**Chapter 29**

**The Empire Strikes Back**

*At the risk of surprising a few, no, the majority of the Roman Emperors were not fond of the Olympic Games, barring a few exceptions.*

*Of course, the Emperors being all different, the antagonism and the reasons behind this hostility varied enormously.*

*Force is to admit, though, that plenty found it unbearable to have to wait for four years between each travel to the sacred grounds of Olympia.*

*You have to understand the poor successors of Augustus Caesar, really. When the man in question is wondering each day if he has paid enough his Praetorians to make sure they don’t massacre him while he’s asleep, waiting four years is an eternity.*

*Then there are those who didn’t like the Olympic Games because they lacked the comfort they were accustomed to. They did have kind of a point, needless to be said. When you are serviced by a hundred slaves and servants at any moment of the day, have your private lodge in the Circus Maximus and the Colosseo, and can rest in your delightful palace when you’re tired, the prospect of sleeping under a tent in Greece is underwhelming.*

*Because yes, if you weren’t a participant in the Olympic Games, you weren’t granted the permission to use the permanent infrastructure, be they lodging quarters or training facilities.*

*Some Emperors, rather cleverly, tried to get around this problem by being selected for the different races and the other sports contest.*

*Naturally, this was then the next hurdle was revealed: they are Judges overseeing the Olympic Games, and they didn’t like cheaters.*

*Moreover, no matter the period, the largest delegations of the Olympic Games came from the nearby Greek Cities, whether they were or not under Roman domination at the time. The Romans often found themselves outnumbered on the ground.*

*And yes, threats of mustering a Legion or two were uttered more than a hundred times, but nothing came of it, no matter how loud the post-game arguments between Greeks and Romans rose over the hills.*

*Everyone had too much to lose; the Greeks wanted their Roman overlords to not provide a credible alternative to the Games organised in the honour of Zeus, and the Roman aristocrats felt it was unconscionable for anything to threaten their supply of statues and other cultural items that were critical to make sure their villas were the most beautiful of the Mediterranean.*

*Plus there were the Gods into the equation. Whether in their Roman or Greek aspects, the immortals made it very clear that those who believed in them would respect the Olympic truce, or suffer the consequences of their transgressions.*

*Obviously, this meant both sides had to make unpalatable concessions. The Judges closed their eyes when Emperor Nero won the four chariot races of the Games that he had specifically requested to take place, and the Romans merely grumbled when the Greeks confiscated nine out of the ten laurel crowns presented to the races’ winners in the marble stadiums.*

*Did this mean cheating remained far limited outside of these chosen examples?*

*Hardly.*

*The Judges were very good at their jobs, and able to notice the mortal cheaters. But the Olympians remained completely outside their area of expertise. It went without saying that the Greek Pantheon abused the hell out of it. Many proud male Champions who had egos as big as Apollo were punished by coughs and small diseases on the eve of a competition. The God of the Sun didn’t hesitate to give his blessings to other racers so that they ran thrice faster than they should be able to on their day of glory. Hercules and his father often gave some strength bonuses during the boxing and wrestling events, just to laugh at the stunned expressions of the children of Ares.*

*One entire delegation from Athens was disqualified because Aphrodite had made sure the ‘loving husbands’ all suddenly decided to have amorous and pleasant nights with their Corinthian mistresses, with the result they all missed the first day of the Olympics. In revenge, Athena made sure several Spartan Demigods were unable to sleep as flights of owls attacked ferociously their tents.*

*Events like this amused greatly the Roman Emperors, and generally made sure the Games continued, as long the men in purple toga ruled from the Pillars of Hercules to Egypt. Well, that, and the legendary parties organised by the children of Bacchus and Dionysus every time the Olympic Games ended.*

*It was a poor secret after all that, yes, the Olympic Games lasted ‘only’ three days, but the fourth had the blessings of Zeus to be the day his son the God of Wine ensured the enmities died down and the parties gave Emperors and plebeians something to remember for the rest of their lives.*

*It must be remarked that yes, most of the time the Olympians participated assiduously in the festivities, and no, unlike the modern Games, there were no preservatives or methods of birth control methods handed on to the athletes and their female supporters.*

*No wonder that the records never mention how many Demigods and Demigoddesses were ever sired during the Games; and that was when the Games were restricted to Olympia alone every four years; before that, there were the Nemean, Isthmian, and Pythian Games.*

*Yes, I saw there were questions.*

*What has it to do with Commodus and our adventures? Oh, nothing at all.*

*I just wanted to speak of the Olympics and the Roman Emperors, I was sure it would make for a nice monologue. And I may have dropped a few inaccurate things here and there.*

*But have no fear, oh adoring public. The* real *Games are about to begin.*

Extract of the *Mad Musings of a Crazy Demigod*, collected by Annabeth Chase, daughter of Athena

**20 January 2007, Waiting Room of Team Adjudicator, Commodus Coliseum**

“These Games are just murder.” Bianca remarked, trying to maintain a facade of calm as the insane Demigod was evacuated towards the infirmary put at the disposal of Team Adjudicator.

“And you know what you’re talking about,” Ethan Nakamura snorted next to her.

“Yes, though I almost wish I didn’t,” seriously, as former Dread Empress, she had organised certain events where the goal was to exterminate everyone, and many Heroes had died in ‘contests’ that were ridiculously fair compared to this orgy of violence and madness. “Lou. You can go stabilise him, I know you want to.”

The daughter of Hecate gave her a grateful smile before storming out.

“Was it a good idea?” the son of Nemesis asked with his usual grim expression. “We will miss her for the Third Labour. A sorceress of her power-“

“I am a sorceress too, Ethan.” Bianca shook her head. “If the situation demands it, I will personally intervene, just as Jackson did to save the Second Labour from being a bigger disaster than it already was.”

“Michael Yew being transformed into a hare was the only permanent loss, assuming the Golden Fleece and the skills at the Suicide Squad’s disposal can’t change him back.” Luke Castellan intervened.

“Michael was just the rock star of the group, having our crazy leader unable to go outside and fight is way more problematic. If Mark Antony decides to take the field again-“

“He won’t.” Bianca interrupted Ethan’s dark statement. “The Second member of the Triumvirate just had the dubious honour of being a witness when Jackson decided to spread his madness against the Thracian Mares. I doubt he wants to risk being close to it so soon. In addition to this little problem, Isis’ husband may not be suited for the challenge of the Third Labour.”

“Yeah, speaking of that, it looks like the teams of Commodus are creating...a garden?”

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

It was, of course, above the dignity of a God such as him to scratch his head and show an incredulous expression.

That said, the urge was definitely there.

The men and women in the service of Commodus were busy creating a garden, where minutes before there had been only been sand and the ruins of the Thracian Administratum.

And yes, it was a true garden.

There were flowers and bushes, all growing thanks to some sort of magical fertilisers.

No, the flowers weren’t carnivorous or dangerous. The bushes provided some berries that could be dangerous for your intestines if you ate too many of them in a few hours, but that was all.

Paved alleys came into beings, and more flowers were added.

Fruit trees were moved and placed at irregular but carefully chosen intervals.

There were more flowers coming, enough that about one-third of the arena was now nothing but a large pasture of flower and grass, one with an uneven hill. More work was done by human hands until a small trench was dug, and once it was done, some water poured in via an ingenious underground pumping system, until the arena was thus granted a miniature river.

As far as beautiful landscapes came, this one could get a good grade.

The left part of the arena was best described as ‘organised garden’, and the other as ‘gentle pasture’.

The flowers gave off a powerful perfume, and they had reached impressive sizes in little time, being close to two metres tall when they finally stopped their ascent.

It was all very nice, to be sure.

And Dionysus hadn’t the faintest idea what the purpose of all that scenery was.

The mystery even increased as the workers moved two little altars next to the tunnels from where the two teams entered the arena. These were crude things, made of black metal, and once they were in position, a small cage of Orichalcum was placed atop them.

Last but not least, at the centre of the arena, there was the suspended scaffolding of colossal size that was assembled in record time. And yes, the scaffolding had zero contact with the ground, it was holding in the air by massive metallic cables. The lower level of the scaffolding was about three metres above the ground; even for Demigods, it was going to be quite a jump to grab the metallic bars and take position on it.

“**One has to admit, it is very different from the first two Labours**.”

In scenery, one could hardly see any common point with the Emu War or the Thracian Administratum.

Since each of these ‘New Labours’ was parodying the old ones, was it possible these flowers and bushes were intending to be a lesser copy of the Garden of Hesperides?

There was much confusion, including in the stands, where the bloodthirsty crowd of centaurs and other monsters wasn’t exactly seeing the point of all these preparations.

“DEAR PUBLIC!” Commodus rose again. “THANK YOU FOR YOUR PATIENCE, THE THIRD LABOUR IS ABOUT TO BEGIN!”

Thunderous cheers erupted from the massive crowd filling the stands of the sole and only Coliseum to have been built in the Sea of Monsters.

“I know some gladiators,” the narcissist and megalomaniac Emperor, “were incredibly angry when they saw they had to participate in this bureaucratic chore. That’s why I think it is necessary to make things simpler for these poor souls.”

The gates rumbled and opened.

Many centaurs whinnied in anticipation.

“The Third Labour is a HUNT!” Commodus declared cheerfully. “Two teams of twelve gladiators will come into the arena, and will have to track, corner, and grab alive a rare monster that has never been hunted before! Whichever team grabs the monster first and places it in the cage that has been prepared for it, wins the Labour!”

There were many shouts of incredulity.

Dionysus was close to add his voice to theirs.

Because the cages mentioned were ridiculously tiny. A middle-sized dog wouldn’t fit inside them; it was impossible to deny it.

But perhaps that was half of the ‘challenge’? It was impossible to fit a huge monster alive, so the two teams would first slaughter each other before finding a solution?

“But first, let me present you the target of this unprecedented HUNT!” Commodus finished with a roar. “It has been bred using some particularly rare herbs and enchantments! It has survived many dangerous predators of this Zone Mortalis! It has won several records in the Guinness Book of Monsters! GLORY TO THE LEGEND OF THE THIRD LABOUR!”

And out of the gates where an army of monsters had come, a small rabbit made its entrance into the arena.

It had a beautiful silver fur.

But aside from that, there was no indication it was different from any other rabbit.

It wasn’t particularly large or small.

And when coming close to some fruits that were lying on the ground, it began to eat them.

“Err...”Antaeus, Second Referee and son of Poseidon, managed to stop its gaping. “That’s not a monster. That’s a rabbit.”

“**Precisely**,” Dionysus blinked. What the hell was Commodus playing at?

**20 January 2007, Waiting Room of Team Adjudicator, Commodus Coliseum**

“That’s a rabbit.”

Bianca closed her eyes and counted to ten. This was necessary, otherwise she was going to lose her temper, and crucify someone.

“Yes, I’m aware of what this horrible furry creature is, thank you very much, Ethan Nakamura.”

The daughter of Hades could see the obvious with her own eyes.

“Where is the trap?” Annabeth Chase had just returned, having abandoned her gladiator attire for a T-Shirt and shorts that could be bought in the shops of New Byzantium. “Assuming there is only one, of course.”

“It could come from plenty of directions.” The former Dread Empress replied. “I think that the tunnel where the monster came out staying open is incredibly suspicious.”

“Yes,” the son of Nemesis grunted. “When the Second Labour was fought, the gates stayed closed. But when the Emus arrived by waves, it stayed open. This rabbit can’t be the sum of the opposition both teams will have to face. There is something worse coming. Commodus wants a bloodbath, and if he leaves us alone, he can’t be sure this will end in slaughter.”

A good part of Bianca thought Ethan was really naive. Yes, so far both Team Adjudicator and Team Triumvirate had not torn each other apart, but it was because of the strength of the opposition.

If there wasn’t an enemy they could unite against, the participants would shift their focus and assault each other.

“Nonetheless, it should be easy, no?” Leo, son of Hephaestus, had clearly not been chosen by Jackson because he was smart outside of his mechanical atelier. Though Bianca supposed having a pyromaniac in his team was half of the reason Jackson had chosen the Forge-skilled Demigod. “I mean, it is just a rabbit!”

“One that has certainly been ‘doped’ somehow with the essence of the Ceryneian Hind,” Annabeth answered, her grey eyes analysing the arena, watching everything, and calculating all possible scenarios. “You may very well be right about monster reinforcements, Ethan. But the rabbit has to hold its own while both hunting teams are after it. Super-speed is one of the ways it could escape a prolonged hunt.”

“Are you sure?”

“The silver fur is not exactly normal, and the first two Labours have established a pattern. The Emus were crossbred with Stymphalian Mares. We got Thracian Mares speaking like humans. Why not a Ceryneian Rabbit?”

“WHAT?”

This wasn’t the end of the world, but the scream pushed by several of the Huntresses was incredibly loud, and it earned them plenty of evil glares from everyone in the Waiting Room.

“There was no need to kill all our ears,” Dakota McDonald mumbled, and many boys and girls approved his words.

“This is an insult to Lady Artemis and everything she stands for!”

“Oh, come on!” Clarisse La Rue rolled her eyes. “The Stymphalian Emus were an insult to my father too, and I didn’t jump on a chariot before going on a berserker rampage. Yeah, this is not good. So what? The megalomaniac bastard must have somehow obtained either some blood or fur from the Ceryneian Hind, and then used it to breed this rabbit.”

Yeah, but it hadn’t been-

Oh, no.

Bianca’s eyes widened imperceptibly. A hunt. The symbol of the Goddess of Hunt, but bred into a rabbit body.

This was not a Labour per se. This was a provocation, and Commodus had decided to make it when Jackson was out of the game.

“Stop,” the Lightning Thief commanded in a threatening hiss. “You are not to participate in this Third Labour! It is a trap for you and-“

“You don’t give me orders, Hell Bitch!” Panther Kowalski snarled, and the senior Huntress ran out of the Waiting Room, followed by eleven Huntresses.

What in the name of the Styx-

No, they had already prepared this while the Suicide Squad was still reacting to the shocking revelation.

