

The Oracle Paths

Volume 2: The First Ordeal

Chapter 101 - Let the fight begin!

Jake had thought long and hard before choosing his opponent. At first, he just wanted to play it safe, choosing an opponent he was confident he could beat without taking too many risks. However, through pondering and hesitating over and over again, he realized something.

Something that had eluded him until then, but which was of paramount importance. His emotions were holding him back. Fear drove him to be cautious, which in most cases was a good idea. But not here. Not when you had a bracelet that could offer a Path that matched your full potential.

He found that the Paths he generated were directly affected by his state of mind. For example, the one aiming at 'surviving' or 'getting stronger' as fast as possible, obviously took into account many conscious and unconscious filters, which corresponded to his deepest beliefs and emotions.

This was the reason why his Oracle did not propose him to immediately execute all the weak recruits of the Ludus while they were sleeping. This would probably have allowed him to accumulate a significant amount of Aether, even if it meant being on the run for the rest of the Ordeal.

Of course, the Oracle did not encourage such behavior. It would defeat the purpose of the Ordeal. Even if he was willing to do that,

he wasn't sure that an optimal Path would be generated. The question of whether or not the Oracle was impartial remained open.

It was likely, if not certain, that some other Players would not have such scruples. Even Yerode and Lamine, who were far from being angels, had a number of considerations in mind. Their trust had a limit. All it took was one small misstep to lose their lives and fail the Ordeal.

Likewise, certain battles or plans could probably be accomplished, perhaps even easily. But the difficulty did not lie in the act itself, but in its drudgery or the mental obstacle it represented.

This was the case, for example, of the Path that was supposed to guide Jake to hit on Camille a few months earlier. All he had to do back then was behave and repeat the words of the Shadow Guide, but stress and shyness had prevented him from following the Path to its conclusion.

This was what the probabilities of success or failure in the Coach's missions were all about. The Oracle knew from the start whether Jake would succeed, but he still offered these Paths, which were high risk. This betrayed above all the difficulty it would represent for Jake, but its feasibility was always guaranteed.

Jake's current strong point was neither his strength nor his agility, and even less his technique. It was his Constitution and his Vitality.

Combining his two statuses, his Real Strength reached 148.5 points, where his Agility stagnated at 43.2 points. His strength was incredible, almost 15 times that of a normal man, but his reaction time or body control did not follow.

Some participants had similar strength like Hugo or Yerode. Others had superior Agility like Lamine, Yifeng or Miya. He may have had

more Aether, but a body trained for years was not so easy to catch up with, at least before this Ordeal.

On the other hand, there was no participant to his knowledge with a higher Constitution and Vitality than him. His Actual Constitution reached 132.8 points, while his Actual Vitality was at 72.4 points.

Elias had a similar Constitution and Strength due to his highly trained physique, but his Vitality was almost normal, as was that of almost every other participant he had met in this Ordeal.

If he didn't use it, he would be a complete moron. Unfortunately, apart from digesting faster, sleeping less and training more, there was only one other possible way to use this advantage at its peak: By suffering.

The gladiators' stats were relatively balanced, since they did not use encoded Aether. Their bodies were more or less impregnated with Aether depending on how they trained or how they fought.

This meant that Khazus was not much stronger than them in terms of strength. Maybe 200 points. The real problem was that his Agility, Constitution and Vitality were almost identical. For him, recruits didn't move faster than turtles, as if they were frozen in time.

In contrast, Jake could definitely take on an opponent whose agility was similar to his own. After all, he had the advantage in strength, stamina and toughness. But that wasn't enough. He had to choose the hardest target within range, and so he did.

Little by little, he moved up in the rankings, looking at each gladiator one after the other in search of the perfect challenge, the one that would back him into a corner. The Digestor's Proto-Soul he had absorbed had partly stifled his fear and caution, giving him a fighting spirit he had never thought he possessed before. Perhaps he

had always had this character in him, but the Digestor had exacerbated it.

