

The Oracle Paths

Volume 2: The First Ordeal

Chapter 131 - I don't care to be a priority target, as long as they obey

It was dark under the catacombs of the Coliseum. Cooler drafts of air, coming from who knows where, made the weak flame of the torches flicker.

The gladiators and recruits prepared silently, each in his own way. The most pious prayed kneeling before statuettes of their gods, while others repeated the same sword movements they had practiced over and over again, imagining an invisible opponent.

Others, like Jake, were frowning in a bad mood as they inspected the edge of their blades. Dull wood. Applying strong pressure by pinching the blade between his thumb and forefinger, the wood cracked immediately, confirming what he dreaded. Those swords were useless.

Gazing at his fist for a brief moment, Jake then punched the stone wall. A thud of clatter sounded, pieces of rock and rubble falling in front of him. His fist was thrust into the wall up to his wrist, wide fissures cracking it.

Jake grinned slightly as he contemplated the result. He had prepared as best he could. Now all he had to do was apply what he'd learned.

Meanwhile, the other Ludus' gladiators and recruits had watched Jake's demonstration of strength without saying anything, and the reactions were varied.

Non-Throsgenian gladiators did not have to participate in the Throsgenians vs. Myrmidians War Reenactment. They had their own fights and were not particularly anxious.

However, it was uncomfortable and a source of shame for them to have been surpassed in such a short period of time by a recruit who had been present for less than two months. None of them were confident that they could take that punch.

For the Throsgenian recruits and gladiators and especially the Players, it was a real eye-opener. Not all recruits had to participate in this fight, but those who did were reassured to have a fighter like this with them.

Only 200 Throsgenian gladiators had been requested for this fight and they had to be valiant warriors so as not to give the impression of a totally unfair public execution. It was therefore of utmost importance that the Throsgenians sent to die in the arena would do absolutely everything they could to survive in order to make the performance as credible as possible.

The Ludus of Cassius and Livia provided about 180 gladiators while the remaining 20 would be supplied by other establishments.

Refusal was impossible and a colossal amount of gold to compensate these Lanistas had been offered to them. If Cassius wasn't so protective of his men, it would have been a great deal.

Hugo was not shocked because his physique was also his forte, it was different though for Lu Yan and her brother. Even after absorbing the Aether of Lutex and scheming in the shadows she was far from having such physical strength.

She consoled herself by thinking that Jake had focused his training on physical conditioning, but she knew she was lying to herself. The man's eyes were as sharp as hers and he was wary of her. She knew

that she had made a mistake by killing Lutex so openly, but it was too late to turn back. At least they were on the same side today.

Her brother Yi Feng was simply in admiration. He had trained as seriously as Jake, but he hadn't progressed as much. The difference in constitution at the beginning of the Ordeal was now revealing its full meaning.

As for Kyle, he was stressed for other reasons. He had never doubted the potential of a monster like Jake. When he had a nightmare, it was Jake's indifferent face he would see. No, he was nervous about the fight in the arena ahead of him. As strong as Jake was, he couldn't be everywhere at once on the battlefield.

Suddenly, drum beats began to echo above them, shaking the foundations of the galleries. Dust fell on them with each drumbeat. The games were finally about to begin.

Each gladiator, destined to die or not, put on his equipment, ready to be called at any moment. Jake picked up one of the moldy wooden shields they had been given. These were piled on top of each other next to the swords and there clearly wasn't enough for everyone.

Servius Cassius had left them a few minutes earlier to return to his seat with Lucia and her bodyguards. Gerulf had patted Jake's shoulder with his usual roughness with an expression that translated as 'It's going to be all right.'

Lucia, for her part, had given Jake and Hugo only a slight nod before leaving the gallery. Khazus had greeted the siblings and Kyle by giving them some advice before following her in turn.

For a while, they didn't hear much except the muffled sound of the drums, then they too stopped beating. The intendant from earlier

then rushed to another changing room to signal them to come up to the arena.

A muscular and rather fat man in his forties walked past them undisturbed, holding his horned helmet under his arm. His other arm was dragging a heavy metal flail, the rattling of the chain dragging the spiked bronze ball hurting their eardrums.

Seconds later, the enthusiastic shout of the jubilant crowd echoed down to their dressing room deep underground, despite the thick walls separating them from the arena. The games of the Coliseum had begun.

A short moment later, two very strong servants passed by again, this time dragging something bloody behind them. As Jake glanced over, he recognized the confident gladiator with the flail they had seen entering the arena earlier. He couldn't have been more dead.

Seeing the corpse, many recruits and Players who would be fighting for the first time suddenly panicked, gripped by an anxiety attack. Of course, this was not the case for those who had fought on the mutiny day in the Ludus.

In the next hour, more fights followed. Sometimes the gladiators who passed before them returned victorious and unharmed, while others returned in several pieces, their remains contained in a kind of trolley. Each time the cries of joy, anger or disgust of the crowd would punctuate each action, giving them the impression of witnessing the fighting in person.

Not all fights were meant to be deadly, as a gladiator was expensive to train. However, because the Crown Prince wanted to make people forget the recent military failures of his clan and the abuses of other noble families, he made this 'sporting' event a real butchery to

intoxicate the plebs. It was well known. Once they had their dose of hemoglobin and gore, they would be appeased for a long time.

At long last, it was silent again. The drums began to play again, and the intendant with the moustache who had assigned them to this locker room came to fetch them signalling that their turn to fight had finally come.

Like so many at that moment, Jake's slight stage fright solidified, freezing his blood. A bit like when one is suddenly summoned to take the oral exam and doesn't feel ready at all. The difference was that a failure wouldn't just result in a bad grade this time.

With a gloomy face, Jake climbed up the stairs and up the ramp leading to the arena with extreme intensity. The Coach suggested he had a good chance of surviving the fight, but it wasn't guaranteed. Also, he still didn't know how to avoid the consequences that would inevitably follow their victory.

Jake knew his Oracle Rank was too low and his information limited. However, Lu Yan who was at least Rank 4 had the same expression as him. This meant that no matter what intel and plan she had, the same worry was eating away at her. She too now knew that there must be Players with a rank above hers.

When they reached the lowered metal grid separating them from the bloody sand of the arena, the intendant motioned for them to wait. He then handed them some good quality furs to choose from among them to portray the Throsgenian commanders.

No one wanted to have a target on him saying 'kill me first' and so no one rushed to drape themselves in furs. Resolute, Jake wrapped the fur of a coyote-like animal around his shoulders. Whether he would be a priority target or not didn't matter to him, as long as the other recruits obeyed his orders.

Lu Yan refused to put on one of these furs, but her brother, Hugo, Thomas and Kyle put on the four others that looked like foxes, bears, wolves and mink, respectively. Jake was surprised that Kyle took the risk, but his rivalry with Thomas was as strong as ever. After two months of Ordeal, not once had he won against him and it was eating away at his ego.

At that very moment the presenter's voice began to speak. It was their turn to fight.