Bianca had an incantation on her lips, but had to stop half-way, remembering offensive magic was forbidden in the tunnels under the Coliseum.

“ASTERIUS! STOP THEM!”

The Minotaur had already begun to move, and her surged forwards.

But as fast as a Minotaur was, the Huntresses could be just as swift...and they had the surprise on their side.

A metallic harrow slammed down as the twelfth Huntress passed the official boundary between resting rooms and arena, and Asterius had no choice but to abandon the pursuit, nostrils burning in fury.

Bianca cursed under her breath.

“This is really, really bad.” Ethan commented darkly.

“Yes,” the former Dread Empress scowled. “Our chances to win this Third Labour weren’t good before, but now they are near-inexistent.”

**20 January 2007, the Arena-Garden, Commodus Coliseum, ‘Narcissist Island’**

By the time they entered the arena, Ellen had already had doubts about how clever they had been to disobey the Lightning Thief.

Massive harrows had blocked down the tunnel behind them, making sure they would be unable to call on any reinforcements.

Suddenly, all the warnings of Jackson were playing back in her head, and from the expression of Jenna, the Huntress could tell her sister-in-all-but-blood remembered them too.

That Panther and all the others were still showing confident smirks, if anything, didn’t exactly inspire her a strong amount of confidence.

“Team Triumvirate has committed eight women in addition with four *males*,” Carina, the Huntress that was effectively Panther’s second-in-command, showed a bloodthirsty grin. “Permission to make eunuchs of the latter?”

“Later,” the silver-haired Huntress shook her head. “I want to capture that damn rabbit first. As I’m sure you are aware, there were *males* in the Waiting Room we just left. Males and females that are barely one step above the status of uncontrollable beasts. We must win this challenge, and prove that they were wrong in all aspects!”

“Indeed, Lieutenant,” Guinevere spoke with so much assurance you couldn’t say where her confidence ended and her arrogance began. Her walk was so smooth one might even forget she wore the same ridiculous and impractical costume as they did. “The rabbit is there, eating these red berries. Nets?”

“This is for the better, yes. Sisters! I want to capture this rabbit and fulfil the conditions of victory immediately! This rabbit must be captured alive, and no kind of injury!”

No Huntress did ask why such precipitation was necessary.

When they had been in the Waiting Room, save the bastards worshipping the God of War, everyone had been more or less ignoring them.

But here, under the gaze of thousands, it was impossible to deny that they were wearing really near-transparent costumes that were parodies of the noble Ceryneian Hind. It would have already been bad before a human public, but the Coliseum was filled with Centaurs. Lecherous and pervert proposals were echoing by the tens of thousands, and things that were sexual harassment with no attenuating circumstances was the norm.

And there was nothing they could do to stop it.

Ellen stared at Jenna, who silently nodded back. Yeah, she too had noticed how angry the ten other Huntresses were. In hindsight, spending so much time with Jackson and his band of miscreants had prepared them a bit for this. The other daughters of the Hunt had not ‘benefitted’ from such ‘training’, however.

“THE THIRD LABOUR...BEGINS!”

Instantly Carina took the lead.

Ellen acknowledged that the older Huntress was assuredly bloodthirsty, but she was also incredibly fast.

Had she been born a daughter of Hermes or Nike?

No, she had to focus.

Carina left them in the dust, much as the other sisters sworn to Lady Artemis were humiliating the members of Team Triumvirate in this hunting race.

The Legionnaires of Mark Antony, who had made the big mistake of coming in the arena with heavy equipment, were dragging far behind and sweating profusely.

No that it mattered, because Carina was already close to victory.

The rabbit was still eating the big red berries, no sign it had been even paying attention to the contest.

Carina jumped and launched the enchanted net.

It was a perfect jump.

It was a perfect throw.

It was-

BOOM!

There was an explosion.

There was a shockwave.

Many Huntresses, including Ellen Jenna, were thrown away like they were toys in the path of a tornado.

“What...what just hit us?”

The answer did not come from one of her sisters, though.

It came from the Throne-Lodge far above the public and the Referees watching the spectacle.

“**Oh, dear**,” the God of Wine exclaimed with irony dripping from every word, “**it looks like this poor, innocent rabbit just went super-sonic**!”

“That...that’s just...”

Ellen stood, before helping Jenna stays the same.

Since she was one of the first to recover, it also meant she was given the non-existent honour to see Carina gape at the net that should have held a rabbit.

A net that had a massive hole at the centre of it now.

It shouldn’t be possible.

The net had been blessed by the Goddess of Nets, Britomartis, who had been a Huntress herself millennia ago. It had been created with some of the most resistant materials to capture animals that possessed their own magics!

It couldn’t be destroyed that easily!

All eyes turned towards the silver-furred rabbit.

The little monster was no longer looking innocent at all.

No, the silver rabbit had taken a bipedal position, and now make a provocative move with its forward paws, all the while twisting its long ears as if to insult them further.

Then it turned around, raised its fluffy tail, and delivered the final ‘insult’.

“That’s what happens when males are in charge of breeding their monsters.” Panther Kowalski seethed, her eyes promising violent murder for everyone, including but not limited to Commodus. “Sisters! I rescind some of my previous orders. This rabbit must be captured alive, but I don’t think we need to be particularly concerned about any eventual injuries! HUNT IT DOWN!”

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

The Third Labour had begun badly for all gladiators.

Dionysus was willing to concede it was not their fault.

It had been rather evident that the Third Labour was a contest of Speed from the start.

Unfortunately for them, the members of Team Triumvirate and Team Adjudicator weren’t *deities*. They couldn’t reach supersonic speeds. Alas for them, the ‘Ceryneian Rabbit’ could do it. Easily. When and where it wanted. And with a mastery of sprint that was downright impressive.

The outcome was humiliating and simple to describe: the silver rabbit was literally playing around, evading all capture attempts with disturbing ease, destroying nets and other tools when it was fanciful, and then delivering provocation after provocation.

“**This is rather bad**,” the God of Parties acknowledged.

“Especially as the Huntresses have no strategy,” Antaeus approved with a grimace. The red-skinned giant who had been once Charybdis’ favourite General was not in a happy mood. “If they were more observant, they would see that the rabbit is eating voraciously certain berries and flowers after four or five speed bursts.”

Dionysus nodded. He had seen the same after thirty or forty seconds. The rabbit couldn’t sustain these bursts of super-speed for long; they consumed way too much of its strength. And it had to eat a lot to repeat the exploit. This was the kind of thing a canny participant would be able to exploit.

“**Unfortunately, our Referee speeches can be heard by the public, but not by the gladiators anymore**.”

This ‘rule’ had been put into effect just after the rabbit unveiled its true abilities for the first time. Dionysus was sure some loophole would be found in time, for now, they were effectively censored if they said something that could displease Commodus.

“I could try something,” Antaeus grunted, echoing unwillingly the thoughts in Dionysus’ essence. “But I’m not sure the Huntresses would listen to my advice. And if this fails, this would have been a lot of effort for nothing.”

“Yes, I believe this was why your brother made clear he had no intention to let the Huntresses fight alone in this arena.”

Perseus Jackson’s papers revealing his plans for them had called it Plan H, in fact. H for ‘Horror’.

“Well, evidently, something went wrong.” Antaeus commented with clear disappointment. “It could have been an easy victory if they included a sorceress in their ranks. I’ve seen several monsters like this rabbit before. They’re overpowered in some physical aspect, but that means they’re weak to everything magical. The Ceryneian Rabbit has Speed but nothing else. You don’t need someone as powerful as Circe! A daughter of Hecate would make this rabbit submit in a hurry!”

Dionysus supported completely this theory. Unfortunately, it would remain a theory, for none of the Huntresses present in the arena were witches, and the same could be said about Team Triumvirate. It was rather ironic given that Marcus Antonius had one of the Three Immortal Sorceresses in his service right now. Medea in the arena could have won the Labour by herself. But she was in the Waiting Room, and thus as useful as if she was on another continent.

BOOM!

The silver rabbit made another supersonic dash, throwing more Huntresses away, crippling their hunting arsenal, and adding another chapter to the humiliation of the two teams.

“I think this spectacle is becoming a bit boring,” Commodus intervened, the male slave feeding him grapes stopping the activity and taking several steps back. “The two Teams have had thirty minutes to capture the rabbit. I’m generous, but there are limits. I believe it is time to give some spice to this Third Labour!”

**20 January 2006, the Arena-Garden, Commodus Coliseum, ‘Narcissist Island’**

It was almost too late when they did notice something was wrong.

The massive mistake they had made was to not take into account the flowers.

The beautiful, inoffensive, smelly flowers.

There were roses and hyacinths, tulips and poppies.

They represented no danger for any Huntress as this criminal of rabbit tore their capture plans apart with the greatest ease.

They should have been of no importance. After, if the evil males wanted to send them one hundred more killer Emus, it wasn’t like they were going to be caught unaware by them, no?

All of it had sounded fine and sound. Ellen wasn’t sure Panther Kowalski had thought of it in the first place, but there was no denying that with the blessings of Lady Artemis, they were far more capable than any Quester, male or female, to notice if something tried to ambush them.

And it was almost their undoing.

The wind turned for a few seconds, and Ellen smelled the enemy.

The monsters were absolutely reeking of blood, and possibly worse.

“JENNA! ENEMY!”

“What are you saying? There is nothing!”

“I smell them! I swear it to you, I smell them! I don’t know where they are, but-“

A Legionnaire of Team Triumvirate was some ten metres away from her, raising a javelin to have another go at the rabbit.

The male didn’t even have the time to realise what was going on as half of his body disappeared into the giant fanged maw that had come out of nowhere.

Ellen screamed.

She wasn’t the only one.

“MONSTERS!”

They were Huntresses.

In three seconds, all the girls sworn to Lady Artemis had shot at least one silver arrow at the monster.

It did absolutely nothing.

The arrows hit dead on target...and the black-tainted fleece intercepted the projectiles like they were nothing but child’s darts.

In the meantime, the sheep finished devouring the Legionnaire of the Triumvirate.

The sheep?

Yes, it was a sheep. A sheep the size of a car, and a big one.

A sheep that had fangs that could easily fit in the maw of a Giant White Shark.

A sheep that now that it had devoured one of them, stared at them with an expression that was way too carnivorous to belong to a prey species.

Suddenly, Ellen understood why the suspended catwalks had been installed at the centre of the arena, despite the rabbit showing no willingness to use them!

“FLEE! WE MUST GET ON THE SUSPENDED PLATFORMS!”

“What are you saying, we can deal with-“

One by one, the sheep turned off their invisibility ability and charged.

They were twelve of them, and each one was as big as the first.

“FLEE, SISTERS!”

**20 January 2007, Waiting Room of Team Adjudicator, depths of the Commodus Coliseum**

“Oh, Gods!”

Luke snorted.

“The Gods aren’t responsible for this disaster, I think we can blame Commodus for this one.”

“Yeah,” Rico immediately approved. “But how the hell did they get carnivorous sheep the size of pick-ups?”

“If I may?” a Telekhine raised his pincer-like fin.

“By all means...” the son of Hermes answered.

“There are many Cyclops clans of the Sea of Monsters who have disgusting ideas where their livestock is concerned. Too often, they ‘forget’ the cattle is not carnivorous, and they give them meat. Too often, that results in the animals dying. But sometimes...well, they begin to adapt to their new regime.” The Telekhine cleared his throat, an expression of embarrassment on his face. “Clearly some sheep-owner Cyclops sold his flock to this insane Emperor. I have no idea how they gave them invisibility powers, though.”

“Just what we didn’t need...” Annabeth murmured darkly.

“You have a cap of invisibility,” Dakota McDonald pointed out unhelpfully.

“It can’t work more than a few minutes, and the enchantments can’t be renewed past a few years,” the daughter of Athena grouchily replied. “Giving this power to a piece of object can be achieved by a single blessing, and the area of effect is extremely limited. The monstrous sheep on the other hand gained this hereditary ability somewhat, and are able to use it as long as they’re willing to be discreet.”

“I think it is their fleece,” Clarisse said, arms crossed and glaring at the screens. “It is way too heavy for the tropical climate of the Sea of Monsters.”

“The perfect armour and an offensive weapon in one package,” Richard Grant gritted his teeth as the Huntresses and the other women took refuge on the scaffolding at the centre of the arena. “Most of the body of these monsters is covered by this absurd wool, and it is able to blunt the impact of arrows and other weapons.”

This was bad. No, it was worse than that.

“Two Legionnaires of Team Triumvirate died.”

“Yes.” The sheep had screwed up their approach; clearly for all their cunning, they hadn’t predicted the women to be able to take refuge at heights that the monsters couldn’t reach.

This had been the only thing that prevented a one-sided massacre, really. Something danced at the outer edge of his thoughts, almost out of reach, but the son of Hermes didn’t manage to put a name on it.

“Let’s see the good side of things,” one of the penguins began just as the sheep acknowledged their temporary failure and once again disappeared in the pasture, giving a fake impression of peacefulness to the arena under the bloodthirsty screams of the crowd. “All members of our team are alive, and they are, as we say at New Constantinople, going to ‘bunker up’ on the suspended platforms.”

“Their arrows are useless as long-range options,” Leo pointed out.

“Oh forget the idea of killing the sheep,” the Emperor penguin dismissed the idea after clacking his beak several times. “They don’t have the weapons for it. I mean, technically they have these long knives of silver the evil lesbian cult sometimes carry with them, but this means going at close-quarters against the carnivorous sheep. I don’t think the Huntresses are so eager to die.”

“Ah,” Annabeth coughed. “I believe I understand. You think the Huntresses must just wait the end of the challenge.”

“Yes, that’s exactly right! I mean, it’s not like they had much luck capturing the rabbit before.”

The animal in question had resumed eating its favourite regimen of berries and flowers, by the way.

It seemed the ‘Ceryneian Rabbit’ – though many unpleasant nicknames had already been found to describe it – had no problem sharing the arena with invisible monsters at all.

