

The Oracle Paths

Volume 2: The First Ordeal

Chapter 109 - Change of Program

As usual, Jake carefully inspected the envelope, making sure that the wax seal was still intact. His first letter had been read by Creece, supposedly as a precautionary measure, and he had taken it very badly. After whining tactfully between fights against Gerulf, he had managed to guarantee the privacy of his mail.

This raised a few problems within the Ludus, however. It wasn't difficult to circumvent the security measures that had been put in place, especially for someone with an Oracle. Yerode and Lamine had made very few waves during this Ordeal, simply moving up the ranks cautiously, which went against the image he had of their character.

They were in 34th and 36th place, behind the Asian siblings, Miya, Hugo and even Elias who had managed to climb to 33rd place. Places in the rankings above 40 were hard earned, with each rank being marked by a dramatic increase in the gladiator's skills and physical attributes.

Saying goodbye to Creece by patting his shoulder a few times as if they were old friends, Jake headed back to the residential quarters. He never opened his mail in the open air where he could be watched. His correspondence with Will and Sarah was rather mundane, but he had always been a modest person in this regard.

However, he didn't have a chance to walk very far before a slightly breathless Priscus appeared in front of him, raising a gust of wind. Considering the incredible strength of the lame gladiator, it must have been extremely urgent.

'There you are, Jake! Come with me, Servius Cassius is looking for you. We're all waiting for you.' The old Myrmidian informed him curtly before setting off without a pause.

Jake had noticed by now that Priscus wasn't too fond of him, like most of the other recruits. The man seemed to see them as a nuisance, but had never harmed them directly. Aside from barking at them once in a while or adding an extra layer of training, he usually had better things to do.

'All waiting for me? There were other people who were called?' Jake picked up on Priscus' last words.

No response. The veteran chose to ignore him. Alas, he couldn't afford to show his bad temper to Priscus the way he did to Creece. If he truly tried to impose himself by force, he would probably spend the rest of his Ordeal in the infirmary.

Jake had never been in the main building where Servius Cassius and his wife lived. Gerulf and Priscus also stayed there because of their role as bodyguards. Other guards protected the residence, but their duty rooms were in the gladiators' residential area. Servius Cassius seemed to be a cautious person who could barely trust anyone.

Seen from the outside, this building was adjacent to the arena, with the third floor balcony opening directly onto the patio. The interior, however, was completely different from the recruit dormitories.

As with the entrance hall when they arrived at the Ludus, the floor was paved with marble and decorated with numerous mosaics

representing various animals. The walls were also covered with frescoes carved out of the rock or painted decorations. The furniture was also luxurious, with trays filled with local fruit and pastries always at hand.

The beautiful and scantily clad maids were busy making the residence ever cleaner and more welcoming, ignoring Jake and Priscus as if they didn't exist. Perhaps because his Perception had increased substantially in the last few days, his sense of smell was sharper than before, and he could pick up many smells and perfumes pervading every room he passed through.

Some of them came from the freely accessible fruit and oleaginous trays, while others came from the floral arrangements decorating the villa. He could also smell a touch of vinegar, probably used as a household product to maintain the building. There were a few other more or less familiar and unpleasant smells that he could not identify, but he had never claimed to be able to recognize them all.

Priscus took him directly to the top floor where the rooms were, but also Cassius' office, whose balcony opened onto the Ludus' inner courtyard and from which he monitored everything that went on there.

Tvu lofrtftzt md iasare mr oval dimmz jfl usur vaevuz, usur ovu tmmz vfrtiul juzu nfarout emit. Duhmzfoasu mgbuhol qftu md nzuhampl quofil juzu mqrantzuluro, lvmjare ovu mnpurhu md Suzsapl Cflapl frt ulnuhafiiw val jadu Laharaf.

Speaking of her, Elias had finally fallen into the clutches of this femme fatale a few days earlier. He hadn't talked much about it, but with his rosy complexion and his good mood of the last few days, it seemed worth it. The depression that had been with him since the death of his wife and daughter seemed to have disappeared. Maybe

it was just an illusion, but in any case he had regained a taste for life.

