

The Oracle Paths

Volume 2: The First Ordeal

Chapter 93 - The sad story of Myrmidian blood

The new recruits could still hear the gladiators' enthusiastic discussions and the sounds of cutlery coming from the cantina. Without this background noise, one could probably hear the slaves' stomachs rumbling.

The sun was now completely up and a blue sky without a single cloud loomed over their heads. The air was hot and dry despite the early hour. The day promised to be scorching if the trend remained the same.

'First of all...' Priscus clapped his hands twice in succession. The thunderous clap resonated throughout the arena and beyond.

Seconds later, the slaves saw a few slaves dressed in simple loincloths bring bronze cups filled with vermilion liquid on silver trays. The servants walked past each new recruit, inviting them to take one of these cups with subservient curtsy.

Jake held the cup to his nostrils, sniffing the mixture. A metallic smell immediately attacked him. Blood. Though, the liquid was a little clear to be blood. He could easily make out the bronze at the bottom of the cup.

'This is the resource that you will fight for throughout your time in this ludus, and perhaps the reason you will survive and stay.' The lame gladiator declared in a solemn tone.

‘Diluted Myrmidian blood.’

Jake took a closer look at the blood this time, but he didn’t find anything special. It was blood like any other. Yet, if Priscus talked like that, the blood must have had some special property.

He was no longer as ignorant as when he arrived on B842. He had already drunk Digestor blood and enjoyed its miraculous effects. Anything with a developed Aetheric code had unique properties. The Myrmidians were the descendants of the hero Myrmid and could grow stronger or weaker with their personal victories or defeats.

This blessing was a double-edged sword for the Myrmidians. Victories and successes were highly rewarded while defeats and failures were severely punished. A property that pushed the concept of meritocracy to the extreme. If Myrmid’s blood had even a fraction of this effect on those who consumed it, it was frightening.

‘First of all, drink the whole contents of your cup. ‘Priscus ordered with a tone that would not allow any refusal. ‘Whoever I see spitting or emptying his glass into the sand will be whipped 10 times and sent to the mine for a week, you are warned.’

The few crafty ones who were planning to quietly empty their cups or spit out the diluted blood later nearly choked when they heard the veteran’s threat. With these words, no one dared to shy away from the task. The cups were all emptied in a few sips. The taste was not great, but it was diluted enough to make it taste somewhat like water.

The servant slaves once again went through the recruits to collect their empty cups, inspecting them one by one, before confirming on their way out that none of them had shirked from their duty.

‘Very well. Now that the blood is drunk, and until it takes effect, let me explain what it does and how it works here. »

The limping gladiator glared at them one by one, pressuring them into submission. Satisfied with the effect his intimidation was having on them, he continued his speech.

‘First the Myrmidian blood. You may not know how our Myrmidian blessing works, let alone the problems our people face because of it. So let me introduce you to our ways.

‘A Myrmidian grows stronger in victory and weaker in defeat, it is true. Nevertheless, the Myrmid hero’s bloodline has been gradually diluted over generations of his descendants. The most influential noble clans from Primus to Decimus are direct descendants of Myrmid’s ten children. The other commoner clans are all unwanted bastard heirs of the ten main clans who have formed their own branch.

‘The blood of the ten clans is the purest, and therefore the blessing is stronger. The power of the blood seems to fade generation after generation. Only the Temple of Myrmid holds the secret to reigniting the power of this bloodline, and it is jealously guarded. Although, let’s face it, their sacrifices surely had something to do with it...

‘The direct consequence of all this is consanguinity. The ten clans isolate themselves and fornicate among themselves. The Imperator himself is married to his own sister Antonia. As was his own mother to her brother. I’ll leave you to imagine the problems that come with that. Of the many children of Sextus Caelius Augustus, half of the princes and princesses have some physical or mental handicap or deformity... ‘

Jake, like many other slaves, didn't know whether to laugh or hold his poker face. For a nation of warriors reputed to be invincible and descended from a great hero, knowing that all nobles were inbred and suffering from various deformities totally shattered the myth.

