

The Oracle Paths

Volume 2: The First Ordeal

Chapter 130 - The Coliseum

Jake thought that Lucia would have stayed in the Ludus under Gerulf's protection, but it was not so. The Princess's progress had been so terrifying that he was now unable to determine her true power. The potential of a Myrmidian pureblood was simply terrifying.

From her small size and frail, anemic appearance, the young woman was now about his height and seemed physically as strong as a Valkyrie. Her long golden hair fell down to her lower back and her golden irises radiated an incredible aura of valour and determination. Compared to Khazus and Priscus, one may have thought that they were not even of the same species.

Seeing Lucia's dramatic transformation, her half-brother Cassius had been flabbergasted but also overjoyed. He could feel how different she was from her former self, and even Gerulf was unable to estimate her true level. Well, the Kinthar had never been very sensitive anyway.

In preparation for the family trip, Cassius had ordered the highest quality armour and sword to be forged so that the princess would be able to protect herself under all circumstances. Over her exquisitely patterned golden armour, a black velvet hooded coat was covering the features of her face.

Not exactly discreet, and that wasn't the purpose. Cassius seemed intent on drawing attention to them. Gerulf and Khazus guarded the Princess on both sides, with only Priscus continuing to defend the Lanista standing in front of her.

As they marched towards Heliodas, retracing the path they had taken the day they were brought to this world, Jake noticed dark clouds gathering in the sky. The sun was still visible, but the weather could change at any moment. If he had been superstitious, he would have seen these clouds as a bad omen, but it remained to be seen who would be harmed by such an omen. Him or his foes?

When the group finally saw the city of Heliodas, Jake recognized the cereal fields, but also the garbage and slum heaps around the city wall. The smells of sewage and sweat mingled again and again with the cheap perfumes of the prostitutes and stalls.

He also recognized the Insula where they had appeared at the beginning of his Ordeal. Some of the recruits seemed to be discovering the city for the first time, being among the slaves who had been bought at a public auction in one of the nearby towns.

Moreover, as they approached the large gate giving access to the city, many slavers were queuing up with their goods waiting for permission to pass through so that they could sell their stock to the highest bidder.

Even so, there were fewer merchants than he remembered. Most of the people lining up were normal citizens, often wearing their best clothes. Their exuberance and numbers were reminiscent of the crowd at the entrance to a football stadium where a major league game was about to be played.

Servius Cassius wasted no time in queuing, walking parallel to the queue towards the gate. Recognizing the Lanista and the fierce

gladiators behind him, the Decurion supervising the entrances to the city immediately signaled to the other legionaries to let them pass.

Once inside the city, the tuff stone wall and poverty gave way to a resplendent city of marble and brick. The 7m wide central lane was paved and well-ordered legionary patrols were patrolling it as they had two months earlier.

There was less traffic, however. The stormy weather ahead might have had something to do with it, but it was a safe bet that all the wealthy citizens of Heliadas who could afford a wagon or stagecoach had already reached the Coliseum to attend the games organized by Sextus Lucius.

Even the many brothels in the city's slums were closed, their owners and employees having joined the arena either to watch the fights or to make a profit at the end of the games.

A few minutes later their group reached one of the aqueduct bridges over the Ylla River cutting Heliadas in half. Accustomed to walking this route, the legionaries standing guard at this checkpoint immediately recognized Cassius and greeted him with a cheerful greeting as they saw the Throsgenian recruits with him.

Straight away, the Lanista returned their greeting and without hesitation proceeded over the bridge to the central islet where the political, religious and commercial heart of the city was located. A moment later, they had reached the central islet where the games would take place.

Al mnnmlut om ovuaz dazlo tfw, jvur ovuaz bfaiuz vft emru om ovu ifzeu npgiah lypfzu ar ovu vufzo md ovu alifrt jaov ovu arouroamr md luiiare ovuq ovuzu, Cflapl juro ar f tadduzuro tazuhomr. Adouz lofware mr ovu hurozfi ifru dmz f duj vprtut quouzl, ovuaz ezmpn gzfrhvut mdd om hazhpqsuro ovu hmqquzhafi talozaho.

To the right of this and behind the Temple of Myrmid and the palaces of the various noble clans stood the Coliseum. Jake hadn't noticed it two months earlier, since it was largely hidden by the temple and the barracks.

He would have found it more logical to build the Coliseum on the other side of the islet with the amphitheatre and other entertainment venues, but the battles in the arena were apparently sacred to the Myrmidians. The proximity of the Great Temple and the heavy threat of being sacrificed by going there was certainly no coincidence.

The closer they got to the Coliseum, the more Jake became aware of the gigantic structure. The Coliseum resembled the one in the Roman Empire that he had seen in pictures years ago, but the dimensions were incomparable.

The building in question was as large as a football stadium, the walls lining the bleachers as high as a 15-storey building. The paradox was that the Temple of Myrmid next door was just as impressive. The golden statue of the Hero Myrmid at its entrance had little to envy to the Statue of Liberty.

Here, the patrols were more numerous and the soldiers very different. Instead of the characteristic navy blue of the Myrmidian legions, the legionaries present were draped in black and were generally older. Their eyes were vigilant and each of them emitted a murderous aura betraying their experience.

'The Imperial Legion...' Priscus murmured bitterly for Jake, Hugo and the siblings nearby. 'Augustus had to leave a few cohorts to ensure the safety of the palace and his eldest son. Fortunately, I don't recognize the crest of the first cohorts. Still, they cannot be underestimated. Each centurion is probably as strong as a Myrmid Templar and the decurions not much weaker.'

Jake frowned when he heard PriScus' warning. Looking up at the gray sky, a few droplets fell on his face, followed by a slight rumble of thunder.

'A thunderstorm... That takes the cake!' Khazus growled, without letting go of the grip of his gladius.

'Stop bitching.' Cassius ended his whining with a snap of his tongue. 'Don't complain, you're not the one who'll have to fight in the rain today.'

'Nothing's less certain...' The number two of the ludus grumbled in response.

After that, the group entered a staff door leading them to the underground galleries beneath the Coliseum where the gladiators used to prepare for their future fights. A Myrmidian in armor with scarred arm muscles inspected them one by one before giving a wooden token to the Lanista indicating the dressing room they had been allocated.

There was an intendant waiting for them there to explain the intricacies of the games to come. The first instruction he gave them drove Cassius mad with rage, which was quite rare.

'My apologies, I learned of it this very morning as well.' The sweaty steward with a well-oiled moustache apologized copiously with multiple bows and curtsies.

'The Throsgenians must not wear any armor. Their equipment has already been prepared by the Crown Prince.'

Seeing the equipment in question the Lanista barely refrained from strangling the moustached man. Apart from a leather loincloth and sandals, his gladiators would be literally naked. A tiny leather bra had been provided for the female fighters to ensure a minimum of

decency, but given the fineness of the garment one would have thought more of a sadomaso bondage accessory than a protective clothing.

Lu Yan, who Jake now knew, had an innate talent for acting, could not help but tremble slightly, her lip rising to form a hideous rictus. As for Jake, he was not at all surprised. He put on the armor, or rather undressed as he was asked to do without flinching. At least they could keep their swords.

‘I must interrupt you... but they can’t use their weapons either... they have to use these weapons here... ‘ The mustached steward barely dared to breathe when he met the gaze of Cassius and his acolytes. He had never felt death so close.

The weapons in question... were swords, but they were the training swords they were used to wielding. Worse, the wood was damaged, close to breaking.

Everything had been carefully thought out to prevent them from winning.