“It sucks, of course,” Julian Skipper finished with a tone that was not at all sorry. “We aren’t going to be able to get a third victory in three ‘Labours’. But the other Team won none, lost more gladiators than we did, and looking at them right now, it doesn’t look like they are going to be able to deliver a more impressive performance than us!”

“True,” Hylla agree with the ‘amphibious-specialist’ penguin. “It’s been forty-five minutes since this challenge began. That means the Huntresses have just to wait for two hours and fifteen minutes for the ‘Labour’ to end, and for the carnivorous sheep to be removed from the arena.”

“Yes!” Asterius huffed, nostrils smoking in fury. The Minotaur had not been happy the Huntresses went against the orders, especially as it had denied him more ‘fun’. It went without saying there had been more than a few insults from him as the servants of Artemis were humiliated one after another by the supersonic rabbit. “Then the short one will give me the permission to teach them a few things!”

First Bianca di Angelo, then Asterius. The Huntresses were not going to have a pleasant evening, to be sure.

“Still, Skipper is right.” Miranda called out. “As long as the Huntresses don’t do something really stupid, they can survive this. It’s not good to lose one Labour, but we can win others.”

This sounded all too reasonable, to Luke’s ears. Yet he was feeling they were all missing something big...

**20 January 2007, the Garden-Arena, Commodus Coliseum, ‘Narcissist Island’**

Ellen had preferred the minutes when the supersonic rabbit was humiliating them.

Being completely ridiculous in front of a bloodthirsty crowd sucked. Enduring this while countless monsters leered at your half-naked body was, if anything, *worse*.

But this had only been a humiliation. There had been no existential threat, though many of her sisters had had their ears bleeding, courtesy of this accursed rabbit.

“What would Jackson do in such a situation?” Ellen thought aloud.

“Don’t speak of this odious male!” Panther Kowalski spat venomously a second after.

Ellen and Jenna decided of a common accord to ignore her.

“I thought it was evident.” Her sister of the Hunt replied. “First, he would have sworn his eternal friendship to the sheep. Then he would have tried to ride them like in a stupid rodeo.”

“That sounds like this insane Demigod, all right.” Ellen approved. “But I think we can agree that doing something like that is a bit too risky?”

“Well,” Jenna drawled, “unlike him and the sorceresses, we didn’t bathe in Drakonic blood or in the Styx.”

And without that, going down the suspended catwalks was just suicide. Yeah, Huntresses were fast, skilled, and incredibly agile. It didn’t mean a lot when the monsters below had enough weight to crush bones if they happened to collide with you.

“The big problem is that we need to make a perfect fight against a sheep to have a chance of victory. The monsters only need one blow to knock us out.”

“Yeah,” Jenna grimaced. “In hindsight, can we say that sending a group that has the same set of skills was a horrible idea?”

“Panther took the best decision at the time!” Carina defended her.

Funnily enough, no other sister of the Hunt felt the urge to support Panther Kowalski. Maybe because they had all realised this was a stupidity?

“No, she didn’t.” There was a time to be polite, and this wasn’t it. “Even if we were all willing to deny males entry in our group, Miranda Gardiner, Drew Tanaka, and Jade all had powers that could have been really useful against these abominations.”

“You would have tolerated a whore and a traitor?”

“Yes,” she replied as bluntly as the silver-haired Huntress. “There are times where success and survival come before everything else. It would have been an humiliation, but at least we could-“

“AHEM!” The magnified voice of Commodus drowned the crowd baying and everything else. “WE ARE ALL VERY INTERESTED BY THIS LITTLE DEBATE OF TEAM ADJUDICATOR, BUT THERE IS A LABOUR GOING ON!”

“Return to the Underworld where you belong!” Panther predictably shouted back.

“I AM AFRAID I WILL HAVE TO DECLINE.” The tyrannical Roman replied with a large smirk. “NOW THAT I HAVE YOUR ATTENTION, I WANT TO INSIST THAT THIS LABOUR IS NEITHER A FORUM NOR A RESTING PLACE. THE SCAFFOLDING WAS NOT BUILT FOR YOU TO SPEND THREE HOURS PLAYING SOME SORT OF HIGH-ALTITUDE GAME. BEGINNING RIGHT NOW, FOR EVERY FIVE MINUTES WHERE YOU TAKE NO ACTION, THE HIGH JUDGE, BY WHICH I MEAN OF COURSE ME, THE GLORIOUS NEO HERCULES, IS GOING TO LOWER THE HEIGHT OF THIS INGENIOUS METALLIC STRUCTURE!”

No. He had to be bluffing. It was a bluff, right?

But there was the sound of enormous mechanisms suddenly being activated, and after more clanking sounds, the structure began to move.

It was not difficult to see that the distance separating them from the ground was decreasing, not increasing.

“Oh, by all the animals of the Austral Forests!”

Inevitably, the change of fortune had not escaped the sheep. The monsters couldn’t jump –probably because of the sheer mass of the fleece burdening them – but they could see, and they had noticed their prey was not so out of reach after all.

They remained invisible, yes, but you could see the trails created in the pasture and the flowers being trampled by creatures which shouldn’t exist.

They were coming to eat them, and Ellen felt true fear, because this time, there was really no one to save them.

“Target the eyes?”

“Target the eyes,” the young Huntress nodded, not liking how small of a target they were.

“We have to focus on one monster!” Carina proclaimed.

“This is the stupidest idea I’ve ever heard!” Jenna retorted. “Do you think the eleven other monsters are going to stay idle while you deal with the twelfth?”

“What other situation there is, if you are so smart?”

“I don’t know, but at least-“

The first sheep charged. The good news was that the first level of the catwalk was still too high. The very bad news was that though the monster’s jump was ridiculously low, the view of its enormous maw was honestly *terrifying*.

“We are so going to die...” this one came from one of the women of Team Triumvirate, but plenty of Huntresses were shivering. They were sworn to Artemis, but that didn’t mean they had a perfect control over their emotions. The divine blessings they received in exchange of their sacred oath weren’t that powerful.

“I don’t want to die! Vote of the Public!”

Ellen almost snarled something approaching ‘you’re kidding me’, but the other women seemed quite serious...and they, unlike Team Adjudicator, had not been warned to not use it.

“Vote of the Public!” In mere seconds, one by one, the virgins of Team Triumvirate, their supposed enemies, all spoke the same words.

“THE VOTE OF THE PUBLIC HAS BEEN DEMANDED...AND ACCEPTED!” By the horns of...this couldn’t happen so fast. It had to be ‘Vote of Commodus’, to be granted so fast.

There were suddenly parachutes over the arena, eight of them to be precise. No, ten, they were two more when the males brayed like donkeys.

They all carried chests, and landed in a thunderous crash a few metres below where everyone stood.

“INSIDE THE CHESTS YOU WILL FIND ITEMS OF GREAT POWER THAT WILL HELP YOU DEFEAT YOUR FOES! BUT SINCE THERE IS A PRICE TO PAY, YOU WILL GET POINTS OF PENALTY FOR THE HELP!”

The carnivorous sheep, not understanding whatever had just happened, decided to withdraw for the time being, especially as the metallic structure continued to lose altitude.

“OH, AND THE CHESTS ARE KEYED TO THE PERSON WHO REQUESTED THE HELP! NO STEALING!”

“As if we would steep so low,” Panther Kowalski muttered. “Males.”

“I wonder what is inside these chests,” Jenna spoke as their feet touched the grass again. “I suppose we are...new costumes?”

Ellen could say she had expected many things, but not something more.

“NEMEAN LIONS COSTUMES THIS TIME, CREATED WITH THE SKIN OF THE GREAT ANIMAL ONCE SLAIN BY THE MYTHICAL HERO! BUT I, THE GLORIOUS NEO HERCULES, HAVE SLAIN IT MORE THAN TWENTY TIMES, USING NOTHING BUT MY BARE HANDS!”

“This is just another insult,” Carina seethed. “I’m so glad I didn’t request it. What is it supposed to do, help the sheep find us more easily?”

It had to be said, the bloodthirsty Huntress was not wrong. The Hind costume was already an insult and an eyesore, but the Nemean Lion costume was shining with a flamboyant gold.

Unless you were blind, you couldn’t miss it.

But all the women of Team Triumvirate were...it seemed the costume literally ‘flowed’ around their fingers to mould itself around their bodies.

In mere seconds, they weren’t Hind-costumed women; the eight girls who weren’t of the Hunt looked like they were naked and painted in gold.

And this moment of stupefaction was promptly cast aside, because the enemy decided they had no more tricks to stop them.

“DISPERSE!” Panther screamed.

For once, Ellen and Jenna obeyed the order.

The next seconds were just murder.

They jumped; they ran; they desperately tried to keep the maws and the fangs as far away from them as possible.

It was a storm of violence and death.

And finally, the sheep broke out.

Ellen for a second didn’t understand.

Flora had just lost an arm, and Cordelia was screaming, having lost her left leg.

Everyone was out of breath.

But as eyes fell on Team Triumvirate, the reason of the withdrawal became obvious.

One sheep was lying lifelessly, surrounded by flowers, its ugly fleece torn apart by what appeared to be thin, but powerful claws.

And the moment Ellen watched the not-Huntresses, she realised the claws had indeed come from their costumes.

Okay, clearly, there was more than indecency and insults to this Nemean Lion costume.

“One down, eleven to go!” one of the girls participating as part of the team under Mark Antony laughed. “These costumes are incredibly cool!”

“Yes, Myria is already healing from the blows she could!”

The two surviving males of their teams didn’t appear to share their joy, but then again, they hadn’t been able to use the costumes. It seemed the men couldn’t read the instructions, or were just too stupid-

“Panther! Flora and Cordelia need healing!” Carina urged the Lieutenant of the Hunt. “And I think we may...we may need the costumes to win this Labour.”

“Out of the question!” Jenna shouted. “Come on, we don’t have to-“

“We must win this Labour! I am not going to tell the males we had a chance to be victorious, and we let it escape!”

“But these are not-“

“Vote of the Public!”

Ellen opened her mouth to say there was a reason they had been warned-

“They aren’t going to listen,” Jenna remarked with a grimace. “And this is bad.”

“I mean, yes, it is, but-“

“The claws...”

“Yes, the claws of the costume.”

“That’s the thing, sister. I don’t think they are really part of the costume for the women who used this poisoned ‘gift’.”

The Huntress watched again the bodies of the girls who had killed the sheep. They looked indeed very dangerous, naked...and yes, there didn’t seem to be any separation between the hands and the claws. It was like the hands of the female members of Team Triumvirate were turning into *feline appendages*!

“STOP!” Ellen screamed. “THESE COSTUMES ARE ALL CURSED, WE ARE FALLING INTO A TRAP! STOP THIS-

The song engulfed everything.

The song was magnificent.

The song was all the classic themes she loved. It was something epic and tragic at the same time.

It was a choir of animals achieving purity of sound.

It was-

It was-

Ellen turned her head with difficulty.

It was the girl next to Commodus.

She was singing.

She was Charming them.

It was not-

It was not Charmspeak, it was Charm-song.

And it urged everyone to call out the words for a chest to come to them. It pressed her to succumb and don one of the beautiful golden costumes.

Ellen resisted.

What had Jackson done. It was so hard to remember...it was so-

Ellen screamed again, and drew her dagger, before stabbing her left hand with it.

Instinctively, the pain disrupted all the charm of the melody, though the song remained temptation itself at the edge of her senses.

It hurt. It hurt badly, soul and body.

Jenna was feeling the same thing, clearly, her own dagger covered with her own blood.

“We are too late...” her sister of the Hunt sobbed.

When Ellen raised her eyes, it was to see the other ten Huntresses looking like they had taken a bath in molten gold.

**20 January 2007, Waiting Room of Team Adjudicator, Depths of the Commodus Coliseum**

“I would have preferred to steal sheep from the Callowan peasants.” Bianca muttered. The hereditary enemies of Praes were quite vengeful and prompt to avenge centuries-old familial feuds at every opportunity, but seriously, even they hadn’t managed to breed carnivorous sheep. The creation of chimerical monsters had always been a Praesi specialty.

“This is going to be problem,” Jade cleared her throat. “The Huntresses have fallen for-“

“I can recognise a ritual when I see one, thank you very much,” the daughter of Hades winced. “The symbolism may have escaped these blind and foolish girls, but not me.”

Inevitably, the remaining Huntresses which had stayed in the Waiting Room glared in her direction.

The former Dread Empress glared back, and the girls all decided discretion was a quality to strive for.

“Grant.”

“Yes?” the muscular son of Hercules answered.

“Commodus clearly targets the virgin women of both teams, and he marked forty-nine Huntresses, Legacies, and Demigoddesses mustered on both teams. The symbolism can’t be denied anymore. Do you know which myth-tale he is using for his purposes?”

“I think he is using the Thespiades Myth.”

Bianca blinked.

“The Thespia- what? I didn’t see it in the twelve Labours of Hercules!”

“That’s because it isn’t one, it is more an ‘unofficial Labour’ my father did. It’s about the hunt of a lion, that many sometimes guess was the mate of the Nemean Lion killed during the First Labour. The hunt was particularly difficult, and Hercules returned each night to the palace of the local King, where each night the King’s daughters went to his chamber, and...err...”

“They let him enjoy all the hospitality the kingdom had to offer?” the former Dread Empress chose to use an indirect euphemism with a bored voice.

“Yes, one can say that. There were fifty daughters, but Hercules only slept with forty-nine of them. The stories aren’t saying if he took one, seven, or forty-nine nights, but at the end, they were all pregnant and would eventually give him children. One gave him twins. And the fiftieth was told to become a priestess to some cult, though I don’t know if she obeyed.”

Bianca sighed.

“Okay, I see the symbol. The forty-nine virgin girls were spread out in the two teams, mostly as our ‘reinforcements’, and the fiftieth is by the Emperor’s side.”

And where the hell had Commodus found such a powerful Demigoddess, by the way?

