Teaser the Empire Strikes Back

**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, 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 all 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 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 two metres above the ground; even for Demigods, it was going to be quite a jump to jump 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 Panthers 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 sprints that were 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.

“**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 efforts 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 else. 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!”