

The Oracle Paths

Volume 2: The First Ordeal

Chapter 103 – The deal with Cassius

When Jake woke up with a startle hours later, he found that he was lying in a real bed instead of the straw mattress he had become accustomed to over the past week. The stone walls were austere and the shelves were full of medicinal herbs. Other unoccupied beds filled the room. It had been dark for a long time and the only source of light was an oil lamp on his bedside chest.

He was in the Ludus' infirmary.

As he tried to stand up, he gnashed his teeth, a slight dizziness gripping him. He had lost a lot of blood in the fight and his wounds were many. They had been cleaned and bandaged while he was sleeping. A smell of honey and other medicinal plants emanated from the bandages. He could have been mistaken from afar for a mummy.

Once in a sitting position, he noticed that he was not alone in the room. A man sitting on a chair in the dark was observing his reaction. Squinting to adjust his vision, Jake recognized the face of Servius Cassius, the owner of the Ludus.

'Already awake? I suppose that's not surprising with a build like that...' The Myrmidian, this time wearing a sea-blue toga, mumbled into his beard.

‘How long was I unconscious?’ Jake broke the ice with a neutral question.

‘Oh, not long. Five, six hours at most. Latro, our medic, said you’d sleep at least until tomorrow. I guess he gets it wrong sometimes...’

That was good news for Jake. He was worried that he’d been in a coma for several days, wasting his precious time.

‘How are you feeling?’ Servius Cassius inquired further.

The Lanista’s insistence on checking on his well-being made him feel uneasy, but he tried to answer as vaguely as possible.

‘I feel tired, but otherwise I’m all right. I’m just extremely hungry.’

His last words were the strict truth. He had lost a lot of muscle and fat mass due to the intensive training of the last week and the fight against Rufus had only made things worse. His throat was dry and his stomach was rumbling. He was in desperate need of energy.

CLAP CLAP

Servius Cassius clapped twice, and seconds later a slave pushing a wagon full of victuals entered the infirmary. This time the food lived up to his expectations. Roasted poultry and red meat, unidentified game, bread, vegetables and some kind of mashed potatoes or something similar. When the scent reached his nostrils, Jake immediately began to drool like a dog over his kibble.

‘Help yourself, it’s not every day you get a chance like this.’

Jake didn’t have to be reminded twice and started eating with his hands without wasting a second, not caring much about passing himself off as a lout without manners in the eyes of Cassius. The

latter didn't seem to be bothered by the way he was eating, as if he was used to this kind of show.

'Your fight impressed me today, Jake.' The Lanista congratulated him while he was stuffing himself. 'Few Myrmidians in this Ludus know how to control their bodies like you did against Rufus. From time to time, when they get carried away by their emotions, the strongest gladiators show similar changes. But it's still an occasional occurrence. And I think in your case, too, it was just a fluke.'

Jake continued to eat his chicken leg, not daring to interrupt it or else the meal might end prematurely.

'What I'm interested in is your tenacity. Gerulf hasn't had a training partner for years and that makes him taciturn. Khazus used to volunteer from time to time, but recently he's busy training the new recruit. I'd like you to take his place.'

Jake laid his chicken leg on the serving platter, frowning. He could see where the Lanista was going, but he didn't like the looks of it.

'Why me and not another veteran gladiator like Hector, Krona or Lutex?' Jake answered with another obvious question.

The balding man sighed wearily in response. At that very moment, he looked older, as if overwhelmed by worries.

'Because Gerulf is a bit peculiar. He's not mean when you get to know him, but he doesn't really know how to hold his punches. After a few hospital stays like you did today, no one wants to enter the arena against him anymore.'

Cassius' intentions were much clearer now. Jake had shown that he was able to take a beating without flinching and he hoped he would

be willing to do it again to keep his gladiator number one in good spirits. But even without using his Oracle, Jake knew he could use the situation to his advantage.

‘What’s in it for me?’

Reassured to see that Jake had not instantly refused, Cassius began to present the terms of the job with a slight smile.

‘First of all, you get to eat meals like this all you want every day. Second, if you are so injured that you can’t defend your rank in the daily challenges, I guarantee that you will receive the salary and resources corresponding to your current ranking. That is 3 gold coins per week and a cup of 3/100 pure Myrmidian blood every morning.’

‘It looks honest on paper... But blood won’t do me any good if I get beaten up every day by Gerulf. I’ll just regress even faster.’

‘You have nothing to worry about. Gerulf knows the difference between a duel and a friendly fight. If he doesn’t wish to harm or defeat you, your strength won’t be stolen. However, if you feel deep down inside that you’ve been defeated or give up in the middle of a fight, you will actually lose a fraction of your strength. Like those who haven’t finished their training in the past week...

‘Anyway, you’re too weak at the moment. Even if Gerulf took the fight seriously, the strength that would be stolen from you would be insignificant.’

That was indeed a good argument. Even if Jake’s Aether stats regressed and he would surely be nothing but a punching bag for Gerulf, fighting against the Ludus champion could only benefit him. Just look at how fast Lu Yan was progressing while training against Khazus. She may have been a genius, but that it was Khazus who

trained her personally and not someone else could not be a mere coincidence.

‘When will I know when I have to fight him?’

‘Priscus will come looking for you. The rest of the time you will continue to train with the other recruits under the supervision of Lutex.’

Once Jake’s consent was obtained, Cassius left the infirmary, letting him eat in peace. Not for long though, as Kyle, Lu Yan, Lu Yifeng and Elias visited him a few minutes later.

They congratulated him on his new rank, and he told them about the agreement he had just made with Cassius in front of their amazed expressions. However, he did not invite them to share his meal with him. The poor visitors had to endure with their eyes his interminable feast, not without insulting him with every name they could think of in their minds. This bastard was definitely teasing them!

‘You should have seen the look on Yerode and Lamine’s face! Priceless!’ Kyle abruptly changed the subject, though he couldn’t look away from the roast under his nose.

‘Oh? Yerode that doesn’t really surprise me. I’m sure he was planning something against us. If he thinks he can penalize me by defying me when I’m hurt, he’s in for a nasty surprise...’

‘Speaking of which, what are your ranks?’

Kyle had stabilized in 12th place in the rookie rankings, while Lu Yifeng and Lu Yan both managed to defeat a professional gladiator. Contrary to what he imagined, neither of them had chosen to face a veteran gladiator from the top 50.

Lp Yadure jfl 88ov frt Lp Yfr 86ov. Yuzmtu frt Lfqaru dmiimjut ovuq himluiw, zulnuhoasuiw ar 90 frt 92rt nifhu. Suuare ovuaz zulnuhoasu zfrcarel, vu jfl hmrsarhut ovfo Yuzmtu frt Lfqaru juzu pn om lmquovare, gpo ao jfl omm ufziw om hmrhptu frwovare.

After the siblings, Yerode, Lamine and Jake had joined the ranks of professional gladiators, 5 places were freed up in the rookie rankings, allowing Kyle originally 17th to move up to 12th place. Elias, who was 8th just behind Jake was now 3rd in the rookie rankings.

Once his meal was over, the group said goodbye to him before letting him finish his night of convalescence in the infirmary. Now that he was alone, he could finally check his new stats.
