

The Oracle Paths

Volume 2: The First Ordeal

Chapter 94 - The First Test

Khazus was as his name might suggest a Myrmidian. He had the same half-long Venetian blond hair and golden irises as Princess Sexta Livia. Unlike Priscus, whose noble origin was unclear, Khazus was a warrior as strong as an ox with no debilitating deformities.

The man was as tall as Gerulf, though less stocky, but no less muscular. His face was young, but betrayed that he had already experienced many things.

Like all gladiators his skin was tanned and he wore a breastplate directly on his bare chest, as well as the belt, the loincloth, the protective shell and the regulation training sandals. Unlike Priscus, who seemed to worship his whip, Khazus carried only a wooden sword within the Ludus.

‘Priscus has entrusted you to me, and it’s time for me to do my part.’ Khazus broke the ice with the recruits without wasting any time.

‘I am Khazus, number two in the Ludus after Gerulf. I joined this Ludus only two years ago for personal reasons. I’m not a slave like you and my Myrmidian bloodline is pure enough. Rewards are of no use to me. Hence my meteoric rise to position. Gerulf isn’t Myrmidian, but he’s an exception.

‘We’ll do as my predecessor did with the new recruits before me. I will have you fight friendly against another gladiator and depending on your performance you will be placed in a group.

‘The grouping does not affect your future ranking in any way. It will mostly affect the nature of the training you will undergo. For example, hiding your skills may be detrimental to your performance. So I advise you to do your best.’

The last words sounded like a warning from the Oracle to the participants. The place was safe. What was less safe was the Players’ behaviour towards each other. Concealing too much of their abilities would allow them to have a less strenuous training, but this would be reflected in the final rating of the Ordeal.

However, revealing everything was just as dangerous. Those who were aiming for a high score at the end of the Ordeal carefully pondered in their mind what they could or could not show. Others who simply hoped to survive the two months of the Ordeal did not ask themselves all these questions.

‘Pick up a wooden sword from the crate over there and form an orderly line.’ Khazus ordered while holding back with great difficulty a yawn. ‘As soon as the other gladiators have finished their lunch, we’ll start. It may take a good part of the morning, but I want to go through you one by one...’

Lphcaiw dmz ovuq, ovu eiftafomzl juzu fiqmlo tmru jaov ovuaz gzufcdflo. Tvu hifoouz md hpoiuzw vft dfiur laiuro, fl vft ovu ifpevouz frt lfphw bmcu. Tvu ruj zuhzpaol jfaout f duj qmzu qarpoul gudmzu ovu eiftafomzl md ovu Lptpl bmarut ovuq.

Instead of starting their training as they had been used to, they leaned against the arena walls under the bleachers with folded arms to watch the show. When they were all there, young gladiators as well as veterans, Khazus turned to his fellow gladiators in search of a volunteer.

‘Let me do it, Khazus!’ The gladiator Jake had seen bullying a participant the day before, stepped out of his group with a conquering step. His sadistic smile hid an inferiority complex towards Khazus. Not once did his receding gaze meet Khazus’.

‘Very well.’ Khazus accepted his initiative with a nod. ‘So it will be Gnaeus who will be testing you today. I warn you, Gnaeus, this is a friendly fight. If you let go, I’ll be there to show you what it feels like to be on the receiving end...’

The Gnaeus in question managed to keep a smile on his face, but no recruit missed his action of gulping in the face of the threat.

‘Don’t worry, I know how to control myself...’ The brute promised in an insecure tone, perspiring profusely.

‘You better be! In that case, let the first fight begin!’

An orderly queue had formed, but when the time came to be tested, the first in line was not so sure he wanted to go first. Terrified, he tried unsuccessfully to let the slave behind him go first, but the slave naturally refused. When Gnaeus and Khazus saw their damn little game, both Gnaeus and Khazus soon grew impatient.

‘White!’ The number two in the ludus rendered his verdict. ‘Too scared to fight in a secure environment, so he’ll have to grow some balls first!’