The song was enthralling, and Team Adjudicator was only listening to it indirectly!

“This girl is powerful,” Hera calmly declared. “Is there something we can do?”

“No. The rules are iron-clad, and even if I decided to disregard them, it would likely take a lot of time to fight my way through the defences. And I’m not sure I can save any who were so stupid as to fall for such an obvious trap.”

“This is a bit unfair,” Kimiko tried to defend the honour of the Hunt. “They had their back against the wall-“

“Something was clearly wrong with this vicious’ Vote of the Public’, and Commodus wouldn’t have handed out true skins of the Nemean Lions if there wasn’t something at stake for him.” The daughter of Hades growled threateningly.

Anyway, it was too late.

Ten Huntresses had let the enchanted ‘skin’ of gold colour cloak their body, dissolving the provocative Ceryneian Hind-themed piece of cloth.

Already, you could say there was something wrong. Where before they had been hesitant to be seen at the beginning of the gladiatorial fight, now the Huntresses were standing proud, walking like supreme predators that had nothing to fear.

The song was enthralling them, encouraging their worst impulses.

They were beginning to transform.

The high-definition of the screens was sufficient to see it.

They were getting taller, and gaining in muscles and curves.

But the most obvious part for the moment were their hands.

They had claws growing out of them.

It must also be noted that the two Huntresses who had lost a limb were in the process of regenerating it.

“Yeah, I have to give it to you, Commodus; it was a well-executed trap. And you waited until Jackson was unable to control the situation before activating it.”

Would the Emperor have gone ahead if she’d been among those gladiators in the arena? In all likelihood, the answer was negative. The rabbit alone would have been a disappointment, but who could have guessed the truth?

“Whatever happens at the end of this Labour, it won’t be a total victory for Commodus.” Annabeth Chase told her.

“No, but eighteen girls out of forty-nine is a number far too high to my taste.”

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

Apollo knew he was a super-pervert.

In his defence, when you lived on Olympus and you were an immortal sired by Zeus, this was kind of inevitable.

In fact, everyone on the Council had its perversions. The only question was how many of them you did have, and whether everyone else knew about them – the disturbing answer to the latter question was in general yes, and no one cared.

And yes, the God of the Sun loved to disguise himself as a gladiator, all the while everyone stared at his perfect golden body.

All of that was true.

But Apollo was not delusional enough to believe that the girls sworn to his sister would choose to imitate him of their own will.

Most of the time, they couldn’t stand being in his presence. The idea of copying his exploits was not one that had likely entered their minds before today.

“**By Othrys’ ruins, where did Commodus found such a powerful Demigoddess**?” Artemis seethed next to him.

“**I don’t know**.” Apollo admitted out loud. “**I don’t know, but she is at the heart of a very powerful ritual**.”

“**Why the hell didn’t Perseus Jackson see it coming? This arrogant bastard always gloated before! Why didn’t he put an end to it**?”

Apollo sighed.

“**Sister, whether Perseus Jackson did indeed see it coming or not, he was dragged out of the arena almost unconscious by his friend the Minotaur. He played no part in the regrettable minutes that led to your Huntresses volunteering for this folly**.”

And it was entirely the Huntresses’ fault. In an Adjudicator Game, you couldn’t play a part if you were forced to. You had to do it of your own will. The Huntresses had chosen to thrown themselves in this diabolic trap.

Regardless of one’s feelings, one could say they were paying for it at the moment.

“**The voice is enthralling them**...” The excuse of her sister sounded incredibly weak to his ears. The song had begun *after* the majority of the Huntresses made the worst mistake of their lives. And as the two girls who followed Perseus Jackson had proved, it was perfectly feasible to resist the voice-compulsion. It didn’t feel good to stab yourself, but it clearly could be done.

“**And it encourages their worst impulses**.”

More words were unnecessary; the Huntresses went to war against the carnivorous sheep.

They were joined by the eight girls of Team Triumvirate.

The result was a one-sided slaughter.

After the first seconds, every girl had forsaken bows and daggers. The claws that were growing out of their hands seemed to be the only weapons they needed to for the fight, that said, as the wool of the sheep was destroyed and the naked flesh underneath was pierced.

The monsters counter-attacked, but it was obvious they were fighting alone. The Cyclops-bred sheep were alone and outnumbered, and some clearly tried to stay invisible while their ‘fellows’ were under attack.

In the mean time, the Huntresses fought like a single pack, together with other women that they should have considered foes.

No, not like a pack, Apollo corrected himself mentally.

They were fighting like a *pride*.

A pride of lionesses.

And with every minute, with every sheep that fell, the description seemed more and more accurate.

First the feet began to see claws grow out too.

They were made of extremely high-quality steel, and they couldn’t have been hidden on a costume anywhere.

The shape of the ears was changing.

With every opponent which died, the changes were accelerating. The feet were looking more and more like paws.

But the most striking part was the communication.

The battle began with the Huntresses and the other Roman girls giving themselves verbal instructions, suggestions and commands.

By now, all of it had ceased, it was animal growling, purring, and roaring.

The last sheep was the smartest of all. Seeing no hope, the monster tried to escape out of the arena, since the gates were still open.

But this promised salvation was more than thirty metres away, and the Huntresses could hardly miss the large trail the panicking sheep made.

Eighteen girls of the ‘pride’ fell upon it, and it was like seeing a bull being torn apart by a pack of wolves.

Apollo gave a glance in the direction of his sister. She was livid.

It didn’t get any better.

This last push had gave one more change to the girls who had been before entering part of two different teams: they had fangs instead of teeth now.

And under the loud approval of the bloodthirsty crowd, the enthralled Huntresses began to feast on the sheep’s carcass.

The centaurs loved it.

“**Artemis**-“

“**This is not over! They are going to resist; their vows are both shield and bow**!”

The word went white for a second, and three seconds later, the God of the Sun could look at a massive hole in what had been in his opinion the most splendidly decorated ceiling of all Olympus.

“**Come on, I had just redecorated last week**!”

**20 January 2007, the Arena, Commodus Coliseum**

Jackson said a thousand stupid things every day, but there were many things where the son of Poseidon had been dead right.

One of them was that the number three was important.

The trap of the Third Labour had come in three stages.

The first had been the humiliation.

Then there had been fear and panic.

And at the end? At the end, there was utter despair.

The song had stopped.

In the stands, Commodus had hidden his chief weapon behind a cloak of silver and gold.

Ellen wanted to believe it was because the singer was tired, but her experience told her it was because what the megalomaniacal Emperor had achieved everything he wanted.

Ellen and Jenna had bandaged the wounds they had taken stabbing themselves to avoid being enthralled like the others.

They were alone.

Okay, not perfectly alone, the two other surviving male Legionnaires of Team Triumvirate were by their side.

For all the good it was going to do.

The Huntresses and the other girls...they were lost.

Ellen wanted to believe that whatever had happened to them could be reversed, but after the first sheep they had killed, it had become progressively worse.

As the last sheep died, everyone who had committed the massive mistake of accepting this ‘Lion Costume’ was very much looking like a bipedal hybrid of lion and human. They had been cursed to take the form of an animal.

And Ellen knew which animal Commodus had chosen for them.

It wasn’t like he had made a mystery of it, after all.

The Nemean Lion. Or in that case, the Nemean Lioness.

The Huntress didn’t remember the specific myth, but there was no doubt about what must have happened in the preparations of this trap: Commodus had slaughtered several Nemean Lionesses and imbued the essence of said monsters into the parody of costumes.

Provocation after provocation, and they had fallen for it.

Yeah, the Ceryneian Hind ‘costumes’ had been completely inoffensive, but because they were that and absolutely indecent, the derange result of a pervert mind, no one had really planned for a second set of costumes to be handed out.

Jackson and several others of the Suicide Squad would have seen the trap coming and avoided it before it was too late.

But the twelve girls who had come into the arena? They had seen the trap coming far too late, and of them, only Ellen and Jenna remained.

“Panther...” her sister began as their former leader came forwards.

The Lieutenant of the Hunt had massively changed.

She had always been a fit girl, all of the Huntresses were.

But Panther Kowalski had been about fifteen in looks, not that it mattered most of the time, since they were immortal unless they died in battle.

She had also been silver-haired, though everyone knew she dyed them regularly.

The figure which advanced towards Jenna and Ellen had golden hair with only a few streaks of silver left.

She was taller, at least half a head worth of height gain. She was more muscled, and she had way bigger breasts.

And yes, she had claws of the colour of steel, both on her hands and feet...though the term ‘paws’ felt more appropriate.

The pace was controlled, the moves were akin to a content feline.

But Ellen saw it was all a lie.

The Huntress watched the eyes of the Lieutenant, and while the irises had stunned to a steely shade there too, Ellen could all too clearly see the horror in them.

“Ellen....Jenna...”the words were something between a purr and a growl, and she was sure their expressions must accurately reflect what they felt in their hearts.

“Resist!” Jenna urged. “You are stronger than you believe! And the song has stopped!”

The lioness-human growled.

“I...I am...too strong...and my body...my body rebels. All the instincts...too strong...”

Ellen didn’t say anything. What could she say anyway?

Yeah, it had been a stupid mistake, and it had closed on them worse than what had happened to Iphigenia in the Clash of the Titans.

“Too strong...” the steel eyes continued to stare at them, pleading, urging them to act, but what could they do? If their skin had the properties of the Nemean Lion, they had no weapons capable to give them mercy kills right here. “He...he wants to push us...to join the pride too.”

“We will die first,” Jenna retorted immediately.

“No...you will...too strong...” Panther’s last silver streaks in her hair were disappearing, leaving only a mane of gold behind. “It will be...you...sisters...you...avenge us. Kill Commodus...kill him. We...apologise.”

There was an inhuman growl, and Panther Kowalski’s body shook, as if she had been electrocuted.

“As long as you can hold to your oaths, there is hope! Don’t lose hope! We will find a solution! We have done more outlandish things with the Suicide Squad!”

“You...foolish...girl...” Panther growled. “There is...a last sacrifice. It was...so obvious.”

“But-“

“Go!” The eyes of the Huntress turning into a lioness had the horror replaced by ferocity. “Go and climb up! Save your lives to fight for another day...*sisters*.”

**20 January 2007, Waiting Room of Team Adjudicator, depths of the Coliseum**

The last act of the tragedy was greeted by solemn silence.

Ellen and Jenna had the good sense to obey Panther’s last command and make an incredible sprint before climbing towards the top of the suspended platforms.

The two other surviving Legionnaires of Team Triumvirate didn’t have that reflex.

Worse than that, they were burdened with the heavy equipment they had grabbed back after everyone abandoned the elevated scaffolding the first time.

It was not a battle; it was an execution.

The claws of the transforming girls cut through the shields with ease, and what they did to the bare flesh of the gladiator-looking soldiers of Mark Antony was...bad.

There were only two mercies: it was quick, and the girls didn’t eat their victims. Yeah, after what they had done to the last sheep, Dakota freely admitted the worse could be expected.

But it seemed even Commodus thought that cannibalism was a step too far.

“At least it is over...” the son of Bacchus commented sadly. And yeah, there was no doubt each Team had lost, and lost very badly. Team Adjudicator had managed to do better than Team Triumvirate, but this was a bit like saying like you did better trapped in quicksand than someone who had been bitten by a thousand snakes.

It was just a difference of failure, and how dramatic the fall.

“It is not over,” Annabeth Chase was prompt to crush even this tiny hope. “Did you forget? There was something one had to do to win this Labour.”

Dakota needed a couple of seconds to remind what the daughter of Athena was talking about.

“The supersonic rabbit?”

“Yeah,” the grey-eyed Demigoddess confirmed. “Or as I would rather call it, the last symbol to be sacrificed before the transformation is complete and the oaths sworn to Artemis break.”

Dakota didn’t think of himself as a genius, but you didn’t need any clues to realise what Annabeth was saying.

“To win, they were supposed to capture the rabbit.” A rabbit, which, from all evidence, had been created with the blood of the Ceryneian Hind, one of Artemis’ sacred animals – or monsters, depending on your point of view.

But if they killed it...

“Can they do it? I mean, yes, it would work, but they couldn’t exactly do it the first time. I think we can all remember how much of a fiasco it was one hour ago.”

“But this time,” Ethan pointed out, “they have an advantage.”

“And this is?”

“Unlike I greatly miss my guess? They are what they eat, thanks to Commodus. And they just ate a sheep. A carnivorous sheep which could turn invisible.”

“What?”

“Oh, I don’t think it is a permanent ability,” the son of Nemesis ‘reassured’ them. “But it will likely hold for as long as they have the sheep’s flesh in their bellies. It’s far more time than they need to hunt the rabbit.”

It should have been a joke, but Ethan wasn’t exactly known for them.

And as the bipedal lionesses went to war, the events proved the treacherous lieutenant’ of Jackson was right.

There were many golden-skinned Huntresses to be sure...but some were clearly nowhere to be seen.

The supersonic rabbit once more dashed to the other end of the arena.

But when it stopped, two of the girls ambushed it in a storm of claws and fangs.

The coordination was, if Dakota was honest with himself, absolutely frightening.

The rabbit lost its head before it realised it had been under threat.

And then the eighteen girls approached its remains, before all greedily placed drops of blood in their mouths.

“And now it is over.” The daughter of Hades said grimly.

There was an enormous blast of magic, followed by an awful shrieking sound that forced Dakota and all the Suicide Squad to place hands on their ears.

It didn’t last long.

But as the smoke dissipated, the result was obvious.

Before, there had been eighteen transforming girls, all looking like they had been dropped into a lake of golden paint, and having gained several animal parts in addition to that.

Now there were eighteen gigantic Nemean Lionesses in the arena.

They were all feline and lethality incarnate.

They were as big as the carnivorous sheep had been.

“TEAM TRIUMVIRATE AND TEAM ADJUDICATOR HAVE UNFORTUNATELY FAILED!” Commodus proclaimed as the stadium exploded in triumphant cheers, the centaurs approving the victory of the narcissist Emperor. “I, THE GLORIOUS NEO HERCULES, DECLARE THERE ARE NO VICTORS! AND AS PENALTY, I CLAIM THESE NEMEAN LIONESSES FOR MY HOUSE!”

