

The Oracle Paths

Volume 2: The First Ordeal

Chapter 126 - Cassius' Story

Jake's mind automatically compared Cassius' face with that of the princess, taking into account the age difference, and one could practically see the error message in his eyes. Hugo was also finding it hard to believe.

Cassius was rather pale skinned, a beautiful tonsure in the making with rather short grey curly hair and hazelnut-coloured eyes. Princess Lucia was a petite blonde with golden eyes and olive skin. Apart from her small size and a couple of years younger, she looked a lot like her sister but not much like the Lanista.

Seeing the doubt in their eyes, Cassius smiled before explaining himself.

'It's a complicated story, so it's best to start from the beginning. As you know, the noble clans are essentially inbred to keep their blood pure.'

Jake and Hugo nodded, Priscus' explanation still fresh in their minds.

'Well, the royal family is no exception.' Cassius shrugged and resumed. 'Antonia, the current Queen of the Myrmid Empire is the Emperor's cousin, but also my mother-in-law.'

'As royal marriages are arranged from childhood, there is little room for love. It is the duty of the royal couple to give birth to a few heirs

to perpetuate the royal line, but for the rest they are relatively free to do as they please. ‘

Jake was already imagining the story straight out of a child’s fairy tale and he wasn’t disappointed.

‘My father and I, like you, were slaves. Brought back from the Eastern Conquest thirty years earlier, we were bought at an auction by Antonia to join her Ludus. Princess Livia’s passion for gladiatorial training and fighting came from her mother.

‘ Skipping all the details, Antonia and my father fell in love and I had a rather happy childhood. With the help of Antonia’s royal blood and his determination my father quickly rose through the ranks in the hope of becoming a Champion of the Coliseum and gaining his freedom. It was also the only way to obtain Myrmidian citizenship and a clan name.

‘Thanks to my father’s efforts, he quickly became the best warrior in the Ludus and forged a strong friendship with Priscus who, as you know, was rejected by the Quartus for his physical deformities.

‘After fulfilling her duty as Queen by giving birth to Lucius, the Crown Prince, Antonia began to date my father openly, attracting the wrath and contempt of the other clans. A few years later Princess Livia was born, followed two years later by her little sister Lucia. ‘

Tvu Lfralof duii arom f lvmzo laiurhu. Fmz ovu oaqu guare, rmovare luuqut nfzoahpifziw tzfqfoah ukhuno dmz ovu ırçèlo guojuur hmplarl, jvahv qufro ovfo ovu jmzlo jfl wuo om hmqu. Jfcu frt Hpem zuqfarut qpou, rmo tfzare om arouzpzno val lomzw.

‘Until then her husband the Emperor Augustus had tolerated his wife’s adultery, their love being only an illusion. Augustus himself had many concubines and was known to celebrate his victories of

conquest by fornicating with the natives. It is rumoured that he might have a few thousand bastards scattered throughout the Empire and its neighbouring lands...

‘ Things changed with Lucia’s birth. To protect her older sister Livia, Antonia and my father chose to acknowledge Augustus’ paternity in order to guarantee her the official rank of Princess. The Imperator had not objected and the same should have happened with Lucia. Unfortunately, fate sometimes does things strangely.

‘While the noble clans fornicate among themselves to maintain the purity of their declining Myrmidian blood, Lucia, who was born to a Myrmidian and a stranger, has changed the picture. Her blood is as pure and powerful as that of the Myrmid Hero himself. The theoretical 100% purity never achieved.

‘ You must know that the blood of today’s nobles is not a quarter as powerful as the original hero’s blood. The diluted ‘pure’ blood that we gave you to help your training was in fact that of Priscus and more recently Khazus. Don’t worry, they are amply compensated for this donation and were never forced to do so. ‘

‘It means that...‘ Jake was starting to guess what had happened and what Lucia was going through today.

‘ Yeah, indeed. With such pure blood, Lucia’s future seemed bright, but it was without counting on the ambitions of her esteemed fake father Augustus. The pressure on the Sextus to retain the throne is extremely strong. The Imperator is and must always remain the strongest Myrmidian.

‘Before Lucia was born, Augustus was under extreme stress, many Myrmidian warriors were rivalling his strength, and every victorious defence of his throne was at the cost of new wounds. The time

before he was finally defeated by another clan or had to make way for his younger brother was counted.

‘ By the time Lucia was three months old and had learned to read on her own at the age of two, Antonia and Augustus had the royal physician test her blood. The result showed up and Augustus’ sinister plan took shape.

‘Every week he would have his daughter’s blood drawn for his personal consumption, which allowed his power to skyrocket in a very short time. He defeated all his rivals and made his position as Emperor and that of the Sextus unshakeable.

‘He segregated Lucia inside the Royal Palace, hiding her from the rest of the world by claiming she was his favorite daughter, and that she was...

‘Lucia does indeed have a quality that other Myrmidians did not have, she was brilliant. Like Lu Yan she also possesses the spiritual blessing of the Eltars, which comes to her from my father. This combination may have been the reason that magnified the power of her Myrmidian blood, but it also gave her an innate talent for strategy.

‘Augustus soon consulted his daughter before and after each battle, stringing together victorious conquests with minimal casualties. Lucia would accompany him with her sister during his campaigns, much to their mother’s despair.

‘At that time my father defeated the reigning champion of the Coliseum and obtained his Rudus, the wooden sword that set him and his descendants free. Naturally, he wanted to save the daughter, who knew nothing of his existence. That never happened. ‘

‘Only a few days after he was granted his freedom, he was invited by the Colyseum to visit the Temple where his Rudus was to be delivered to him. I have never seen him since then. ‘

It was indeed a sad story. One would have to be an idiot not to understand what had transpired. Augustus had never stopped looking after his daughters’ real father and had arranged to get rid of him, or maybe not.

‘This is the story...‘ Cassius concluded wearily, suddenly appearing much older. ‘I was told one morning that my father had left and the rudus and papers proving my new citizenship were issued to me.

‘Antonia, who had been sent to oversee another province, heard the news and became so mad with rage that she challenged Augustus to a duel. She lost, of course. She then handed over her Ludus to me, pretending to not know what had happened, but she was a terrible liar. Priscus didn’t believe the official version of events either.

‘So I developed this Ludus in the hope of finding the truth about my father’s death and seeking revenge. I soon discovered through investigation that it was impossible to find a former non-Myrmidian Arena Champion still alive. They all seemed to have vanished into thin air...

‘ Yet with the arrival of Gerulf and Khazus, I found hope again. Gerulf was so strong that he had no trouble becoming the Champion of the Colosseum and he refused the invitation of the Temple to stay by my side. Since then, I’ve been waiting for an opportunity.

‘It finally came with the recent war against the Throsgenians. The first defeat in Augustus’ reign forced him to go to the front in a hurry. Antonia, whom I hadn’t seen in years, then contacted me to help her daughter escape. You know the rest of the story. ‘

The rest of the story was mostly a fiasco, Jake and Hugo thought. Years of preparation training gladiators only to realize that half of them were actually spies! If Gerulf or Khazus had turned out to be traitors, Cassius' life would have been a total failure.

Cassius, far from being an idiot, could sense their disdain, but that didn't stop him from making his request.

'Now that you know everything, I have a task for you. I want you to become Lucia's bodyguards.'