'You can laugh. I'm living proof of that myself. Quartus Priscus at your service!' He downplayed it by pointing to his lame leg.

'Now what good is that to you? Diluted like this, not much, but it's better than nothing. Every time you go over your limits or defeat someone in some area or another, the blood will resonate with your emotions and your body making you stronger. If you fail, the opposite will happen.

'Of course there's a catch. Simply surpassing yourself has extremely limited effects. The Myrmidians actually become stronger through competition, by stealing the strength of other Myrmidians. This means that for an all-powerful man or woman at the top, hundreds of Myrmidians have served as a stepping stone for that person.

'By making you consume this blood, you become connected to all the Myrmidians and your strength can then be stolen from you, just as the other way around. This is why the great warriors of other peoples are highly valued. They are forced to drink the blood after having been weakened for days, and are repeatedly beaten until they are stripped of everything that made them strong. In other words, they are forced to lose in order to strengthen their opponent. It's a procedure much appreciated by the Myrmidian noble families...'

It gave a chill to every slave present. The thought of being deprived of food and water for weeks at a time and then having to fight tied up a spoiled Myrmidian to serve as his power source was absolutely

frightening. Jake was happy that they had been sold in the public market square rather than in one of the private auction basilicas.

‘If you want to progress faster, you’ll need less diluted Myrmid blood, or blood from a purer-blooded Myrmidian. You Throsgenians and other barbarians were born with robust bodies, but your potential is limited to your birth robustness or almost. You can beat our tenth and ninth cohorts of novice legionnaires effortlessly, but beyond that it gets trickier.

‘Without consuming this blood, you will never defeat Myrmidian gladiators who have been fighting in the arena for years. They’re all monsters.’

To prove his claim, Priscus raised his good foot slightly before suddenly trampling the arena floor beneath his feet.

BOOOM!

A euwluz md tplo frt lfirt uknimtut fzmprt vaq, gifloare vaq mpo md laevo. Wvur ovu tplo duui gfhc, ovuw dmptr Pzalhpl ar ovu lfqu nifhu, ovu ezmprt prtuz val duuo vfsare hfsut ar qmzu ovfr f quouz. Hu jfl rmj zufhvare ovuaz jfalo, immcare iacu f tjfzd.

Shaking the dust off his armor and hair, the old veteran leapt out of the crater before whistling with two fingers to bring the servants back. The poor souls rushed in with shovels to close the hole, obviously used to this kind of scene.

‘Cough, cough, now that the message is crystal clear to everyone, the rankings. ‘ Priscus resumed his speech as if nothing had happened. ‘ You are 493 trainees. 108 gladiators bearing the mark of Servius Cassius also train in this ludus. The guards are usually former gladiators who left the arena by decision or injury.

‘Every day at the end of the day you will be given a right of challenge. You can and shall face another gladiator ranked above you. Your ranking will determine the resources you receive during your stay here.

‘The first week is an exception. You’ll simply be watched by Khazus here and a few other gladiators to be assigned a provisional ranking. At the end of this week the duels will begin. A wooden panel will be hung in the cantina with the resources for each position. Another one updated every day will display the new rankings. »

In the end, it was a fairly classic system, in the spirit of the Myrmidian tradition. The winners would move up in the rankings, while the losers would fall. The Myrmid blood they would consume would further that segregation. The strong would become stronger, and the weak would become weaker.

The last in the ranking, however, was exempt from the challenge. This gave him the chance to train on his own for a while before joining the competition again in the future.

If a Player were to occupy this position, however, they would probably have wasted their time in this Ordeal, since, with a few exceptions, their average level was higher than the native Throsgenian. Especially since they had their Oracle to handle all kinds of situations.

‘Okay, I’ll leave you to your training in the hands of Khazus. Show him what you got. ‘ Saying this, Priscus bid them farewell with his hand, leaving them with the only gladiator left.

The terrifying Khazus. Someone they would curse day and night for months to come.