Dakota knew they had won two Labours.

He could concede they had done better than Team Triumvirate.

And Ellen and Jenna had survived with their minds and bodies unaltered the Third Labour.

All of that was true, and it didn’t make the taste of defeat any less bitter.

For Commodus had handed them a significant defeat, there was no use denying it.

“We will have to ensure there is no repeat of this.” He said weakly.

“Yes,” Luke said grimly. “I don’t think we can afford more screw-ups of that scale in the next days...”

**20 January 2007,** **Bedroom Level of the** **Primus Ludus Magnus Commodus, ‘Narcissist Island’**

The pain was gone when he woke up.

There was no time to ask if the Golden Fleece was used, as Lou Ellen’s lips were on his.

Soon they were kissing as if their life depended on it, and maybe his was.

It was a long moment of kissing, and it was *good*.

Of course, all good things had an end.

“One day, your crazy stunts will kill you.” The daughter of Hecate managed to articulate, out of breath and her noble visage flushed with excitation.

“One day, but not today,” Perseus replied cheekily.

Predictably, Lou Ellen huffed, as had been his intention.

“You’re incorrigible.”

“And you love me for it.”

The smile of his lover vanished, and the former Tyrant immediately noticed.

“Something bad happened while I was unconscious, I take it.”

“Yes. We lost ten Huntresses in the Third Labour.”

The son of Poseidon raised an eyebrow.

“I don’t remember ever authorising Bianca to purge that many, no matter how irritating they were. Her Dark Majesty knows we must avoid antagonise Artemis in deliberate ways. So many Huntresses dying at once will cause trouble in the future.”

“They aren’t dead. They have been transformed into Nemean Lionesses, and claimed by Commodus, along with eight other girls of Team Triumvirate.”

There were plans of the enemy he did see coming ten kilometres away.

This one wasn’t one of them.

“Remarkable,” he began to think furiously. “Obviously, the Nemean Lion is the symbol and favourite animal of the narcissist Emperor. But he would have needed more weight behind this scheme. And there are no Nemean Lionesses in the Twelve Labours.”

“But apparently, there is an unofficial myth, a so-called ‘Thirteenth Labour’, where Heracles was said to have hunted a lion during an unspecified amount of time.” Lou Ellen filled the missing gaps. “Each day, Heracles hunted, and every night, he fornicated with plenty of girls, the daughters of the local King, who were remembered later as the Thespiades.”

It all explained so much.

“Let me guess. One of the possible durations for the entire hunt was seven days.” It was the entire duration of the Adjudicator Games, after all.

“Yes.”

“And since I suppose Annabeth counted all the girls who were given the Ceryneian Hind costumes, can I also hazard humbly the hypothesis that they were forty-nine overall, not counting certain unsuitable girls of the Suicide Squad, to be granted the indecent costume?”

“Your deduction mode is incredibly fast.” The daughter of Hecate complimented him.

“Once the opponent has revealed his grand plan, it is not that difficult to add two plus two.” The former Tyrant winced. “The only reason that I don’t understand is why Commodus did such a half-baked job. Eighteen is not forty-nine. Yes, it is a serious defeat, but it’s not even half of the effectives he must transform into his leonine slaves. And we will be on our guard now.”

“I believe this has to do with the Demigoddess by his side. He unleashed her when there was a possibility the Huntresses were going to jump out of his trap. As a result, only Ellen and Jenna were able to truly save their skins.”

“A Demigoddess?”

“A powerful Demigoddess. You are gifted when it comes you particular brand of Charmspeak, but her, she...she simply sings, and the enthrallment is incredible. I suppose we should call it Charm-song, not Charmspeak.”

“All right, I didn’t see that coming either.” Commodus was either way more cunning than in his worst predictions, or he had way more backers than anyone had ever imagined. One unfortunately didn’t prevent the other.

“That’s not encouraging.”

“No, it isn’t.” Perseus jumped outside of his bed.

“You have to rest.” Lou Ellen told him in a resigned voice.

“I have to return to the Suicide Squad and take back command,” he corrected with a very serious expression. “After such a massive defeat, it is essential to calm tempers, restore the spirits of everyone, and provide some brand of charismatic leadership. The day of rest isn’t there for our health, my dear sorceress lieutenant. It is there to make sure the Teams fall apart psychologically. That way, our enemy will have to do nothing but pick up the broken remnants and sail to victory unopposed.”

**20 January 2007,** **Refectory of the** **Primus Ludus Magnus Commodus, ‘Narcissist Island’**

Miranda’s senses had been enormously sharpened by becoming the Champion of Calypso.

As such, she felt the danger coming seconds before many members of the Suicide Squad.

It engulfed you into a storm promising nothing but craziness and pain.

It gave you the urge to run away as fast as your legs allowed.

It was intimidating in the extreme.

It lasted five seconds, and then Perseus Jackson entered the refectory, Lou Ellen on his heels.

And he was grinning.

The Champion of the Third Queen of Hell flinched.

This was not the grin ‘I am going to play a ridiculous joke on you’.

It wasn’t either the ‘I know something you don’t’.

It was the ‘you sew the wind, and now you’re going to reap the whirlwind’ vicious smile.

Ellen the Huntress cleared her throat.

Miranda was impressed by her courage.

It took some guts facing him when the son of Poseidon was clearly on the warpath.

“We are sorry. We screwed up everything.”

“Oh, no need to congratulate yourself so highly, Huntress.” Perseus snarked. “This honour belongs to Lieutenant Panther Kowalski. She truly managed to ‘screw up everything’, using your admirable words. You? You are guilty of stupidity, mutiny, recklessness, charging without a plan, and abominable arrogance and *heroic* self-righteousness.”

The evil red eye stared at Ellen and Jenna.

“This is the moment where you’re giving me a reason to not kill you for the absurd amount of trouble you’ve caused.”

The two Huntresses who had travelled with them since the start of this Great Quest wisely decided to stay silent.

Alas, the other survivors of this disaster, the few they had been given as ‘reinforcements’, were not so wise.

“The rules of this Adjudicator Game forbid you from killing us!” one of the idiotic members of the evil lesbian cult snapped back.

“**Give yourself a slap**,” all the Huntresses that were not Jenna and Ellen slapped themselves.

And for the first time, fear returned, disintegrating their anger.

“You seem to be under a bit of a misunderstanding, servants of the Hunt and the Moon,” the black-haired Demigod spoke slowly, but malice threatened to grow out of control behind his eyes at any moment. “The orders I have from the Gods and Goddesses of Olympus are to ensure the liberation of the God of War, and the failure of the Triumvirate plans to usurp the Olympians. There is nowhere mentioned I must especially *care* if you end up dead at my feet.”

“Lady Artemis-“

“Your Goddess has no power here,” the words were cruel, but painfully accurate. “And my previous words were a bit misleading, of course. These Adjudicator Games won’t see you die.”

The glare sent to the Huntresses was incredibly venomous.

“In case, you have any doubt after the Third Labour, Commodus’ chief goal is to make you his sex slaves. And if you continue the litany of stupidity that led to the latest defeat, this is exactly what is going to happen.”

Miranda grimaced inwardly. There were unpleasant fates waiting for many Demigods, she had never been under any illusion she was different. And the Possession of the Sand Drakon had been unimaginably painful.

But what the transformed Huntresses were no doubt experiencing as prisoners of the megalomaniacal Emperor...no one deserved that.

There was a cough, and Jade intervened.

“I admit they paid for their folly a thousand times during the Labour and what is no doubt happening right now, but as stupid and reckless Panther and the others have been,” the former Huntress and current Champion of Khione declared, “it is in our best interest to free them as soon as possible.”

“I won’t deny this is true.” Perseus conceded with a shrug. “Alas, there is a little problem. We can’t assault Commodus’ lair, that’s against the rules. These girls have broken all their previous allegiances when they ate the Ceryneian Rabbit, there’s no return back possible for them.”

“Couldn’t we try to challenge him? Raise the stakes and bargain that the price will be liberty for all the girls?” Jenna tried.

Jackson gave her a look of pity.

“Lou Ellen, be sure to remember me if I ever forget that the Huntresses are horrible negotiators.”

“Duly noted.”

“No, Jenna,” Perseus continued, “Commodus has zero reason to accept any sort of bargain. He has gained his first victory, and the only stakes he is likely to accept are those that let the rest of the forty-nine girls fall without any risk whatsoever for him.”

“I see what you meant about this Emperor being a *predator*,” Annabeth noted.

“He’s a very unpleasant individual, like many narcissists,” their leader acknowledged. “Unfortunately, he also has nine remaining Labours. He is naturally impatient, otherwise he wouldn’t have tried his stunt at the Third Labour, and I think I will be able to use it against him. But that’s still nine times we must go in the arena and he has the opportunity to murder us.”

“That still doesn’t explain how you are going to explain it to Lady-“

“**Huntress**,” the Charmspeak was used once more, “you are under a severe misapprehension that your mistress wasn’t watching the events live, much like we did in the Waiting Room. She has already made her own opinion of this reckless display of idiocy, and I can’t change it.”

“You could have saved them!”

“No, I couldn’t. Or are we going to imagine your friends of the Hunt could have survived an explosion of Greek Fire like I did? Now shut up, I have heard my quota of stupidity for the day.”

The Huntresses shut up, without any Charmspeak involved.

“Now let’s begin again, because I think my previous words did not enter some very insolent heads. Under no circumstances are you to use the ‘Vote of Commodus’, or as it is better known, the ‘Vote of the Public’. Am I clear, or must I let Bianca crucify someone before it is taken seriously?”

**20 January 2007, the Dove Palace, Olympus**

The call arrived two hours earlier than Venus had thought it would.

“**I thought Commodus would prevent you from communicating with outside parties**,” the Goddess of Love didn’t bother asking how he had obtained the codes to contact her.

“He is certainly jamming incredibly hard every frequency, both the divine and non-divine. But it is not against the rules to try...and succeed.”

“**You must have had help**.”

“The Telekhines weren’t invited just because they are helpful with providing weapons of all kind. One of them also happens to be an expert in electronic warfare.”

Venus breathed out. Yes, this explained why they were so many sea monsters in Team Adjudicator.

“She is your daughter, isn’t she?”

The fateful question arrived as fast as she had feared.

“**Yes, yes she is. I won’t ask how you arrived to this conclusion**.”

“Good. Charmspeak has always been something tied to you, either in your Greek or Roman aspects. And it isn’t a great stretch to admit that if it can used when you speak, it can be used for singing too; it is just way more difficult for the user.”

Venus waited.

“Why didn’t you raise her?”

“**You know the problem we immortals have with the Ancient Laws**.” She replied defensively.

“Don’t insult my intelligence, please, Lady Venus.”

“**I am not insulting anyone**,” she gritted her perfect white teeth. “**You know the cruel dilemma the Ancient Laws demands of us. We can technically raise our children ourselves, but we have to make them full members of our House in exchange. This means a place in the succession to our Thrones, with all the privileges and rights our true immortal children possess**.”

Indeed, it was so advantageous that when these Demigods and Demigoddesses became adult, the Olympian having sired them formally requested Zeus to grant them eternal youth and immortality, making them lesser deities.

“**But in exchange, I would have had to bring both father and daughter with me, taking them with me completely, removing them from the world of the mortals. And the father of my daughter was too fragile for this revelation**.”

“California? I think I heard her singing in a famous movie.”

“**Her father is a famous Hollywood actor. He often takes her well to the movie shooting...or he took her to them, I suppose**.”

“Blackmail?”

“**This is my guess too. While I admit this was a while I visited my lover when he played the role of flamboyant gladiator to a peplum, it didn’t take me very long to notice all the Praetorians watching him**.”

“They have been dealt with, I suppose?”

“**They are on their way to the Fields of Punishment. I asked Hades to go wild; their crimes deserve nothing else**.”

Venus bit her lip, and ignored the splendour that was her palace. Most of the time, the pleasing distractions were very welcome. Today, they were eyesores, and no amount of sex with Vulcan could make the awful news more tolerable.

“**I’m hunting the other parties responsible for this as we speak**.” The female secretary had already been incinerated for the sheer scale of this betrayal. Marrying him in exchange of betraying her precious daughter? There were things that would never be forgiven by any mother, and certainly not an Olympian mother in fury. “**But as I’m sure you have already thought behind your grinning mask, this is trying to extinguish the fire of the castle when all the owners have already been kidnapped**.”

“It is a good comparison, yes.” There was a couple of seconds of silence. “Neither Commodus nor his generous benefactors could have reached the River of Hellish Oaths. In the unlikely case they did, security is maximal right now. But there are other rivers, like the Lethe, who have been left unguarded for several months very recently. You have the timetable of the affair. Was there an opportunity?”

Venus didn’t bother to check a calendar or verify her sources. She had done the calculation the moment she began to dig in this sordid attack on what was hers.

“**There was**.”

The sound at the other end of the communication line was one of displeasure and frustration. Venus could almost taste it.

“**I freely admit I should have been more attentive, but the Fates really don’t like when we focus too much on one child without formal claiming. And with the resources her father could give her, she was well integrated in her father’s social circles, and thus less at risk from monster attacks**.”

Ironies of all ironies, the studios of Hollywood were one of the safest places of the world for Demigods and Demigoddesses. While no one raised an eyebrow when the giants and the other non-humans walked in plain sight courtesy of the Mist and all the movies, the monsters themselves policed each other, loving way too much the income they got from loaning their services to the film-makers.

“**As for Charm-singing, yes, I gave her the potential, but many of my other children had it in the last century, though not exactly to the same degree. I didn’t think she would manage to develop it to the extent I heard during the Third Labour**.”

And yes, it cost her to admit her mistakes, no matter how few persons would know of this highly-secret exchange.

