

The Oracle Paths

Volume 2: The First Ordeal

Chapter 80 - Livia

The group of slaves, always chained to each other, were led to the wooden platform overlooking the large public square. Some of them were frightened, their fleeting gaze constantly sweeping the crowd. Others were excited, eager to finish or execute their plans. Finally, some, like Jake, were calm, barely holding back from yawning.

The jailer who led them was probably only the lackey of a much more influential slavetrader, but he was certainly a qualified servant to be entrusted with such an important task. He was a veteran soldier, and the speed with which he changed his expressions and adapted his body language was worthy of respect.

He had many years of practice behind him in these types of transactions and knew the tricks of the trade well. As a result, the first lot of about twenty slaves he displayed on the dais to open the auction were neither his best goods that he kept for the grand finale, nor his worst.

On the contrary, selling the shabbiest slaves first might actually do him a disservice, making one think that the quality of his merchandise was mediocre. The wealthiest buyers might lose interest, or worse, leave.

Even if he had a beautiful princess for sale, if no one could afford to buy her, she would be sold for a pittance. He couldn't afford such a gamble. Especially since he recognized several extremely influential

personalities from Heliodas, some in their sedan chairs, others sitting in grandstands or around the tables of certain restaurants or open-air taverns.

The visibility from the stage was excellent and as long as the buyers were able to make themselves heard, it was possible to go about their business without any problems. Most of these notorious people had simply dispatched one of their guards to the stage and they were responsible for negotiating in their stead.

Jake had spotted several extremely wealthy merchants, whose tinkling of all the precious gold jewellery they carried with them could be heard from afar, as if they wished to be robbed.

All of them wore rudimentary tunics of different colours, but most of them were plain coloured. On top of this, many wore a white toga made of thick wool, attached by a fibula so that one of their arms remained uncovered.

Apart from the wearing of jewellery as an evident ostentatious sign, the only difference between the richest men and the citizens of more modest origins could only be seen in the quality of the fabric. The richest wore togas or pallium woven with finer wool while the poorest were sewn more coarsely or made of thin felt.

The auctioneer, who was also their jailer, suddenly clapped his hands to capture the attention of his audience. The hubbub of whispers and whispering ceased abruptly, replaced by a heavy silence.

Satisfied with its overall effect, his lips stretched into a gentle smile.

‘I introduce myself, I am the decurion Toleus of the 3rd cohort of the Falco legion, your humble servant for today. As you probably know, the war against the Throsgen barbarians is raging on the northern

front, and these savages are putting up a fierce resistance for which we were not prepared. »

Nods and murmurs of assent in the crowd confirmed the truth of his words. Most of the wealthy Heliadians present held positions of influence and naturally had access to the latest news of the empire.

No one doubted the invincibility of the Myrmid Empire, whose blood of their great Hero flowed through their veins. Their technology was superior, as was their sheer numbers and the martial prowess of their army.

However, it had to be acknowledged that these Throsgens had inflicted their first defeats on their army in more than a century. The Myrmidians became stronger when they were victorious, and weaker when they were defeated.

Yet this specificity obeyed very clear rules. This gain in strength did not come out of nowhere, just as the lost strength would not really disappear. The important point, though, was that the average Myrmidian warrior was no stronger than a human being from Earth. To be quite frank, they were even a little weaker, since the Aether density of this world was only 0.8 (or 8 pts).

Tvu Tvzmleurl juzu rmo giullut jaov ovu ezmjov nmouroafi ovfo ovu Mwzqatafrl vft. Or ovu movuz vfrt, ovuaz gmtaul juzu qphv qmzu zmgplo. A our wufz mit Tvzmleurafr jfl nzmfgiw lozmreuz ovfr ovulu atplo Mwzqatafrl jvm vft rusuz nzfhoahut frw lnmzo.

An adult had a brute strength and tenacity that conventional infantry could not hope to match. Like the Myrmidians, the Throsgenians were a warlike nation. They didn't have all these notions of strategy or formations, but they compensated with exceptional ferocity.

This had required the urgent deployment of their elite warriors, as well as that of their Emperor, the latest physical incarnation of Myrmid the Great.

The Myrmid Empire had been politically stable for millennia for one simple reason. Each Emperor was given his title after erecting a mountain of corpses of his enemies and countrymen.

Each confrontation, whatever it was, punished or rewarded the Myrmidians involved. Whether it was a game of chess, a game of hide and seek, or a simple wager. If both Myrmidian parties recognized the legitimacy of the challenge, then the Myrmid blood would take effect.

The consequence was that the current Emperor of the Myrmid empire was undefeated since his accession to the throne. The generals directly under his authority were all old monsters that no one dared to challenge anymore.

The fact that they were sent to the battlefield in the North was a credit to the Throsgens, but their end was inevitable. With the intervention of the legates, tribunes and other primipiles forming each Myrmid legion, the course of the war had changed in a flash and their fate had been sealed. They were not yet defeated, but it would not be long before that happened.

The Myrmid legions functioned very similarly to the ancient Roman Empire on Earth. Each legion had ten cohorts of a hundred men, each led by ten decurions and a centurion. New soldiers were assigned to the tenth cohort, while veterans were in the first. In the event of battle, the tenth cohort was always sent first into action.

Unlike the Roman system based on seniority, the cohort number was based on individual strength and the skills of the legionnaire. Those who would eventually join the first cohort of a legion were all

elite warriors who had overcome every deadly challenge with or without brio.

That a simple decurion of a 3rd cohort like Toleus was in charge of selling all Throsgen prisoners was rather surprising. This meant that, although he was not a great warrior or a fine strategist, his commercial and diplomatic skills had been recognized. In truth, it was above all his total lack of morals and scruples that was held in high esteem by his superiors.

‘As you know, General Flavius, to whom I obey, greatly appreciated the courage of these savages and therefore decided to spare them by opening the door of slavery to them. I have with me a large number of these prisoners, just waiting to find their new master to serve.

‘I guarantee you, you’ll find the specimen that suits you. Work, servant, guard or sex slave, I assure you that there is something for every taste and every purse. Even if you will not find a princess or Throsgen hero in these lots of goods, it may be that a gem is hidden among these pebbles.

‘ Finding it is up to you. »

Damn, that guy could have done some advertising on Earth, Jake mumbled in his mind. For sure, there weren’t any princesses among them. But there were Players. If he was planning to show off some of his talent to influence the rest of his Ordeal, others had made similar plans. He wasn’t the only one with a bracelet after all.

The murmurings of the crowd were enthusiastic and some of the Heliodian nobles sipping their red wine in a golden horn put it down to concentrate on the auction about to begin.

‘Interesting! Count me in! »

A woman's thunderous voice suddenly resounded from the entrance of one of the basilicas to the right of the stage, startling all those old merchants and politicians. When they saw the newcomer, a leaden silence enveloped the assembly.

Even Toleus, their jailer, was livid, as if he had just met his worst enemy. The presence of this devilish woman was a real catastrophe for all the merchants and slavers wishing to do business. With her present, no one would dare outbid the slaves who would have the misfortune to capture her interest.

Paying attention, Jake managed to catch the rare whispers of a group of nobles in togas, whose tranquility contrasted with the ugly faces of the other traders.

This woman was Sexta Caelia Livia Augusta, one of the many daughters of the present Emperor. A great warrior, but also one of the most influential Lanistas of the empire.