Lost in Memory

Remus rolled awake with a resounding ache piercing through his skull. He levered his torso upright to rest against a rough cedar wall behind him before being thrown back to his knees as the world around him jolted to a halt. His eyes raked across his surroundings, he sat in a small wooden compartment devoid of light save one stark beam piercing through a gap in the ceiling. All about him he could see boys packed shoulder to shoulder rolling themselves awake, a few lingering unconscious on the floor. The waking children’s heads bobbed around like a gaggle of inquisitive owls as each took in their surroundings with a confusion equal to Remus’ own. The sounds of wooden axles grinding to a halt told Remus he was aboard some sort of wagon, but the extent of his awareness halted there. The more he looked inward the greater his confusion mounted. It was as if he was a tiny librarian scouring the halls of his memory only to find them devoid of experience. As this realization dawned on him Remus slid into a small terror before he slammed his will into place over his brief panic. What DID he know? He knew he was Remus, he knew he had been born 13 summers ago, he knew he was on a wagon, but he knew not where, he knew what a wagon was, and infinite other small details of the world, but there was so much missing, not a single memory emerged from the void.

Those thoughts were quickly ushered into the recesses of his mind as twin doors were flung open at the end of the wooden enclosure. Blinding shafts of light assaulted the children and they quickly moved to shield their faces from the radiant onslaught.

“Out! All of you!”

An aggressive male voiced barked orders from the sunlit rift and Remus could feel himself being jostled from the sides as a few of the children began pushing forward, eager to obey the harsh commands. Remus lingered as young boys filtered past him towards the bright entrance. He counted sixteen as they passed him, all of a similar age as him, the youngest maybe a summer or two below himself while the oldest had the faintest whisps of a beard crawling along their chins. Remus raised himself to follow before hearing a sigh from behind him. At the very front of the enclosed space a prone form could be seen still thoroughly unconscious. Remus rushed over and jostled the boy’s shoulders and he startled awake, slamming back into the wall as he leaped away from Remus.

“I… what... where?”

The words stuttered out as Remus saw his own confusion and terror mirrored in the boy’s eyes. The boy boasted broad shoulders and long legs but his eyes betrayed youth. Remus placed a comforting hand on his shoulder and the boy spent a long moment gazing at Remus’ hand before meeting his stare. Some unspoken consensus was reached and both began moving towards the exit without uttering another word.

Remus hopped down from the wagon to land on hard packed earth, dry and reddish-brown. He began analyzing the arena around him while the wagon tottered away towards a massive gate with raised portcullis. Himself and the seventeen other boys that had spilled from the wagon stood milling about in the center of a wide, flat arena encased on all sides by a tall stone wall which hosted protruding platforms at regular intervals. On each platform sat a hooded and robed figure wearing opulent onyx vestments. At the far end of the arena a larger dais jutted out from the arena wall and a tall, pale woman could be seen standing there flanked by more of the robed figures.

“Good evening children, and welcome to the proving grounds!”

As the woman began speaking the milling boys drifted towards her and her features came into more stark contrast. She was tall, standing a head above even the tallest of the men flanking her and wearing raised sabatons to accentuate the fact even further. Her hair was midnight black and she bore makeup around her eyes and lips to match. She touted a glistening suit of armor that matched the pitch black of her follower’s robes.

“You few have been chosen by the fates to be here on this day! Three of you will soon become the newest initiates of our order. Your destiny has been written since the day you came into this world, do not squander this opportunity.”

The boys looked to each other in confusion, they could barely remember who they were, let alone imagine some ridiculous destiny this woman had in store for them. As if answering their thoughts the woman spoke up once more.

“I know you may not realize it now but you are all part of something greater than yourselves. Unfortunately, we have vacancies for only three of you.”

Confusion mounted in some and realization dawned on others as eighteen onyx blades manifested themselves in the dusty ground before each child. Remus snatched the blade from the ground in front of him and he quickly backpedaled away from the thronging group of boys. The seventeen other blades were swiftly equipped by the rest of the children and they began circling each other in wary anticipation. The first child to strike was a smaller boy with a slight frame, jet black hair and a hooked nose. He launched himself at a larger boy’s back while his attention was focused on another. As the first blade slammed into the unsuspecting victim’s back chaos broke loose among the tensed combatants. Boys leapt into action all around Remus as he backpedaled further to give himself space. One of the larger children began sprinting towards him, onyx blade raised above his head in an aggressive charge. As the larger foe approached Remus slid low and extended his blade to meet the midsection of the advancing assailant. Too quick for his attempt, the other boy slammed his blade down onto Remus’ before it could slide between his ribs. The behemoth of a boy tumbled through his momentum and sent Remus sprawling away from his blade lying in the sand some yards away. As he scrambled to his feet the other boy picked up both blades and resumed his charge. Remus froze for a fraction of a moment before ice cold clarity settled over him, he closed his eyes and fragments of knowledge slid into place like the pieces of a puzzle. Almost as if he needed to be stripped of a weapon before realizing, it dawned on him that he had never used a blade before. He never needed one. Remus opened his eyes to meet the assailant, now only a yard away. Moments before impact, Remus thrust his palm forward and unleashed a massive discharge of ionic energy. With an earsplitting crack the boy was lifted from his feet and sent careening into the far wall of the arena, arcing neon bolts of static trailing in his wake. Frigid silence settled over the arena for a moment as everyone stared at the boy turned comet. With a moment of reprieve Remus shook his now aching arm and scanned the battlefield. A quick tally counted ten of the eighteen boys either dead or dying littered along the ground. At the far side of the arena he spotted two combatants circling each other with blades extended, flashing feints and countermoves towards each other without making any real progress. Towards the center of the battlegrounds the slimy black-haired child who initiated combat was standing with two other boys, their attention on the fighters facing each other at the far end of the arena. The three of them stood at a distance, circling the duel like a gang of hyenas.