“Well, this is a massive mess.” A tongue clicked. “You know that even assuming the ritual fails and the Great Quest is successful, the Goddess of the Hunt is going to make it her mission to kill your daughter.”

“**I am not naive**.” Usurpation was a very bad affair, and the only reason Diana had not already tried to storm her temple was that she was likely busy whining in front of Jupiter. “**I thought the problem with Isis was going to be manageable, and now another Roman Emperor decides to be a thorn for everything I love**.”

Yes, there would be more punishments once her wrath was unleashed. But it could not recreate everything that had been lost.

“**Can you save my daughter**?”

“All depends,” the answer was not reassuring at all, “what is your definition of ‘save’.”

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

It was incredible the effects of seven hours of good sleep could have on your mental health.

Naturally, Luke could only acknowledge it came with both good news and bad news.

The good: after yesterday and the terrifying Labours they had either to participate or to watch, the Suicide Squad needed very badly a good night of sleep.

The bad: the aforementioned hours of recovery had replenished Perseus Jackson’s stores of craziness.

The moment he saw the grin, the son of Hermes knew someone was going to suffer.

The first ‘volunteer’, sadly for him but to the relief of everyone else, was Michael Yew, son of Apollo.

Or as he was better known now-

“Good morning, oh Blue Roger Rabbit!” The grin of the son of Poseidon was so large there might be astronauts on the Moon able to see it.

“JACKSON!”

Luke tried very hard not to laugh. He really, really tried. Seriously.

But try not show any amusement when a Demigod-turned-rabbit tried to don a tunic and epically failed.

Yes, this was a challenge.

“Oh, excuse me. I meat of course Blue Roger Hare!”

Yes, the leader of the Suicide Squad didn’t know when to stop pushing.

Please pretend to be surprised.

“I HATE YOU!”

“Now, now, no need to twist your long ears...I mean, they are very long...”

Luke began to giggle uncontrollably.

“CHANGE ME BACK AT ONCE!”

“Let’s prescribe him a regimen of carrots. I’m told it will do wonders where his anger issues are concerned!”

This time Luke lost completely control and began to howl in laughter.

“SEE? SEE! I AM CURSED AND EVERYONE IS LAUGHING! I AM A DEMIGOD, NOT A PARODY OF A RABBIT!”

“Ah, hmm...that is to say, you are a hare, not a rabbit, Michael. And I advise you to banish the word ‘rabbit’ from your vocabulary. The surviving Huntresses, for some reason, are not fond of this type of animal anymore...”

“THIS IS YOUR FAULT!”

“If you mean by it that I saved your life and ensured you are a very healthy hare instead of one cooked by Greek Fire, I plead guilty,” the son of the Earthshaker answered shamelessly. “You’re welcome.”

The long ears really went out of control, and it was really fascinating to see a rabbit sweat in confusion.

And yes, all this meant Luke had a lot of trouble to stop laughing hysterically.

“Please, Jackson. Use the Golden Fleece and change me back!”

“Lou Ellen already used it on you yesterday evening.” Perseus said flatly.

“WHAT?”

Yeah, what the hell?

Jackson emitted an exasperated sigh.

“Does someone listen to my explanations sometimes?”

“It depends,” Luke immediately replied, “if you count the monologues or not.”

That repartee earned him a snort and an amused glare.

“Then let me repeat what should have been an evidence for each and every miscreant of the Sea of Monsters. The Golden Fleece is incredibly potent, and it possesses incredible healing powers. But it has limits. It can bring you back from the edge of death, oh yes. But it can’t reverse divinely-ordained transformations, or transformations at all, as long the God or the Goddess isn’t willing to lift it and it doesn’t cause massive health issues to the victim of the aforementioned transformation. It also can’t return someone already dead. Well, technically it will heal the body, but all it will result into is a perfectly preserved corpse, since the soul will have already journeyed to the Underworld.”

Luke blinked.

“So hypothetically speaking, for a certain pine tree-“

“Completely hypothetically speaking, Thalia Grace is not dead, and the Master of Olympus is willing to lift the curse that transformed her into a pine tree. Assuming we are able to survive this Great Quest, she will be fine. She will have lost a few years of her life-expectancy, in all likelihood, and will need a lot of therapy. No need for concern.”

Luke breathed out in relief.

Michael Yew exploded in hare fury...which was way more funny than threatening.

“I’m sure we can all rejoice and no, wait, would you find a solution TO CHANGE ME BACK TO MY HUMAN BODY?”

Perseus looked he was almost ready to begin a new round of jokes, but Luke’s expression was enough to discourage him. At least, the son of Hermes hoped it was.

“I can’t. I don’t have that sort of power. Lou Ellen and Bianca tried while you were asleep, but as I guessed, the transformation was made by a curious artefact that was hidden somewhere inside the Thracian Administratum.”

The master thief of the Suicide Squad grimaced.

“And it likely was destroyed when all the Greek Fire detonated, I take it.”

“Precisely,” Perseus confirmed.

“I was right! This is your fault!”

The mad Demigod rolled his eyes.

“As I said before, my dear long-eared rock-star, if I hadn’t done what I did, you would have either been devoured by man-eating horses, or you would have been incinerated by Greek Fire. One way or another, I doubt anyone would have transformed you back in Hell, and that was exactly where you were going to travel in these scenarios.”

Jackson clicked his fingers idly.

“The good news, such as it is, can be summed-up like this: I’m pretty sure that the artefact responsible for your problem is one of Circe’s which arrived somehow on the black market before Commodus purchased it. Hare and turkey transformations targeting a male population is exactly the sort of thing the Immortal Sorceress of the Spa loves to create.”

“And the bad news,” Luke finished, “is I suppose that given your crazy stunts, the Lady of C.C’s Spa may not be willing to change me back?”

Perseus grinned.

“Usually, you’re far more brilliant than this, Luke Castellan. No, the problem isn’t here. Michael will have to convince Lou Ellen to plead his cause in front of her half-sister. That’s why you don’t anger daughters of Hecate, by the way.”

Damn it, Luke really hated it when the son of Poseidon was making a very logical argument...

“No, the real problem is that the Immortal Sorceress isn’t here today, and won’t be able to cast a reverse-transformation spell until the Adjudicator Games are over. As a result, you, my long-eared and blue-furred lieutenant, will have to stay in your hare body for a few more days and survive the Labours, much as the rest of the Suicide Squad will.”

“I WILL KILL YOU JACKSON!”

The judo move saw Jackson hold an angry hare by the ears, the Demigod-turned-animal being immobilised on his back.

“We are really going to have to work on your anger issues, oh hare of Apollo! Fortunately, I know a very good psychologist to help you! May I present you Doctor Perseus Jackson, Expert in all sort of Mental Health Problems?”

“Turning everyone crazy does not make you a Doctor in that field!”

“Details, details...”

**21 January 2007,** **the Morgue of the** **Primus Ludus Magnus Commodus, ‘Narcissist Island’**

Yes, he had chosen the morgue for this unplanned strategic meeting.

Yes, it was disrespectful for the dead.

But it was the least likely place they were going to be spied upon – though he had placed many Telekhine-made devices nevertheless, being unwilling to take any risks.

And honestly, Perseus wanted to verify if the proverb ‘dead men tell no tales’ was indeed accurate, after all.

“Why are we here, and why is there only four of us?” Richard Grant began with arms crossed, showing once again he was the more muscular member of the Suicide Squad.

“You are here to learn of some important things, and the reason there is so few of the Suicide Squad is because I didn’t want to attract too much attention, since we are spied upon at all times,” the son of Poseidon replied bluntly. “Now we are going to speak of Commodus’ plans.”

“I think we know very much what his plans are,” Lou Ellen told him in a disgusted tone. “This Emperor is a *rapist*. Please tell me we are going to make his death a very long and painful one.”

“All in good time,” mind you, Commodus irritated him so much that if there wasn’t an ongoing Adjudicator Game, Perseus would have already organised a little accident involving a high cliff and some man-eating monsters. “First we need to isolate him, and exploit his overconfidence.”

“Is it overconfidence,” Ethan asked quietly, “when he has accomplished part of his goals?”

“It is overconfidence,” the former Tyrant reassured him. “Believe me, if for a stupid reason I decided to go for something as a High Judge, unless I wanted to play with my opponents for several days, I wouldn’t do the number of mistakes he did. Revealing your master plan to your enemies when they are in a position to do something about it sounds incredibly funny in theory, but it can spectacularly backfire along the way.”

“How so?” Lou Ellen asked, clearly interested by the subject.

“For his first step to be complete, Commodus must clearly trap and enslave all the forty-nine girls he has marked as his ‘New Thespiades’. It is not an ‘if’, he has to do it now that the process has begun. If the end of the Twelfth Labour there are not forty-nine Nemean Lionesses bound to him, the ritual he began will blow up impressively in his face.”

“That’s all very fine,” Grant said unconvinced, “but he can repeat the process he did yesterday several times. He tricks you to descend in the arena to save the day, and strike in the Labour which follows with all his traps, ensuring the Huntresses and the other girls fall one by one.”

As, the foolishness of the inexperienced Demigods.

“Yes, about that. I’m afraid that one, the Huntresses will be way more reluctant ‘volunteering’ for something that means being enslaved to a madman. And I, being a generous soul, have given some thought to other Labours. Furthermore, we will have other Demigods and Demigoddesses to unleash. And please remember that for the Narcissist-in-chief, the clock is ticking. There are nine Labours left, and he didn’t kill as many of us as he wanted.”

“That assumes eliminating us is part of his plan.”

Perseus snorted.

“Grant, Commodus didn’t go all that trouble with the Stymphalian Emus just for the pleasure of it. The first two Labours were really planned to create a maximal amount of carnage, and cripple both Team Adjudicator and Team Triumvirate. Once the arena will be utterly saturated by the bloodbath, the despair, and the agony of monsters and Demigods, the megalomaniac intends to pursue the destruction of Mark Antony, and then devour the God of War himself.”

“This sounds dangerous,” Lou Ellen remarked, “and I’m using your standards here.”

“It is more than that. As I said before, Commodus tries to put forwards a parody of the unofficial ‘Thespiades Labour’. That means having the forty-nine girls enslaved and raped until they all carry one child of his at the end of the seventh day or the Adjudicator Games, whichever finishes first. At the same time, he also prepares the Demigoddess by his side to play the role of ‘Neo Diana’, that way each time a Huntress is broken by his actions, she absorbs the power of the Hunt, and becomes a ‘symbolic vessel’.

“The more I hear about it,” Ethan spoke grimly, “the more Commodus just seems to copy everyone’s methods, yours and Triumvirate included. But since he is a monster and a predator, he adds rape, mass murder, and a lot of awful things at the top of the list.”

“That’s not completely exact, my treacherous Lieutenant. Oh, Commodus is a narcissist predator. But in many ways, notice that Commodus does not challenge the Gods like the Triumvirate does. The duo we’re currently dealing with tried to forge its godhood as ‘Neo Romulus’ and ‘Neo Isis’. Usurpation, yet imagination.”

“And Commodus wants to be a ridiculous parody of my father, much like the Demigoddess by his side will become a parody of Diana.” Richard Grant finished on his own.

“There are advantages to this, I take it?” his blonde lover asked.

“The Triumvirate’s methods are way slower, but guarantee a success rate of about ninety percent, and if you fail, you can try again, though the resources expended will be far from cheap. The method Commodus is pursuing is way more riskier, not to mention horrifying and painful.”

As much as Perseus wished it was an exaggeration, the reality was probably worse. Bit by bit, the Hunt’s power had been torn from the Huntresses, and absorbed into the host. The sense of violation must have been agonising for Panther Kowalski and the girls by her side, and honestly, the only reason why they weren’t dead was their transformation into a mythical animal.

It wasn’t much better for the daughter of Venus, who must have suffered more pain than Miranda Gardiner when she was fully Possessed by the Sand Drakon.

“I presume that at the end of the rituals, Commodus will rape her too?”

Perseus wasn’t in the mood to waste his saliva providing an answer that was evidence itself.

“Commodus has thought of everything, doesn’t he? Or at least his backers and supporters in the shadow have. It’s risky, but he stayed out of sight until someone needed a High Judge for Adjudicator Games, and now he is close to accomplishing his plans.”

Perseus cleared his throat.

That was the only moment he had looked for of the strategic meeting, assuredly.

“Actually...no. You want my true and honest opinion, my lieutenants? The plan is incredibly stupid!”

One...two...three...

“Err...right?”

Well, he had definitely gambled on having a set of stronger reactions...

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Lou Ellen showed Perseus an emotionless face. To do anything else would encourage him to repeat that sort of approach over and over.

It couldn’t stop him, nothing on this world could achieve that, but it was best to not pour oil on the bonfire, thank you very much.

Perseus was incredibly intelligent. But taunting him and urging him to prove it was the wrong strategy to adopt.

Alas, Grant had to open his mouth.

“I don’t understand. The plan is risky during the Games, but the stakes-“

“The stakes at the end all bet on Commodus, being empowered by the Domain of War, being able to beat your father one-on-one, Grant.”

Evidently, when you looked at it like that, it was incredibly ridiculous.

“Err...maybe you misunderstood his plan?”

Perseus looked at the son of Hercules like he was a dumbass.

“He calls himself ‘Neo God of Strength’, and chose the Nemean Lion as his symbol animal. What part of his usurpation choices do you have a problem deciphering?”

“Couldn’t he stop at the usurpation of the God of War?” Ethan intervened. “Or at least start an unfair fight? Yeah, one-on-one he is going to lose, but with another Goddess helping him? He wants to create a ‘Neo Diana’, right?”

Perseus shook slowly his head.

“The idea is good in theory, but sucks in practise. Everything in these acts of usurpation carries powerful symbols. And it’s the God of Strength, Heroics, and several other significant Domains you want to usurp. If you don’t do it one-on-one, you just admit openly you are not worthy.”

“But does Commodus know this? His backers may have sold him the plan, but refused to explain it the flaws.”

