

The Oracle Paths

Volume 2: The First Ordeal

Chapter 86 - The Ludus

When they abandoned the great market square in the heart of Heliodas, the sun was at its zenith, beating so hard that it burned the back of their necks. Their Throsgen appearance gave them pale skin. Even the participants from warmer countries such as Yerode had barely darker skin than the others. A sort of pale brown for want of a better word.

As a result, without precaution, they were doomed to suffer from sunburn in the days to come. Jake's Constitution and Vitality stats were such that he was likely to pull through unharmed. The production of melanin that would allow him to tan would take place within a few hours, while the resistance of his cells would allow him to endure the force of ultraviolet radiation without hindrance.

Of course, it was possible that the Throsgenians were unable to tan and adapt to the high heat. In which case, their Ordeal would be made a whole lot more strenuous.

Servius Cassius, comfortably seated in his palanquin, guided them in the opposite direction from where they had come, up the Aqueduct Bridge and then the paved road that brought them to the islet. His escort was limited to his two gladiatorial bodyguards and his porters, so pedestrians didn't always let them pass, forcing Gerulf to elbow his way through.

The pace of their march was slow enough to spare the porters and the new slaves, so it took them almost an hour to get back to the outer city wall. The guards at the entrance, in contrast to the passers-by, recognized the man in the white toga at a glance, bowing low before stepping aside.

Jake was surprised that such a wealthy and respected man did not use a cart or stagecoach to get through the city. Even a horse would have been more comfortable than rotting on a sedan chair in the blazing sun for several hours. Over short distances it reflected a certain social status, but over long distances it was probably quite a hardship.

After a few miles out of the coastal city, the cohort left the main road and took a dirt track towards the sea. Vegetation was limited, sticking to yellow and rough grass along with small shrubs. Without the irrigation system provided by the aqueducts, fruit and vegetable growing would have been difficult during this period.

However, as they were progressing they were able to discover fields of grapevines, or at least a plant that resembled them, as well as many orchards. After an endless walk through many cultivated lands, a steep slope replaced the flat path they had been treading.

The weakest of them panting and dripping with sweat, the new slaves climbed the hill within an hour, the whole for a vertical rise of about one hundred and fifty meters. As they approached the summit, a huge structure emerged before their astonished eyes.

Surrounded by a stone precinct even higher than the outer wall of Heliodas, a gigantic ancient building stood at the top of the hill, leaning against the edge of a cliff that overlooked the ocean.

This left Jake and the other participants stunned, because they were under the assumption that this ludus was training only a few dozen

gladiators, a hundred at the most. Considering the size of the building, the capacity was much greater. Rather close to a thousand.

If the space was not wasted, the number of slaves like them inside should prove to be considerable. On adjacent dirt or paved pathways also leading to the building, Jake noticed other groups of slaves being escorted like theirs. Servius Cassius was, it seemed, the owner of the ludus, but he sourced slaves from many cities.

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usur qmzu aqnzullasu om ovuq. Tvu zfqnfzo md ovu hmqnmprt jfl fo
iuflo our quouzl vaev frt ovu gimhcl md lomru hpo arom ao juzu
nuzduhoiw pradmzq. Ar urmzqmpl quofi efou, dmiimjut gw f ovahe
jmmtur tmmz, efsu ovuq fhull om ovu arouzamz md ovu iptpl.

The legionaries standing guard at the entrance to the residence were different from those guarding Heliadas' gate. Their equipment was not standard, most of them wearing a composition of exotic armor and tattoos, their torsos often bare covered with scars. Each one of them triggered a warning signal signifying danger in Jake's mind. Gladiators, all of them.

Considering that most gladiators were certainly slaves, the trust that Servius Cassius placed in them by entrusting them with such positions showed that he was to be appreciated and respected by them. Or perhaps he paid them well.

Recognizing their masters, the guards bowed slightly, putting their right fist on their hearts.

'Master! »

'Hmmm... Dismissed. What's the latest news?' Cassius questioned them in his usual easy-going manner. He took opportunity to

dismount from his sedan chair, allowing his weary porters a well deserved rest.

‘Master, not counting the slaves in your party. 227 new recruits have joined our ranks. Creece brought 98, Lutex 57 and Hector 72.’

The master of the house displayed a satisfied expression. They had done a good job.

‘I’m not surprised by Creece, he always had a flair for business, but I’m amazed by Hector’s success. It was his first time in Cartia. »

‘We were able to confirm the quality of the slaves, they are all of excellent quality. 70% men, 30% women, all young and healthy. ‘The gladiator guarding the entrance hastened to reassure him.

‘ In that case, I shall have to reward them properly. ‘ Cassius exclaimed with a burst of jovial laughter. He seemed extremely familiar with his men, though they hardly dared to breach their formalism.

The metal grid blocking their access to the ludus was gradually lifted, followed by the enormous wooden doors which were pushed open to allow them in. Cassius, followed by his two personal bodyguards, resumed his walk, beckoning the twenty or so slaves to follow him.

For the record, Kyle was one of those lucky slaves. His identity as a young Throsgenian warrior had allowed him to be bought by Cassius without having to prove anything. The princess had not monopolized the handsome slave, recognizing the young man’s inexperience at a glance. Had she known that Cassius would forcibly acquire the last batch of slaves, she probably would have done things differently.

Among the twenty or so slaves were not only Kyle and the last batch, but also a few others. Unfortunately, without being able to communicate, it was impossible to determine who was one, from who was not. All those who had tried to prove their worth or influence their sale were nonetheless participants without any doubt.

Once through the big door, Jake discovered a well mowed lawn and multiple flower beds. Inhaling a breath of fresh air, a mixture of extremely relaxing floral scents caressed his nostrils. A few fruit trees such as fig, lemon and mandarin trees cast their benevolent shadows over them.

It was obviously not the figs, lemons and mandarins of the Earth. The lemons were red, the blue figs as big as melons, while the pale green mandarins could have been mistaken for unripe grapefruits. It remained to be seen whether these fruits were edible.

Beyond the gardens, a huge marble building with three floors and so long that they could not see the end of it was waiting for them. The red tiles of the roof were perfectly aligned, while colonnades bestowed a certain grace to the place.

Inside, they discovered that the house was hollowed out. The long entrance hall opened directly onto an impressive inner courtyard forming a gigantic patio. On closer inspection, Jake noticed that most of the courtyard had been dug out to form a miniature amphitheater, or rather a colossal elliptical arena.

A large marble cavea (raised bleachers or tiers cut into the rock) capable of holding at least a thousand spectators surrounded the arena. Numerous higher balconies also surrounded the arena, making it possible to monitor everything that was happening there. A few sentries were stationed on them.

In the corners of the patio, magnificent fountains and sculptures contrasted with the earth and sand forming the ground of the arena. The residence itself was just as luxurious.

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What caught their attention, however, was not the murals, the fruit buffet or the amphoras and carafes full of wine, but the young woman standing there to receive them.

‘Cassius! »

Unable to restrain herself, she threw herself into the arms of the balding man who wrapped his scrawny arms around her, twirling her off the ground for a short instant before exchanging a long kiss. After a long minute of extreme awkwardness for Jake and the other slaves, he put her down.

‘I’m back.’ The man in the toga simply said, with a gaze full of love.