Teaser 1 Games of Folly

**Chapter 28**

**Games of Folly**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*But by then it was really too late.*

*Both the Triumvirate and the Suicide Squad had once again plunged willingly into a trap.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Good morning, my treacherous lieutenant!”

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

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

“You wanted to see me?”

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

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

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

Perseus Jackson grinned.

“Read.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Seriously?”

The hilarity disappeared like it had been switched off.

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

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

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

“Monsters?”

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

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

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

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

“Politics,” he muttered.

“Continue.” Perseus said with a smug expression.

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

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

“Something above?” Ethan commented drily.

Perseus shrugged.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ethan did, and almost regretted it.

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

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

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

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

The Docks were still as busy as ever this afternoon.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Jade! Do you know where is-“

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Indeed.”

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

“Is it a good idea?” she growled.

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

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

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

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

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

“Really?”

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

“And do you think it will work?”

“I give it odds around thirty percent.”

Annabeth cleared her throat.

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

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

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

“Why, we will improvise, of course!”

Damn this roguish grin. And damn her hormones.

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

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

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

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

“I know what I said, your Owlishness.”

The daughter of Annabeth groaned loudly in exasperation.

Of course he did.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What? Did I mention something unpleasant?”

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

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

“So there is an island there, as the maps Jackson bought promised.”

“You don’t seem pleased.”

“The maps didn’t mention a volcano.”

“Ah.”

Luke winced. Yes, that was a problem.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The human screams.

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

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

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

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

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

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

There was a cough.

Everyone turned his head.

Perseus Jackson waved his orange tricorn at them.

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

“Explain, now.”

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

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

The majority of the Demigods and the Demigoddesses stared.

“But there’s only...oh, no.”

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

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

The expressions of incomprehension turned one by one to horror.

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

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

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

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

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

“You’re right, but we can’t.”

“WHAT?”

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

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

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

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

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

“These are the banners of Commodus.”

Perseus clapped his hands theatrically.

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

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

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

“This is...we have to do something!”

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

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

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

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

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

At first, it didn’t look so bad.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It wasn’t.

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

There was a Roman City waiting for them.

No.

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

It was colossal.

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

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

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

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

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

“Fake,” Elvis Knight commented next to him.

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

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

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

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

WELCOME TO COLONY ANNA LUCIA COMMODIANA!

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

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

WELCOME TO THE LABOURS OF NEO HERCULES!

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dakota grimaced.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Ave Aurelius!”

The world and the Gods breathed out in relief.

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

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

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

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

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

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

They faced each other.

The contrast was rather striking.

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

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

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

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

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

Commodus smiled. It was really much a forced expression.

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

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

Emphasis on the ‘had’.

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

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

The rebuke was clear, and absolutely not subtle.

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

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

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

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

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

Perseus chuckled.

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

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

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

Commodus flinched.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Lord of the Suicide Squad grinned.

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

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

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

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

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

It was a good omen.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Commodus wanted a series of bloodthirsty gladiator games.

Who was Perseus to deny him?

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

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

This was awfully predictable from Commodus.

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

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

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

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

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

Perseus broke the Nemean Lion Seal and began to read.

It was quick.

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

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

*21st January: Rest*

*22nd January: Fourth Labour, Fifth Labour*

*23rd January: Sixth Labour, Seventh Labour*

*24th January and 25th January: Rest*

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

Seven days, and twelve Labours.

It felt...*fair*.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Still, Perseus was wincing deep inside.

Seven Days, Twelve Labours. What was he missing?