

# The Oracle Paths

## Volume 2: The First Ordeal

### Chapter 79 - Heliodas (part 2)

The wall of Heliodas was about 6 meters high, made of yellowish tuff stone with a crumbly aspect. From the outside and combined with the grime and poverty of the immediate periphery of the city, it looked as though it was an inconsequential harbour city.

Yet the interior conveyed a very different image. Farewell to the friable volcanic tuff, which was replaced by good brick, marble or granite as far as the eye could see. Jake was not a specialist in Ancient Rome or Greece, but he did understand why this Ordeal was categorized as Peplum.

Inside the walls, the dirt road was now paved with regular flat stones, slightly swollen in the middle to allow rainwater to drain away. About 7 meters wide, it was a major thoroughfare teeming with thousands of Myrmidian citizens were teeming to carry on their activities.

Several times their cohort of slavers had to move aside to make way for patrols of legionaries armed to the teeth, chariots or stagecoaches of important nobles whom they could not offend, or a messenger rider galloping and whipping his horse without mercy.

The districts on the outskirts of the city were definitely poorer than the large white marble buildings in the heart of Heliodas. They passed numerous brothels, stalls and other inhabited areas, where despite the neatness of the place the misery was still very apparent.

In any case, the water system was incredibly well developed and provided water to every nook and cranny of the city. These stone and brick structures were extremely imposing and striking, supplying the majority of residences, thermal baths and other public places. Several of them also served as bridges connecting the two sides of the river that cut Heliodas in half.

The river in question, according to the few stone panels he saw and could read perfectly, was named Ylla and flowed into the Baelian Ocean. Almost all the major cities of the Myrmid Empire, including the capital Myrm, were built along this river which gave the Myrmid territory its endless winding snake-like shape.

After about two kilometers, they reached one of the aqueduct bridges crossing the Ylla River and leading them to the center of Heliodas. The river was about a hundred metres wide and was divided in two around a central islet about eight hundred meters in diameter, which had become the commercial and political heart of the city.

Even before crossing the bridge, the standard of living of the people living near the river had increased significantly. Citizens were wearing clean tunics, many of them having their own escorts or slaves carrying sedan chairs. The women were elegant and wore dresses of various warm colours sewn with silver and gold thread.

Many carried ostentatious signs of wealth such as jewellery, brooches, necklaces and earrings with enough value to feed many of these poor suburban citizens for life, yet crime was almost non-existent. Low enough for these noble and wealthy merchants to dare to walk these mundane streets with only one or two guards.

Here, the alleys were clean and the facades of the buildings often painted or sculpted on stucco (a kind of lime with sand, marble-like

powder = cheaper than marble). These often represented famous battles or even more often the Hero Myrmid and his exploits.

In addition, they came upon more than one altar or small temple of contemplation with a statue of the latter. There were also other temples honoring other figures, but these were often much more modest in appearance. Clearly, the Myrmid Empire only supported the worship of its greatest hero.

Once they passed the checkpoint at the entrance to the aqueduct bridge, they reached the central islet, the heart of Heliodas. There, only huge buildings of sparkling white marble and impeccably maintained gardens awaited them.

An amphitheatre on their left, a gigantic temple on their right. And then a little further on, the forum accompanied by a gigantic complex of basilisks surrounding the famous large market square to which they were heading.

At the promixity of the temple, several palaces overlooked the city, protected by their own ramparts, often higher than that of Heliodas itself. The city's main barracks provided security for these politicians, nobles and religious priests of great importance.

Waovmpo ovu liaevoulo nfplu mz vulafoamr, ovuaz bfaiuz hmroarput om iuft ovuq om ovu qfar lypfzu jaov f lpzu loun. Al ovuw fnnzmfhvut, ovuw hmpit luu qfrw ezmpnl md lifsul ulhmzout iacu ovuaz mjr, ovu ifoouzl hmqare dzmq tadduzuro fypupho gzateul.