As he considered stronger and stronger opponents, the Coach began to generate less and less favorable odds, until he found the opponent beyond which no Path was generated, victory being deemed impossible to achieve.

His gaze stopped on a gladiator of his size, with a nervous and shredded physique. Unlike the recruits, the man wore reddish blond and medium-long hair, a sign that he was one of the veterans with nothing left to prove. He wore only a loincloth, a protective shell, leather boots, and a belt with two swords. His relaxed expression showed that he did not feel concerned by what was happening.

Big mistake.

‘I want to face this gladiator.’ Jake said, pointing to the target he had set.

A dubious silence fell over the arena, followed by a great burst of laughter. That rookie had guts! Even Priscus, who thought he had seen everything in his career, couldn’t help but check to see if he’d heard what he was thinking.

‘You... want to face Rufus? 46th place?’

‘It will be him, I’ve made up my mind.’ Jake confirmed his choice with a determined look, although he couldn’t help but clench his fists for a moment because of the pressure.

‘In that case... Let me point out two more rules when defeating a gladiator bearing the mark of the Ludus.’ The crippled Myrmidian began to enlighten him on duels between professional gladiators.

‘ First rule: Combat shall be fought with real weapons. The main reason is that at this level, wooden swords break too quickly. Even if they are treated by the Temple of Myrmid, they can’t withstand such shocks. The other reason is that gladiators are at a level that allows them to withstand heavy levels of injury.’

Tval zpiu lpaout Jfcu. Hu jfl fdzfat md guare tuhifzut ovu imluz fdouz f vwnmovuoahfi lofg jaov f jmmtur ljmzt mr f Saofi nmaro, mr ovu ezmprtl ovfo f zufi giftu jmpit vfsu urtut val iadu. Hu vft zuhuroiw guur zprrare lmqu oulol. A Cmrloaopoamr 13 oaqul guoouz ovfr lofrtfzt jfl rm bmcu.

A skin or muscles thirteen times stronger than normal could still be nicked with a bit of effort. On the other hand, bones thirteen times stronger than normal were a whole different matter. With insufficient strength, it was impossible to break a bone.

‘Second rule, it’s still a friendly fight. Deadly blows shall be restrained and the fight shall cease if one of the combatants gives up or loses consciousness. As a referee I can also decide to end the fight at any time after having determined the winner.

‘Questions?’

‘No, it’s all very clear.’ Jake nodded.

‘In that case... Rufus!’

The gladiator in question walked slowly towards the arena, drawing his two swords with unbearably slow motion. The veteran was both ashamed and outraged that a new recruit had decided to make him his first target.

From a reward standpoint, whether one defeated the 50th or the 21st, the reward would be the same. The fact that he was chosen

and not the 49th or 50th showed that the recruit had correctly assessed his abilities and judged that he could win.

‘I hope you don’t regret your choice...’ Rufus whispered in Jake’s ear as they greeted each other for the duel.

‘Time will tell soon enough.’ Jake replied tit for tat without flinching.

Hfsare iufzrut ovu gflahl md eiftafomzafi hmqgfo msuz ovu juuc, Jfcu cruj val mjr iaqaol. Hu vft hvmlur om plu f imre ljmzt frt f lqfii, zmprt, gzmrXu lvaut uflw om vfrtiu. Hu nifrrut om nifw ovu opzoiu ofhoah fl imre fl ao jmpit ofcu dmz f hvfrhu om tudufo om nzuluro aoluid.

‘Let the battle begin!’

Priscus’ loud voice echoed through the arena, attracting the attention of Servius Cassius on his balcony, who until then had been having a good time with his wife Licinia. All of the recruits, especially Jake’s enemies, opened their eyes wide so as not to miss a second of the upcoming battle.

A fight that would not be remembered for the beauty of the moves or the grace of its two warriors, but for the beginning of Jake’s legend. The Hell of all Players.