“It’s...possible, I suppose.” For the first time, Perseus looked hesitant, but it lasted only for a few seconds. “Still, it doesn’t change anything.”

Lou Ellen raised an eyebrow.

“It would mean two immortals against one, Perseus.”

“It would mean two weaklings against an apex predator that crushed legendary monsters like they were ants when he was a Demigod. Heracles was killing Gigantes by the side of the Gods before he was thirty, Lou. Two people who have no idea how to fight a match that isn’t rigged are just horribly outmatched. To make this fight fair, we should bind the arms and feet of Grant’s father, put a blindfold over his eyes, and probably suggest he doesn’t use his divine form at all. And even then, I wouldn’t bet against him.”

Perseus chuckled.

“But it won’t come to that, because ‘Neo Diana’ can’t fight a full divine battle. She has been insufficiently prepared for the ritual. This Demigoddess should have bathed in the waters of the same Hell River Achilles was drenched into, and she wasn’t. As a result, the likely outcome of the ritual is that she’s going to burn inside while trying to be a vessel for a Goddess.”

“That bad?”

“Ethan, there’s a reason Gods and other powerful beings are wary of those Demigods like me who manage to bathe in Drakon’s blood or emerge unscathed from their pool activities in the Underworld. You can’t be incinerated as easily by a God’s divine form, and it applies both on the ‘outside’ and the ‘inside’.”

The grin returned, filled with the promise of bad puns and many more amusing things – from Perseus’ perspective.

“What do you think is going to happen if your body is supposed to contain the equivalent of ten thousand nukes of divine energy, but the receptacle is merely an improved level of the mortal baseline?”

That was not a difficult answer.

“Kaboom?” Lou Ellen chose to use the penguin’s words.

“Kaboom,” Perseus confirmed. “And then the Goddess of Hunt will be free to release all her frustrations on everyone that has displeased her and that is within strike range. Since Commodus is the kind of predator she hates with a deep passion, the punishment would be swift to be delivered, and entirely deserved.”

On that point, the daughter of Hecate completely agreed.

“But we aren’t going to rely on this, because waiting for the plans of Commodus to turn to ashes requires our deaths first.”

And suddenly, they were reminded they were in a morgue in the most brutal way possible, as the parts of the Ares mercenaries which had perished during the First Labour were all around them.

“We need to break his ambitions and win the Adjudicator Games,” Ethan spoke plainly and unenthusiastically.

“Yes. But have no fear, my treacherous lieutenant,” in the distance, the sound of drum musicians being played began to echo, “I have a plan.”

With the benefit of hindsight, Commodus’ greatest mistake had likely been to give Perseus twenty-four hours of rest and analysis in order to find all the loopholes and the weaknesses of the schemes the High Judge had triggered yesterday...

**21 January 2007,** **Commodianopolis’ Command Room, the entrails of Commodus Coliseum**

Marcus Antonius had asked himself several times why in the hell the vast room located somewhere in the entrails of the Coliseum had been so empty and lifeless during his first visit.

Now he knew.

It was because it wasn’t destined to stay empty for long.

Furniture had been added. There were plenty of Roman-style couches, mattresses, and all models of tables, among many things. Each object had certainly been commissioned from Italian artisan companies providing extraordinary items to a wealthy clientele. It was rare to see so many of them at once; not only the expense had to be considerable, but the styles massively clashed, and Medea would have been appalled by the crimes against artistic taste committed here.

All of it was of secondary interest, since Commodus had decided to muster the girls he had enslaved in a sort of sick and twisted parade before him.

Oh, there were no collars, chains, or anything hinting at slavery.

But you could see it in their eyes, this ugly mix of hatred and despair, even as their expressions varied between satisfaction and happiness.

It was even worse than slavery, in many ways. At least in the days of the Old Republic – something that had continued under the Principate and later eras – no one had ever had the power or the will to dictate the moves and the bodies of the slaves, be they female or male.

Commodus had done it yesterday.

The new Nemean Lionesses were forced to obey his commands, no matter how much they hated them.

And they were Nemean Lionesses, no matter what their current appearance suggested.

It seemed that for his monstrous purposes, Commodus had the power and the control to order his slaves to return to the humanoid body everyone had seen in the arena.

From afar, the girls could almost pass as human. Unfortunately, as you got closer, you couldn’t miss the feline faces, the tails, and the claws.

They were radiant, in their shining gold-skinned bodies.

They also were a lethal threat, for Marcus Antonius had no doubt that the eighteen girls could transform back to the full size and might of their true nature, those of Nemean Lionesses, if the order was given.

True, there would be a distinct lack of space to fight properly, but Marcus Antonius didn’t think it would save anyone.

Hercules had had trouble to defeat a single Nemean Lion when he was a Demigod. Facing eighteen all at once was just impossible, though at least the invisibility ability must have faded now – provided there were no carnivorous sheep to use as meals, of course.

The Second Augustus of the Triumvirate breathed out, both to calm himself, and to prepare himself for a very unpleasant conversation that he had no wish to participate to.

Alas, the rules of the Adjudicator Games gave the High Judge the power to request meetings like this one. But Commodus couldn’t do anything to him as long as he kept his self-control. The Captains of each Team couldn’t touch the High Judge, but the protection was reciprocal: as long as they abided by the rules, the only place where Commodus could try to murder them was in the arena. Breaking these guidelines would see him die in mere seconds.

It was still very difficult to maintain an expression that was not of disgust or of rage.

The air reeked of sex, and since the room hadn’t been cleaned up, you didn’t need much imagination to arrive to the dreadful conclusion that yes, most of the day and the night before had seen an abominably high number of rapes.

“This was so easy,” Commodus stated, one former Huntress at his knees. “I wonder why none of your little organisation didn’t try to claim them before in such high numbers? Is it because you were carrying pathetically small and tiny ambitions? Is it because the weak whore that calls herself Neo Selene is going to one day to decide she can’t face the Goddess of the Hunt unless Diana is bound and defenceless before her?”

A good thing the First Caesarea of Caligula was an ally. It would be a pleasure in time to crush this arrogant head.

“I can’t speak for Neo Selene.”

“Obviously not, you’re not powerful enough for that!” Commodus scoffed. “Look at my achievements, you second-rate Magister Equites! “I have made mine eighteen of the New Commodiana Thespiades! I have conquered them, and I have no doubt that soon, they will be all pregnant with my children! They will be my first lieutenants when I will conquer a new Empire, leading my invincible legions across the world!”

The Second Augustus had had his doubts whether Commodus could imagine and execute complicated schemes like the one they’d seen in the Third Labour, or if someone had whispered to him the entire plan from the first step to the climax.

Now he knew. Commodus had clearly understood nothing of the intricacies of the plan, and he was gloating like victory was certain.

This felt, needless to say, really, really premature.

Marcus Antonius chose to stand and give him a cold expression, showing only the contempt Commodus inspired him.

This naturally irritated the ‘High Judge’ to the highest degree.

“You think you are better than me, don’t you?”

“Whether I win or lose, I will at least be able tomorrow to speak with Isis and tell her that in the last decades I have stayed true to her. And I certainly didn’t rape over a dozen girls who were all clearly unwilling and underage.”

“They are mine! I won them from you and your foes! To the winner goes the spoils! You lost, Magister Equites!” Commodus gloated again.

One more reminder that sometimes, it would have been far better for the entire world if some Caesars had strangled their sons before they could get anywhere near the title of Augustus. Commodus thought the world should belong to him, and he clearly had not learned the same lesson as the Triumvirate that keeping slaves, in the end, was just inefficient and prompt to generate bloody disasters.

“We will see about that. Three Labours are over, this leaves nine others. I trust the Fourth will begin tomorrow morning, as was properly scheduled?”

The High Judge of the Adjudicator Games shrugged.

“Leave us,” he ordered the girls that had been transformed into feline monsters, and they obeyed, for once with what was clear relief in their eyes.

“The Fourth Labour will be tomorrow, yes. I just wonder if it necessary for you to participate?”

As far as provocations went, this one was perhaps the least subtle of all.

“You are the High Judge. You don’t have any power over my team.” And yes, Marcus Antonius regretted more and more participating in this sinister farce. None of the previous Adjudicator Games had been falling in a category that could be described best as ‘evil and bloody madness’.

“Of course, but your strategies are clearly lacking, and this is Neo Hercules telling you that.” The megalomaniac was not a God, but he behaved like he had already shed his mortal envelope and ascended to his promised apotheosis. “You really should define a better strategy. You have yet to win a single Labour, and at the rate you are losing your members, you will be left with your sorceress acolyte and yourself by the Ninth Labour at the latest. And this will be quite humiliating for you, no?”

“Once again, I fail to see how it is your concern. You are the High Judge; you are not part of Team Triumvirate.”

Yes, the hints weren’t subtle; Commodus was really bad at it.

“You are going to lose against Perseus Jackson if someone doesn’t help you.”

“Since we entered this Coliseum, someone has been doing awful deeds, killing my Legionnaires and raping girls that by some cruel twist of fate, had come under my protection. And the name of this murderous bastard isn’t Perseus Jackson.”

Yes, it was funny how forty-hours could change one to refocus their priorities.

In hindsight, the Adjudicator Games were a massive mistake, but it was impossible to cancel them now.

“The Age of the Triumvirate will never come! Only under my leadership can the Olympians be toppled! I am Neo Hercules! I am the Chosen One and the New Emperor of the Gods!”

Marcus Antonius didn’t reply. The arrogance was so exceptional there were no words that could describe it. At least when Perseus Jackson had said some things, there was a lot of intended mockery behind them. The son of Poseidon had not been that megalomaniacal, devoid of morals, and utterly repulsive.

“Neither I nor the rest of the Triumvirate will ever serve you. This I swear, for all days and nights to come.”

“In that case, you will never leave this Coliseum alive,” Commodus gloated, reacting like the spoilt child he had always been. “Tell your team to prepare their last wills and enjoy these days...for I doubt you have many left to live.”

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Defiled.

Panther had rarely thought of the word before yesterday, but now it came every minute in her head.

She was no longer a Huntress, and she had been defiled.

It was like you felt so dirty it had tainted you very soul.

It had broken her.

It was like no amount of pure water could make you feel clean again.

And the worst part? The sickening feeling her emotions had once again be the catalyst of this disaster.

If she had not chosen to storm out of the waiting room-

The Nemean Lioness gritted her miniature fangs.

Defiled.

And by her fault, many of her sisters had followed her, and been enslaved and transformed with her.

Panther wished she could apologise to them.

But it was impossible.

Commodus had ordered them to not speak to each other unless they were in his presence, and he gave them express permission.

And in twenty-four hours, when he wanted them to use their tongue, it was for far more depraved purposes.

The former Lieutenant seethed in hatred.

This megalomaniac Emperor truly was a degenerate and a male that deserved to be tortured for a million years in the Fields of Punishment.

And she, like all her sisters who had followed her, save Ellen and Jenna, were his slaves.

The magic binding them to him made sure of that.

At least her thoughts were her own, no matter how hard it was to listen when her very body betrayed you, no matter how painful it was to watch as if you were a stranger looking at your very flesh participate in horribly perverted things.

“I wish I could strangle him with my bare hands,” Panther murmured as she entered the tiny bathroom that had been given to her this morning. Assuredly nothing in this Coliseum would make her clean again, but the hot water might help somewhat. The humanoid body she was currently using was unfamiliar, perpetually saturated with unnatural urges.

“I think impressive queues are already created for the honour of being first line when execution day will come.”

Panther turned incredibly fast, because she knew this damn voice!

“Jackson? How in the name of-“

The vision her eyes gave her was one of the son of Poseidon, yes, but it was flickering and hazy. It was like you were looking at him like he was on the other end of a large water mirror.

But it was him.

“How can you be here?”

The Demigod smiled.

“Well, technically, you see, my mortal body and every tiny part of my essence are safely waiting in the Ludus. I am not here. I am currently resting after an exhausting day. Everyone in the Suicide Squad will vouch for me, by the way.”

“You are not here,” Panther repeated slowly, understanding immediately what the son of Poseidon was saying. That way, if Commodus commanded her to speak the truth, she could give the answer he wouldn’t like.

As such, she didn’t ask ‘how?’ or why?’.

But there was some method of communication currently opened, and Commodus had not forbidden her or any other former Huntress to speak to Jackson in case he contacted her.

“I fell into a trap, and I damned my sisters along with myself.” Her feline traits twisted in disappointment, this time directed against herself. “I should have listened to the daughter of Hades...and yourself.”

There, it had hurt, but she had said it.

“If it can make you better,” Perseus Jackson said, “I hadn’t seen the Thespiades plan coming either.”

“But you’ve recovered, you’re not enslaved, and you are in a position to continue your Labours, with two victories under your belt.”

“The Labours don’t matter,” the red eye of the Demigod shone malevolently. “Commodus wants all of us dead, or kneeling enslaved at his feet. Any temporary escape isn’t as much of a reassurance as you think it is.”

More than once, accepting the deal of ‘volunteering for a few arena fights’ was the worst mistake she’d ever done in her life.

“I am a monster now, and no longer a virgin. I can’t return to the Hunt.”

Perseus Jackson sighed.

“Your loyalty to the Goddess you served until recently is admirable, but I advise very much focusing on you and you alone now, not her.”

“You don’t know-“

“Your ex-Lady pulverised three of her temples and provoked a few thousand deaths across the world in a rampage where the humans were absolutely the prey of choice, right after the Third Labour,” the black-haired Demigod informed her flatly in a voice that was almost afraid. “Many Gods don’t shoot the messenger bearing them the bad news; in the Goddess of the Hunt’s case, I’m personally willing to testify that doesn’t apply. While I agree you were stupid and this isn’t worthy of a death sentence given how much you already suffered for your failures, she will definitely kill you. In your disaster of a hunt, Commodus stole from her tiny shreds of her divine power. It is the equivalent of a cup of tea in an endless ocean, but it is power that won’t return. There are going to be scapegoats, and you, being the leader of this leonine pride, Panther Kowalski, are perfect to play that role.”

