

# The Oracle Paths

## Volume 2: The First Ordeal

### Chapter 105 – Resuming training

While Jake was considering forfeiting and losing a place in the rankings, the man who challenged him to a duel completely overturned his plans. Because the one who defied him was probably one of the only rookies with zero chance of defeating him, even if he had both legs amputated. 'Lircam', the 497th ranked recruit.

The latter had been injured on his first day of training by a single clumsy mistake during a friendly fight. The young man had spent the previous week on the bench waiting for his ankle sprain to heal. His miserable ranking was the expected consequence of his blunder.

No wonder Jake was surprised when the last man in the rankings came up against him. Even though Jake was convalescing, if his life depended on it, he was still a dangerous opponent. He was prepared to be challenged by other professional gladiators, Yerode or Lamine, but certainly not a guy still wearing an ankle brace.

'I know what you're thinking, I only have one condition.' Lircam suggested while speaking English, which made Jake realize that he was actually a participant, just like him.

Lircam was an unusual name, which had misled him. If it was a Player, Jake could predict what the recruit wanted to ask him. His injury had partially compromised his chances of passing his Ordeal, but with Jake's help he could catch up.

'I'm listening.'

Seeing that Jake had not directly refused, the young man's face lightened up with relief. All he had to do was express his terms with fingers crossed that they would be accepted.

‘Once the fight has begun, I will fight as best I can. You'll just have to neutralize me without hurting me if possible to make the duel credible. In exchange, I will need one gold coin a week to buy enough food to feed myself properly. I have no chance of making any progress on my current rations. Another condition, if someone comes after me, if possible protect me... ‘

Those were pretty simple and honest terms. Jake was getting paid three gold pieces a week for his 46th place. In truth, even if he was defeated, he could keep the same advantages as long as he was willing to be Gerulf's sparring partner.

3 gold coins were a substantial sum in the Myrmid Empire. Not enough to support a lofty lifestyle, but enough to pay for all the fantasies a gladiator could have during a week of training.

This included sending money to their families, buying their own food, weapons or furniture, but also paying for prostitutes or the favours of a willing slave. The Ludus and the Myrmid Empire in general offered this type of service.

Jake hadn't had any of these hobbies since Cassius had promised him high quality food in abundance. Two gold coins were also more than enough to buy anything he might need. Depriving himself of one gold coin would have no effect on his Ordeal.

In comparison, a defeat by forfeit could have an unpredictable impact on his Aether stats. He did not have the pretension of being able to simulate a sense of triumph when refusing to fight.

‘I accept. Shall we begin ? ‘ Jake confirmed the deal, before picking up a wooden sword.

Priscus might not understand a word of English or Throsgenian, but he was no fool. By the way he frowned and pursed his lips, he wasn’t a fan of such tricks, but he let them have their way. When you were weak, you had to use every means at your disposal to get back on track. It was not a sign of cowardice, it was a sign of cleverness.

Throughout the entire mock battle that Jake and Lircam played in front of the rest of the Ludus, Yerode and Lamine kept glaring at them like two lions waiting in ambush next to an antelope. This Lircam had just made them miss a huge opportunity.

These daily challenges had a few loopholes to exploit. The right to refuse to fight without consequence after having fought a first time posed a lot of problems for gladiators who wanted to face the same target.

For example, if the 50th ranked gladiator wanted to challenge the 49th ranked gladiator, but the 49th ranked gladiator negotiated a deal to be challenged by the 51st ranked gladiator, then the 50th ranked gladiator would be forced to challenge the 48th ranked gladiator. In most cases, the 50th would be unable to fight an enemy within its range and would thereby lose.

Of course, these deals were more common among the lower level recruits. A defeat would always result in the defeated losing Aether, even if the victory was faked or planned in advance. Unless a gladiator didn’t care about getting stronger, very few would agree to do such a thing.

Priscus tolerated these shenanigans when it was motivated by a genuine intention to improve. When a recruit stopped training

seriously to enjoy financial advantages from those higher ranked than him, he became a vermin to be eliminated.

When these situations occurred, the old veteran would always volunteer for these executions. Physical weakness was not a sin, but moral weakness and idleness was despised by the old Myrmidian.

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Nevertheless, he had gained three places in the rookie ranking after Hugo, Miya and Elias successfully defeated a professional gladiator. Elias chose to challenge the 91st in the ranking, which forced Lamine to challenge the 84th in front of Lu Yan.

This had completely disrupted the tactics of Yerode and Lamine to follow the siblings in the standings. Lu Yifeng and Lu Yan had challenged the gladiators right above them in the rankings, becoming 85th and 87th respectively.

This pattern would repeat itself several times over the next few days of training, with none of the Players wishing to face a contestant they were not sure to win against. In any case, their overall ranking was slowly but surely increasing, guaranteeing them a steady progression.

As for Jake, he was only able to resume training with Lutex two days later. He was not yet perfectly healed, but he had eaten so much during his three days of Convalescence that his Body Status stats had returned to their original values at the start of the Ordeal despite his injuries.

He had taken advantage of this rest period to continue to familiarize himself with the different ways of meditation, exercising his mind and senses. He was far from having found the ideal method, but he was heading in the right direction. It was not as if he was on Earth with a console, a smartphone or a TV to distract him. He really didn't have anything better to do, so his involvement had been wholehearted.

Upon seeing him back in training with a rested and relaxed air, Lutex, the pudgy gladiator, had immediately made him pay for his days off. Training had resumed with even worse intensity than the first week, to the point that he had vomited his breakfast several times during particularly strenuous cardio sessions.

Elias was still his training partner during the friendly fights, but a slight gap was starting to appear in their stats as the food and Myrmidian blood available to Jake was of superior quality. The former firefighter didn't seem to be jealous, content to use the Ordeal's time to make the best progress he could. He seemed to be devoid of ambition.

Lu Yan was still progressing as fast as ever. Her stats were slowly starting to catch up, which made her ability to fight multiply thanks to her extreme intelligence. She was absorbing the advanced techniques of Khazus like a sponge, her technique evolving from hour to hour.

This only strengthened Jake's determination to continue practicing his meditation exercises to enhance his intelligence and perception of Aether. If he ignored this problem now, he would not simply be wasting his time.

Lu Yan's technique had already reached an almost unreal level. Even though he had trained seriously for two or three years in this ludus,

he was not even sure that he could match her level of mastery. Three years was far too long. He absolutely had to do everything in his power to shorten that duration.

Xi didn't say much during this time, but he could feel from her silence that she was supporting his every action. He was on the right track.

On the third day after resuming his training, Priscus picked him up just before his daily friendly match against Elias as he was finishing a hit session on the palus. The time had come for him to fulfil his part of the bargain with Servius Cassius.

He had been mentally prepared for days to take the beating of his life against Gerulf and thought he had overcome his apprehensions. This was clearly not the case. When Priscus came to fetch him and deliver the news, Jake's stomach immediately began to knot.

Nevertheless, he didn't give up. He knew from the start that he couldn't turn back. As he saw Priscus' condescending smirk, who could smell his anxiety, he regained his composure.

Clenching his teeth, he followed the lame veteran to the one who would haunt his nightmares in the months to come, but also the one who would contribute most to shaping the future Jake. The Jake whose name would make the entire Mirror Universe tremble with fear many years later.