It was only after this moment of passion that Elias had challenged the 33rd, ahead of Yerode and Lamine. The future would reveal whether it was a mistake or not.

In the third floor hallway leading to Cassius' office, Jake counted three doors on each side. One of them was the bedroom of Cassius and his wife, another was what he thought was Licinia's 'playroom', and two others were those of Gerulf and Priscus.

The fifth door, closer to the office, was open and what he saw was only a storage room where all the paperwork and other precious collectibles were stored. A vault.

The sixth door was closed and Jake felt that asking Priscus would be a waste of his precious time. When the duo finally reached the desk room at the end of the corridor, Priscus symbolically knocked on the thick oak door before entering.

The room was indeed far from empty. Apart from Cassius sitting behind his desk and Gerulf standing behind him like his shadow, a number of recruits he recognized were waiting with folded arms for his arrival. None of them dared to show their impatience with the owner of the premises, but by their annoyed expressions they must have been waiting for a while.

Yet Jake noticed that the atmosphere was heavy, and not only because of the silence. Servius Cassius, the Lanista in white toga, usually in a benevolent mood, was looking gloomy at the moment, elbows on the desk and fingers intertwined. The situation seemed serious.

‘Jake, we’ve been waiting for you. Without wasting any more time, let’s get down to business. Your first fight has been decided.’

In utterance of those words, unabashed rage radiated from Cassius’ body. As his clasped fingers cracked, he barely restrained himself from smashing everything.

‘What’s the matter? Wasn’t that the plan?’ Jake dared to retort, indifferent to the Lanista’s fury.

‘Planned? Yes, it was...’ Cassius confirmed with a long sigh, his weary body collapsing into his chair as if emptied of all his strength. ‘The date of your first fights has not changed. What has changed are the circumstances...’

‘What do you mean?’ Lu Yan asked in that barely audible voice that Jake was starting to get used to.

‘To appease the people in the wake of the prolonged war against the Throsgenians and the rumors of torture by the noble families on the rabble, Sextus Caelius Lucius, the crown prince decided to reorganize the games.

‘Instead of simply fighting individually or in groups against the recruits and gladiators of other Luduses, it was decided that a battle re-enactment between the Myrmid Empire and the Throsgenians would be staged at the Coliseum instead. Naturally, from a propaganda point of view, those who will represent the Myrmidian legionaries must emerge victorious from this sham, and they will not leave any survivors...’

‘You mean...’

‘Exactly. What better way to represent the barbaric Throsgenian army than to use real Throsgenian slaves? Of all the Ludus of

Heliodas, they chose mine and Princess Livia's to provide the slaves representing the Throsgen side. I'd be the last of the fools if I didn't realize by now that someone is plotting against me. '

Jake focused for a moment to generate a Path showing how to survive the battle in the Coliseum while actually participating in it. The Coach's report that appeared simultaneously froze his blood.

[Participating and surviving the battle in the coliseum:]

[Rewards: None]

[Dalftsfrofeul: [Dzjfjare foouroamr md Mwzqat Tuqniu frt rmgju dfqaiaul]

[Risks: Serious injury, death, imprisonment, sacrifice.]

[Probability of success: Moderate.]

[Probability of failure: Very high]

Over time, Jake had become pretty good at interpreting the data provided by the Coach. From a fight-survival perspective, the probability of success was average. This meant that with his current strength and by continuing his current training, he had a fair chance of being among the winners.

As long as there was even a small chance of success, it meant to Jake that he had nothing to fear as long as he followed his Shadow Guide to the letter. Statistically speaking, if the probability of success was average, the probability of failure should be average as well. But that was not how the Oracle reasoned.

The probability of success responded to the Path itself, while the probability of failure also included the risks. He could win and survive the battle and then be sacrificed by the Myrmid Temple or executed by the royal family after humiliating them.

This meant that the battle in the Coliseum was not important, but what would come afterwards was.