A great burst of perfectly synchronized laughter erupted from the professional gladiators side after Khazus’ remark, as if hazing the newcomers were their favorite pastime. Meanwhile, a pretty, short-dressed maid quickly appeared with several jars of paint.

Approaching the slave who had refused to fight, she dipped one of the brushes in the white paint pot and then painted a large white

stain on his coarse cotton tunic. The recruit in question was so intimidated that he didn't dare move throughout the procedure until Gnaeus' voice shouted him out of his stupor:

'Next! »

The maid returned to Khazus' side with her jars of paint and brushes. By the gentle gaze she had on him, she seemed to adore him both body and soul. The Myrmidian gladiator was definitely popular with the female population of the ludus.

The second slave who had refused to go first stepped forward with trembling legs in the center of the arena. The insistent gaze of the audience placed horrible pressure on him, as did Gnaeus' sadistic smile. The warrior in question was making large twirls with his wooden sword to warm up, the whistling air with each movement only increasing the anxiety of the recruit.

'Attack me.' Gnaeus commanded without taking any guard. His posture was full of openings.

'Raaaaghh!!!'

The slave began to scream to give himself courage, running towards his opponent with an mind empty of the slightest plan. Jake expected to see the poor man get beaten up, but he didn't.

Clink!

Gnaeus simply parried the clumsy move with an air of pure nonchalance, before retaliating with an equally predictable up and down vertical slash. The speed was slow and the gesture exaggerated. The gladiator had taken Khazus' threats seriously and held his blows.

A painfully embarrassing fight ensued, regularly punctuated by the hilarious laughter of the other gladiators, some huddled on the ground because their laughter made them sick to their stomachs.

Tvu nmmz qfr tat val gulo, gpo guojuur val dufz frt ovu dfho ovfo vu jfl omphvare f ljmzt dmz ovu dazlo oaqu, val nuzdmzqfrhu jfl nfzoahpifziw naoadpi. Or lusuzfi mhhflamrl vu hmiifnlut mr ovu lfirt mz lopqgiut, gudmzu darfiw lnzfarare val frciu, ovpl urtare ovu daevo.

A few seconds later, Khazus' manly voice gave his verdict again:

'White! »

After that first fight, the other recruits regained their courage. They could hardly do worse than the first two, and Gnaeus had kept his word, the slave had escaped almost unscathed. He owed his sprain and his falls to his own clumsiness.

The recruits then fought one by one, with a few shy ones refusing to fight like the first. For a good half hour all that could be heard was the clash between the sword of Gnaeus and that of the tested. The ruthless judgment of Khazus punctuated like a metronome these confrontations.

'White! »

'White! »

'White! »

« ... »

'Yellow! »

'White! »

As soon as one of the slaves showed satisfactory physical strength or some rudimentary notions of combat, a stain of yellow paint would cover his tunic. The few Players who participated so far were, with two exceptions, yellow.

They could not die. Therefore, they gave everything they had. The fact that the average Aether level on this world was 8pts (*0.8), while the one on Earth was 10 (*1) gave them a definite advantage over the native Throsgenians.

Eventually, as the line shrank, the first talented recruits came out of anonymity. Some were simply native Throsgenians who had worked in physically demanding trades in the past as lumberjacks or blacksmiths. Their muscles were well developed, even compared to other Throsgenians, and they were not so easily intimidated.

Gnaeus was a Myrmidian whose bloodline was extremely diluted. He needed to consume the Myrmidian blood provided by the ludus to advance and his strength was nothing like that of monsters like Gerulf, Priscus or Khazus.

From an official ranking perspective, he was actually at the bottom of the list. 97th out of 108 gladiators bearing the mark of Servius Cassius.

Therefore, while the serious candidates kept coming up, Gnaeus gradually started to sweat. His gestures became more technical and swift, his expression more focused. He no longer smiled as he had at first, and no longer had the same restraint on his blows.

The fights were finally starting to look like something.