While the hyenas focused on the duel in front of them, the boy from the back of the wagon was busy engaging a slight blonde teen off to one side. The boy’s massive frame came into full reprieve as he finished off the combatant with an aggressive grapple followed by a swift cut across the throat. He threw the slumping corpse off of himself before briefly sinking to a knee, clearly exhausted. Remus could make out four bodies with identical lacerations to the throat forming a bloody wake. After a split-second decision, Remus sprinted over to the kneeling boy who sprang back as he approached, knife at the ready. Recognition swept over the boy’s eyes as Remus slid to a halt in front of him. Remus flashed a meaningful glance at the group of three boys, now fanning out around the dueling pair, before looking back.

Remus could practically see the wheels turning as the boy looked first at the other combatants then back at Remus before giving a short nod.

“You watch my back I’ll watch yours.”

Remus stuck a hand out to the boy and felt a powerful grip close around his hand.

“Remus”

“Thumos”

With ceremony dealt with the two returned their attention to the gang of hyenas that surrounded the still dueling pair of boys. The hyenas circled the pair slowly as the two slashed and parried but their exhaustion began slowing their strikes. Finally, one boy lost his footing on a loose stone and tumbled to the floor before an onyx blade fell through his exposed back. The victor of the duel could not relish in his victory as the hyenas swept over him, jabbing and slashing as he backpedaled, panic rippling through his being. In moments they overwhelmed him, leaving a lacerated corpse behind them as they turned back to lock eyes with Remus and Thumos.

“Let’s kill the slimy goblin first.” Orthus grumbled as he stared at the oily haired backstabber.

The gang of three started drifting towards Thumos and Remus, fanning out slightly as they drew near. Thumos snatched a stray blade from the dirt before turning to Remus.

“Ok, scratch that plan. How many of those things do you have left?” He flicked a finger at the arcs of electricity spiraling along the tips of Remus’ fingers.

“Two… maybe.”

“We’ll assume one then. Stay behind me, when those two big ones rush I’ll throw one at you, zap him and its two on two.”

Remus nodded and dropped back a pace or two, letting Thumos edge out ahead of him. As the gang of boys got within a few yards, the two larger ones began sprinting towards them, just as Thumos had predicted. With the two of them bearing down, Remus almost tried to jump to Thumos’ aid but held back, trusting the plan. With only a few feet to spare, Thumos whipped one of his blades into the dirt, impaling one of the boy’s feet, stopping him in his tracks. The other boy swept down at Thumos with his dagger, only to find Thumos’ second blade in its way. As he deflected the blow, Thumos used the boy’s own momentum to shrug him up and over his shoulders. One final heave sent him spilling towards Remus, the tumbling body met Remus’ palm and light flashed between them. An earsplitting crack tore through the air as the body tumbled across the earth, limbs skewed at impossible angles. Without missing a beat, Thumos was on the boy with the impaled foot. Thumos dove in with a strike meant for the neck but the boy twisted away just in time to watch the blade sweep past his face. Thumos followed the momentum of his strike, however, and bowled through the boy. The boy’s foot tore free from the blade as he was sent sprawling, wailing in agony.

Thumos rose as Remus walked up to his side, the two of them staring down two remaining boys, one gushing blood onto the sand as the other, the backstabber, stood looking on in terror. After glancing quickly between Remus, Thumos and his now crippled ally, the slimy, black haired boy made his decision. Without warning, the backstabber hefted his dagger and plunged it into the other boy’s torso, dark blood washing over his hands as the body fell away from the blade. Thumos reacted instantly, his feet pounding against the dusty earth as he sprinted towards the now cowering boy. Moments before Thumos reached his target, an ethereal gray mist coalesced around his wrists and ankles, it hardened into solid metal before slamming Thumos into the dirt. Thumos struggled against the bonds as the other boy scrambled away, he made as if to run before the onyx clad woman dropped down into the arena, blocking his path. The robed figures from the daises flanked her on all sides, one stared at Thumos with intense focus, silver runes floating about his outstretched hands. The woman walked up to the backstabbing boy and placed one gargantuan palm on his head before looking at Remus and Thumos in turn.

“Now, now children, no more squabbling… Say hello to your new brothers.”