash the madness.

There were fates that shouldn’t be thought about, never mind spoken aloud!

Dionysus was the Jailor of *that power*. It was a very grim duty, and he could only do it because he was the God of Madness.

Yet there had always been embers of it that had not been taken away. And it seemed some had been stolen.

“Did you see it coming, son of Poseidon?”

“Of course, I did.” The son of Poseidon replied with a large grin. “And I must say I am not impressed.”

Most of the mercenaries whose allegiance had gone to Ares looked puzzled.

It didn’t last long.

Just the time for Mark Antony and the Legionnaires who had accompanied him to stab them literally in the backs.

The brutes tried to pivot and face their new opponents, but it was too late. In less than five seconds, the eight traitors were slain.

Perseus Jackson had not even bothered swinging his sword once.

“What a disappointment,” the Demigod who was looking more and more like a High Priest of his cult, “I seriously hoped this would be a betrayal worthy of my legend, but this was rather pathetic. Honestly, Queen Otrera. Did you really think that I, a master of over-complicated plots and schemes, was going to fall for something so evident?”

“This is not over!” The First Queen snarled back, confirming that yes, she had hoped it would work. “The power of the Sire is coming! You can feel its presence! Soon, I will be more powerful than ever, and you will be dead!”

“**No, it won’t. Blood of the betrayal, wash the sins of the oath you swore so recklessly**!”

The corpses of the mercenaries which had once been pledged to Ares exploded in cascades of gore.

In a couple of seconds, it became a red layer that was spreading all over the arena.

And to Dionysus’ pleasure, wherever the blood flowed, the dark glyphs which had been intended to usher *that power* dimmed before flickering out entirely.

“WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?” Otrera screamed aghast.

“I have prevented one betrayer from gaining power that should never have been hers by using the blood of other traitors. Come on. Did you think that I chose these would-be traitors by mistake when your reputation as the Bride of Ares preceded you?”

Up above the arena, Dionysus heard Ares’ approving laugher.

“You have no idea what I did sacrifice,” Otrera hissed. “I passed many harsh trials in the first place to stand here-“

“I don’t really care,” Perseus interrupted her. “You tried to kill me; you needed to reap the consequences of your actions. And speaking of the consequences...it seems the first part of my great plan is at last ready.”

For sure, the entire arena within the circle of torches had been covered by the crimson layer.

Perseus Jackson stabbed violently the bloodied floor with his sword, and rose his arms over his head in a parody of divine supplication.

“TEAM ADJUDICATOR IS MINE!” the lone red-eyed of the male Demigod seemed to be engulfed by madness, while the roar resonated in a deathly silent Coliseum. “THOSE WHO DENY IT ARE MY ENEMIES! IN BETRAYAL I THRIVE! IN UNITY, I DIVIDE! NOW REVEAL YOURSELF! ARCHITECT OF FELL PROPHECIES! SIRE OF THE DRAKONS! **REND**!”

Reality was severed.

The world screamed.

The Coliseum shook to its foundations.

Whatever fissures had been created by the walls falling minutes ago, there were nothing to the cataclysm inflicted now; several structures indeed were utterly demolished by the power wielded by Perseus Jackson.

But none of it mattered.

None of it mattered, for at this point, the crimson veil had been torn up.

It wasn’t showing up the sands or blood anymore.

It was a showing a familiar landscape to everyone with the eyes to see.

It was showing the ruins of *Arcadia*, the ancient Domain of Pan.

This would have already been bad, but there was worse.

In the middle of the ruins, surrounded by vegetation which had overwhelming most traces of civilisation, an immense monster had opened its maw in stupefaction.

Its size was just bewildering.

The Primordial Drakon had reached a colossal size, but this was nothing compared to this one.

As Apollo would say if he was here, it was a Kaiju.

A King of monsters above all monsters.

Unfortunately, Dionysus recognised it.

How could one forget the nemesis of his half-brother?

“**Python**.”

“I return you the question of your servant, Sire...” the words of Perseus Jackson couldn’t be missed by the entire Coliseum, and many more beings watching the spectacle. “Did you see it coming?”

The thunderous hiss, the God of Wine supposed, was an answer that made him very glad he had never learned to speak the languages of snakes...