These slaves were not always Throsgenians like them, their appearances and skin colours being extremely varied, much more so than on Earth. Most of them were brought by ship to the Heliodas dock, which they had seen at the same time as the Baelian Ocean when they crossed the aqueduct.

Once on the large market square, which was a huge paved plaza about 100 meters in diameter and already full of potential traders, sellers and buyers. A wooden platform was erected in the middle of it and an old man in a white tunic, sandals and grey hair was standing there.

A first lot of about twenty slaves was standing behind him, waiting to be sold. Jake recognized in the eyes of some of them the foreign and vigilant gaze of Earthlings participating in an Ordeal like him.

It was easy to tell when someone was consulting his Oracle Device. The gaze would become empty and the eyes would seem to be staring at some point in the void or would quickly shift from right to left as if in full reading. Not everyone reacted this way, however.

Either the loss of intelligence had been too severe, or they were natives of this world. Those who had downcast faces or on the contrary were carried by a vindictive rage could only be aborigines.

Some of the participants had obviously been more fortunate than they were. The race in which their bodies had been altered was different from theirs, and some of them had obviously retained their intellect intact.

Jake could, however, discern some patterns in these fortunate few. These lucky ones were often elderly or had body language and personalities that showed a certain amount of self-confidence. Their gestures were safe and their hands were graceful or on the contrary calloused.

They probably had skills or talents that would have made the loss of their intellect more detrimental than anything else, preventing them from showing their full potential. Another possibility, of course, was that they had simply been lucky.

The luck factor certainly existed. By punishing them so randomly from their first Ordeal, the Oracle was teaching them that Ordeals were unpredictable, just like the Mirror Universe.

The fact that they were now vulgar slaves about to be sold could as well be a reminder that it was the fate that awaited them in five years time on B842 if they were not able to raise their Oracle rank or Ordeal numbers sufficiently. Of course, he was speculating. Cho Min-Ho's first Ordeal had nothing to do with theirs.

Over the next hour, the main square continued to fill up more and more, as the Heliodian citizens who went there were increasingly wealthy and influential. The slavers and their slaves waiting to be sold had to make up their minds to leave the plaza until it was their turn.

A centurion and his legionaries kept order, calling the slavers one by one when it was their turn to sell their goods.

Very high-end slaves could be sold in one of the auction basilicas, but a special permit was required to get there. This permit was usually only given to official Myrmidian generals or recognized Myrmid warriors.

Their jailer in legionary attire, with his ugly face and yellow teeth, certainly did not have this privilege. He had to be content to wait patiently for his turn like a wretch.

These Throsgenian slaves, which he had obtained cheaply and most of whom should not have lasted long, had miraculously regained strength, their vitality suddenly worthy of the best Myrmidians. And it was not to displease him.

It meant more money. And money, he liked that.

Jake and the other slaves were able to watch from afar with some apprehension as several lots of slaves like theirs were auctioned off, allowing them to learn a few things.

Well-built men and pretty women were sold for a minimum of 10 gold coins, enough to live sparingly in the slums of the city for a good year. Outside, probably double or triple, but security was no longer guaranteed.

Elderly people, children or ugly women without any particular handicap sold from 3 gold coins and rarely more than 7. The handicapped rarely sold, and often cost more to feed them than what they could bring back in labour to their buyers.

Nuko hfqu lifsul jaov lnuhafi ofiurol mz zuhmeraxut lcauil. Tvu araoafi fphoamr nzahu hmpit sfzw jatuiw.

Exceptional slaves, such as princesses from another country, elite warriors, or exceptional beauties, almost never appeared in such auctions in the public square.

After a long wait that made their feet hurt so badly that the unfortunate slaves who had the nerve to sit down were whipped, their slaver finally heard his name. In a split second he changed his jaded and undignified expression to that of a subservient and pleasant salesman, and beckoned them to follow him to the platform.

It was now their turn to be sold.