

The Oracle Paths

Volume 2: The First Ordeal

Chapter 108 - Turmoil in the Empire

Shortly before going to the thermal baths for his daily ablutions, Jake went for a walk in the central patio of the Ludus in search of Creece, the Smuggler. It had become one of his daily rituals since he had received his first pay.

It had allowed him to investigate Will and Sarah's situation. He had also tried to find Tim but without success. Wherever the child was, his Ordeal took place in a completely different destination.

Sarah had joined Princess Livia's Ludus and was undergoing training similar to his own. She had apparently become bosom friends with the Princess in just a few days. Only the Oracle knew how she had accomplished this feat.

Will's situation was more complicated. He had become a scribe in the service of the Quintus clan, but these slaves also had to undergo military training. Unfortunately, the latter was not of the same quality as that of a Ludus, being limited to self-defense and some basic notions of combat if they later on became envoys.

Will had been able to use his intellect and his Oracle to gain the trust of Quintus Helvius, but he was kept away from all important discussions. He was sure, however, that something was going on.

Since he had defeated a gladiator in the official rankings and was training with Gerulf, Jake no longer had to shave his head like the other recruits. The problem was that with his great vitality his hair

and nails were growing abnormally fast. He had to cut his hair every week and trim his nails every other day. Boring!

Jake refused to believe that the warriors at the top of the Mirror Universe hierarchy were living a daily struggle just to keep their hair and scalp in check. Therefore, there had to be a way to control it all, but for now it was a real thorn in his side that he couldn't get rid of.

The only advantage, however, of his new Agility stats was that he now had enough dexterity and hand-eye coordination to perform feats that would have required long hours of practice in the past. Like cutting the hair on the back of his head without a mirror with a simple pair of scissors.

He did not have the experience of a professional hairdresser, but from his point of view he was doing admirably well. His new Perception and Intelligence probably contributed to this as well.

After a few minutes wandering the corridors of the Ludus, Jake finally found Creece who seemed to be receiving a delivery at the entrance of the compound. Waiting patiently at the side for the transaction to be completed, he watched the lively exchange between the delivery man and the trained gladiator.

When the trader finally went away satisfied with his empty cart as he weighed the purse full of coins, Creece turned to him.

'Oh Jake, to what do I owe the honor of your presence? The usual, I suppose? You know my rates...' Creece greeted him with his fake friendly smile that Jake had learned to recognize for what was underneath. A snake.

Without flinching or saying a word, Jake took a few silver coins from his own purse and poured them into Creece's open palm, his arm outstretched like a beggar. The man swiftly closed his fist, making

the coins ring, before opening his hand again in front of Jake as if to beg again.

‘I’ve already paid the usual price.’ Jake grunted in a bad mood. Fighting against Gerulf had given him a temper as explosive as the Kinthar. It wasn’t good to provoke him.

‘Yes... But the prices have gone up. That’ll be 15 silver coins from today.’ The smuggler answered without the slightest embarrassment before the intense glare of Jake who seemed about to spew lightning at the impudent.

Without breaking eye contact with Creece from the beginning to the end of the transaction, Jake pulled three more coins from his purse with slow gestures before throwing them one by one with a snap of his finger into the palm of the Smuggler.

‘This is the last time... Or else...’ Jake pulled one last piece of silver from his purse and crushed it in his fist before revealing the deformed piece of metal.

The former gladiator in charge of the Ludus’ external affairs stiffened slightly, but soon regained his usual phlegm. He was not the strongest gladiator, but if he was still alive it was because he knew where the line was. This new gladiator was Gerulf’s protégé and his potential was greater than his own.

And for a dumb Throsgenian, he was pretty damn vicious! All the scams he used to pull on those barbarians didn’t work against this recruit. Worse! He felt like he’d been conned a few times already.

‘You know it’s not my fault, Jake. The Empire isn’t safe right now. I deserve a little bonus for the risks I’m taking...’

‘If someone like you was in danger outside the Ludus, there’s not many people who would dare to leave their homes. Even that merchant didn’t have an escort. ‘

The Smuggler stiffened again. Oh by Myrmid! How he hated dealing with smart people! It was a real pain in the àss.

‘Oh, you mean Hectus who just left us? He doesn’t look like much, but he’s a former Cornix Legion Tribune. He retired because of an injury a few years ago, but he’s an admirable warrior. He’s turned to risky business and delivers his own orders now. ‘

Jake harrumphed when he heard Creece’s answer. Every discussion with the little man was like this. Although his intelligence has increased and he might not be as naive as he once was, without his Oracle he would have been fooled countless times.

Hmjusuz, ovzmpév zunuoaoamr frt aqafoamr md val Svftmj Gpatu, vu vft darfiw daepzut mpo ovu hvzfhouz md ovu artasatpfi frt hmpit rmj tm jaovmpo ovu Ozfhiu om tufi jaov vaq.

‘In this case, why is it not as safe to move around the Empire as it used to be?’

‘Well, apparently it has something to do with a rumor that has been circulating within Heliadas for the past few days...‘

‘I’m listening. ‘

Creece reached out his hand open again, as if he needed a little something to get his memory back, but this time Jake didn’t take the bait.

‘Aaaarrgh! Get off me, I get it!’ The Smuggler screamed as Jake twisted his fingers, forcing him to get down on one knee.

His cries brought the guards nearby, who gazed wide-eyed at the pitiful state their comrade was in. They, too, had been cheated by the rascal in the past, and far from wanting to help him, they felt a heartfelt sense of contentment.

‘Thank you for your help, wondering what you are being paid for! Get back to your post or you can kiss your bonus goodbye, I promise!’ Creece immediately began sputtering at the guards present after Jake let him go, focusing his anger on targets within his reach. A vile and petty character, indeed!

‘And so, this so-called rumor?’ Jake brought it up again, this time expecting a sincere reply. And he wasn’t disappointed. He may not know how to talk to women, but rats like that were his snack.

‘Princess Lucia is said to be missing... All the noble clans are turning heaven and earth upside down to find her. Anyone who wanders alone or who seems suspicious to them sees his cart inspected and is questioned at length.

‘Of course, this is the official version. They’ll do anything this time to find her. Two thousand people have been found dead from injuries related to the torture they allegedly suffered. There is no doubt that the noble families are behind this.’

Princess Lucia was the younger sister of Princess Sexta Livia and therefore the youngest daughter of the Emperor. Since his stay here, Jake had learned a lot from Creece in particular.

Lucia was reputed to be the favourite daughter of Sextus Caelius Augustus. He guarded her like the apple of his eye and the guards at her side were hand-picked. She was tightly protected and never left the imperial palace. Very few had seen her in person and no one knew what she looked like.

The revelation of her disappearance came at a time when the military conflict against the Throsgenians in the North was getting bogged down in a war of attrition, resulting in countless deaths. The Emperor and his Generals who were supposed to turn the tide had met opponents befitting them and were now stuck in place.

‘I suppose these clans want to get to her first so they can gain favor with Caelius or have leverage against him. So predictable...’ Jake grunted at half voice.

‘Exactly. But more importantly, the current Emperor isn’t much liked by the other clans. The Sextus have held the throne for almost a century. Statistically, another clan should have replaced them a long time ago because it’s impossible for the strongest Myrmidian in the empire to come from the same family over and over again. The bloodline of the other noble clans is no less impure than that of the Sextus.’

‘So this is a conspiracy?’

‘That’s what I think.’ Creece confirmed in a low voice.

Jake scratched his chin for a moment as he reflected on all this, and then concluded that it wasn’t his problem at the moment.

‘Any letters from Will and Sarah?’

‘Yes, a letter from Will.’