Strangely enough, despair didn’t crush her anymore. Was it because there was so much of it before, or was it because her hatred for Commodus drowned everything else?

“Can you kill him?”

For the first time, Panther acknowledged she was standing in front of the son of Poseidon completely naked, and she didn’t feel any sense of shame anymore. It said quite terrifying things about her mind not changing...or that she had learned one hour ago that tomorrow, Commodus was going to parade them with no clothes in front of hundreds of thousands of spectators.

“Right now, if I did kill him, the ‘Thespiades Ritual’ would ensure you would follow him into the grave seconds after.”

And since they were now monsters, Panther and the eighteen other Nemean Lionesses would then reform eventually, always doomed to obey every whim and command of Commodus.

“Yes, I suppose it is better to avoid that.”

“I’m so glad you agree,” there was a thin smile, which disappeared as fast as it had appeared. “I will not play with words: I can’t reverse the Nemean Lioness transformation you and the others have been on the receiving end of. “The Labour is over, the monstrous essence has merged with your soul and your body. Some of the process isn’t over, but it’s more because the mind is forced to take things slow, otherwise you get brain-dead beings.”

“My priority is to escape being a slave, and to free all the girls with me.” Panther declared with all the conviction she had left. “We must all break this invisible leash before the end of the Games, or we will lose all chance to ever be free again.”

The former Huntress didn’t know how she knew that, but it was the truth. Commodus had enslaved them, but it was not yet permanent. If they were still at his nonexistent mercy when the seventh day was over, on the other hand, they would be forced to serve him for the rest of their existence, and since the madman intended to be immortal with all those he called ‘pets’, that was a very long time.

“I have a solution to your problem; the only issue is that it’s unconventional, and you may not like it.”

“Does it look like I’m enjoying my captivity, Jackson? He raped me. He defiled me. On my bow and my new claws, I swear I will not let him get away with it.”

“Admirable spirit.”

Panther hated the fact that the sound which came out of her throat was a feline purr.

“We Huntresses can be very vengeful.”

“That I already knew.” The son of Poseidon shook his head. “Very well, let’s begin with the explanations, the audience with Mark Antony is not going to distract him for very long. It involves destroying Commodus’ plans in a most enjoyable and cataclysmic manner.”

The grin was just mad, and two days before, Panther Kowalski would have made several steps back and called her sisters to hunt the danger this Demigod represented.

Now, she didn’t care anymore. Commodus must suffer and die, and his death had to make her free.

The rest of the world could burn for all she cared. The Nemean Lionesses of the pride came before the rest.

“I am ready to play my part.”

“Music to my ears,” the human-looking monster grinned. “Congratulation, Panther Kowalski, you have been chosen to play the architect’s role in the most shocking, vicious, unprecedented betrayal of this century!”

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

Annabeth waited before Perseus had used a towel to mop up all his sweat before approaching.

This ‘techno-magical channel’ certainly seemed extremely useful, given that it had been able to bypass all the security protocols of those serving Commodus, but it looked like it was extremely exhausting for the key user too.

The Telekhines and Bianca di Angelo left the hastily modified room, while other shark demons dismantled in haste all the machines. The daughter of Athena cleared her throat.

“I’m almost disappointed you didn’t call them ‘cat girls’ even once.”

“I’m trying to use them as spies within the enemy’s inner sanctum, Annabeth.” The son of Poseidon replied after emptying a big bottle of water. “As much as insulting them would provide some momentary satisfaction, it wouldn’t give me anything else.”

“True. But it their fault we lost the Third Labour so badly.”

“And they have been horribly punished for it,” the leader of the Suicide Squad answer before raising an eyebrow. “Unless you think you can deal a worse punishment than what Commodus did after he enslaved them?

Annabeth grimaced before shaking her head.

It was an unfair question. No, she couldn’t. If half of the stuff Panther Kowalski had said the truth, the Huntresses and the other girls had endured things that most people generally killed themselves to avoid.

Commodus was a rapist, a murderous monster, and worse of all, he had full control of their bodies, giving him absolute mastery when and where the girls had to be humanoid cat girls or Nemean Lionesses. They had to obey his whims, down to the one who could tell them to stop breathing at any time.

And the eighteen girls who had been enslaved didn’t even have the option of death as an escape.

“At least their willingness to destroy their tormentor exists.”

“Yes. It’s really funny in some kind of sick way that I suspect that in the first hours, the eighteen cat girls were all extremely fearful and terrified of the Narcissist One. Twenty four hours later, it seems they all hate him with a passion, and the fear is gone.”

“Because he already did to them all the awful deeds they could imagine, and more besides?” the blonde Demigoddess asked for clarification.

She received a nod of approval as confirmation.

It said a lot about how pathetic and incompetent Commodus could be in many aspects.

“Of course, the reason he doesn’t particularly care is likely that at the end of the ritual, he hopes to control the very thoughts of all Nemean Lionesses.”

“Once again correct,” Perseus agreed. “It is why I must insist one more time on how monumentally stupid it was for Commodus to reveal his big plan when all the cats had not charged into the trap. It is only a guess, but I think it is the first time he went directly against his advisors and backers’ wishes.”

“Well, the historical records all mention this piece of scum was impatient in the extreme until his very first death. I will jump in joy when this megalomaniac will get a slow and painful death.”

“So bloodthirsty,” Perseus grinned, but there was approval in his voice.

Annabeth tried to not look too fidgety, or the Gods forbid, of blushing under his gaze.

“Anyway,” the black-haired Demigod looked away. “We have a proper plan now, with the majority of the Nemean Lionesses onboard, and the *package* has been confirmed to be on its way. That leaves us the next goals.”

“Which are?”

“Surviving the next day of Labours that will come in a few hours with a minimum of casualties, as few permanent losses as we can manage save for the War-sworn mercenaries, restoring the confidence of our team after the stupidity of the Huntresses caused a spectacular decrease, and of course, to demolish utterly Commodus’ Fourth and Fifth Labours.”

This was certainly ambitious. It was far more confident words than the son of Poseidon had uttered during the first day.

“How?” a simple word, but it was hardly an unreasonable one, in her opinion. “We still have no idea what kind of murder plan is going to be unveiled tomorrow morning.”

“We don’t know the exact *specifics*, no,” Perseus still smiled, however. “But now I have a far better idea what kind of constraints Commodus is operating under. For his story to be a successful one, this vicious narcissist predator has severe constraints. One of them is clearly time. The seventh day is his deadline; if he fails, he will implode under the power he will have conjured, and his soul will likely suffer a level of annihilation so complete he will never return in a million years.”

Annabeth hummed in approval. It was good to know that the insane and risky approach had some massive drawbacks.

“Thus the schedule.”

“Thus the schedule.” Perseus repeated. “The other critical problem from our enemy’s point of the view,” and how fast this Emperor had replaced the Triumvirate as the chief opponent of the Adjudicator Games, “is that he needs at all cost some monstrous essence that was involved in the Twelve Labours of Heracles. He can’t use what he did more than once in all the duration of the Games.”

“That still leaves him a great deal of leeway.”

“At first, it might seem true,” Perseus’ words took a far more cautious tone. “But then comes the second factor, the Emperor must have already established some kind of ‘relationship’ with the animals and monsters involved in the Labours before.”

“Oh,” this was all she was able to reply at first. “Wait a minute! He used Emus in the First Labour!”

“Commodus trained battle-ostriches all the time well before he became the Caesar of the Romans. Believe me, I checked, and all my sources agree on this.”

What kind of madman decided training *ostriches* for gladiator games was a hobby?

Oh, wait, they were speaking of Commodus.

Never mind.

“Okay, my mistake,” she admitted. “I suppose the Stymphalian Emus were sufficiently close to the Ostriches as a symbol to not cause any problems. The Mares wouldn’t either, since they were a standard monster in the Twelve Labours, and Incitatus was a Roman Senator who once served an Emperor.”

That still left the rabbit, but for the sake of her sanity, Annabeth wasn’t going to ask.

“Okay, that makes sense. You know the nine remaining Labours that haven’t been used so far, and you have studied Commodus’ historical gladiatorial and imperial hobbies. All you need now is to combine the monstrous and the non-monstrous choices at his disposal, and you obtain a far more reduced number of combinations.”

“And the ‘High Judge’ wants to kill all those unnecessary for his apotheosis, meaning he very much needs powerful monsters.”

“He certainly killed plenty of gladiators yesterday, and enslaved eighteen girls.”

“He’s impatient,” Perseus reminded her. “And while he seriously reduced Team Triumvirate’s effectives, I think even Commodus has experienced some wariness that the core of Team Adjudicator is still intact after the first day. Him requesting the presence of Mark Antony was a move to increase the hostilities between teams, while he oversees the bloodbath.”

Evidently, seen like that, it seemed the moronic plan of Commodus had already hit a few nasty obstacles.

Hopefully, the treacherous piece of scum would experience a lot more unpleasantness in the next twenty-four hours.

“So you have a good idea what he is going to unleash against us in the Fourth and Fifth Labour, I take it?”

“I think I do, yes.” Perseus grinned, and this time Annabeth answered it with a smile. “I think it is time to make some major alterations to these Games. It is time for Team Adjudicator to counterattack. This Parody of Roman Empire struck with overwhelming force. Now it is our time to return the favour!”

**22 January 2007,** **Commodianopolis’ Command Room, the entrails of the Commodus Coliseum**

She woke up at dawn.

She didn’t wake up because it was dawn, however.

She woke up because something in her was *burning*.

The Demigoddess – for she was a Half-Blood, and at that moment, the suffering very much reminded her of the ‘half-divine’ status’ limits – tightened her fists.

It took a monumental of control to not scream in pain.

There was a carafe of water next to her bed.

In two minutes, she drank everything it contained, and yet it wasn’t enough!

It wasn’t enough.

Deep inside her, something was burning.

“How is it possible?” She grunted. “I absorbed some power from the Moon and the Hunt. If anything, it should be cold!”

No answer came. And the pain inside her belly – though it was not something as ‘normal’ as her organs or her muscles aching – did not disappear before several minutes.

When at last this part of the suffering ended, it was her legs which decided to explode in pain.

Fortunately, she was seated at the edge of her bed, not standing, otherwise she would likely have fallen.

“Close to thirty-six hours, and it is getting worse,” the Demigoddess lamented herself. “Is it because I only absorbed the power of the vows of ten Huntresses, not twenty? Or is because two of the girls refused me?”

She didn’t dare voicing the other possibilities out loud.

Was it because the power was never hers to absorb?

Was it because something had gone wrong with the ritual?

“It should make my father safe. It *will* make my father safe.”

This felt like a mantra, and she repeated it more and more often since the Third Labour ended.

This was the only reason she had to continue.

Yes, Neo Hercules had told her it was going to let her ascend as a full-fledged, immortal Goddess. He had promised her it would give her more power than her wildest dreams. He had assured her that her song would give billions of humans happiness and joy.

But she was doing it for her father.

Everything else, including her name, the Lethe had taken it from her.

It had taken nearly everything from her, except the memories she had of her father, and yet it didn’t hurt as much the flames of suffering erupting in different parts of her body right now.

She removed her nightclothes, and tried very hard to not show any expression of displeasure.

Below her navel, her body looked more and more like she has plunged into a pool filled with silver metallic dye.

There were significant areas that still showed the original colour of her skin, but there were far fewer of them than they had been when she went to bed.

She was transforming; there was no doubt about it.

The shape of her feet was not the same.

Between her brown hair, there were small points emerging, the very roots of what Neo Hercules had promised her to be future majestic golden antlers.

Staring at the mirror of her bedroom, the Demigoddess couldn’t find a single part of her body that hadn’t experienced some transformation.

No wonder it burned deep inside her.

But she also knew something terribly wrong was happening to her. The men and women monitoring her health assured her of the contrary, but instinctively, the Demigoddess didn’t believe them.

The entire transformation process felt wrong, from the very start.

“But it is an ongoing ritual, there can’t be any question of turning back now.” If there was something she believed with all her heart, it was that interrupting everything now would result in terrible consequences.

And she had loved singing. It had not pleased her it was used for such purposes, but the Nemean Lionesses were hardly innocent themselves. Virgins, yes, but they were hardly innocent; warriors and Huntresses, their hands had been soiled with the hands of men they professed undying hatred for.

“All I’m doing, I’m doing it for my father.”

Goddess or not, there were far worse reasons to do what she did.

The door opened, and the personnel brought her the new clothes she would need for the Labours of today.

It wasn’t much: a silver swimsuit that managed the feat of falling into the ‘one-piece swimsuit’ category’ all the while revealing absolutely everything about her changing body.

And a pair of high heels that were so high that the young Demigoddess needed a couple of minutes of training to walk without falling on her backside.

Mercifully, the pain had stopped afflicting her legs...for now. Of course, it was tearing apart her back and her shoulders now.

She didn’t complain; the swimsuit had at least been way easier and faster to cloth herself with than the ‘costume’ of Ceryneian Hind.

The High Judge of the Twelve Labours arrived mere minutes after.

Like her, he had dressed in some sort of swimsuit.

Unlike hers, his was golden, infused with Nemean Lion essence, and left his incredibly muscular torso completely bare, leaving everyone to see the growing golden metallic patches that hadn’t been there before the First Labour.

“Shall we, Caesarea Neo Diana?

“Yes, Imperator Neo Hercules, I am ready.”

And the sooner it happened, the better. Maybe if the Demigods and other mortals standing in the arena acknowledged the futility of their struggle, both their suffering and hers would end today?

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**Situation after 3 Labours:**

**Team Adjudicator effectives: 79**

**Team Triumvirate effectives: 71**

**Labours won by Team Adjudicator: 2**

**Labours won by Team Triumvirate: 0**

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**Author’s note**:

An Impractical Guide to Godhood will continue in the next update, which will likely given the title: *Imperial* *Circus*.

For Commodus really, really shouldn’t have motivated one Perseus Jackson or revealed part of his master plan. Now things are going to escalate in increasingly mad inventive ways...