

The Oracle Paths

Volume 2: The First Ordeal

Chapter 78 - Heliодas (part 1)

When the group of Throsген slaves finally left the Insula through the gate and the enclosure separating them from the outside, a sea breeze smell attacked their nostrils.

The wind was lukewarm in spite of the early morning hour and they had to squint their eyes due to the sand and dust it lifted. The red sunlight of dawn also dazzled them after their days in captivity, but they all adjusted without any trouble.

The Insula was part of a complex built outside the city and owned by a famous slave trader. Dozens of other buildings like this one could be found all around the city of Heliодas, with a standing similar to that of horse or cattle farms.

The human being was a commodity like any other and as such had to be warehoused. The Insulas served this function.

Seen from the outside, the Insula was not as luxurious. Although the building had a recognizable antique architecture, the compound and the private guards standing watch gave it the appearance of a barracks.

The outside of the town was a genuine pigsty, a place of poverty and misery. A water supply and waste disposal system had indeed been set up within the city of Heliодas, but of course this waste and sewage had to be disposed of somewhere.

As such, the ocean was the solution of choice. Between the commercial port and the sewage treatment system, foolish would be the one bathing in the river cutting the city in two and joining the ocean a few kilometers further on.

The aqueduct system was limited to Heliadas itself, and therefore the entire outskirts of the city was a veritable dumping ground where all kinds of smells were mixed, from manure to the cheap perfume of prostitutes.

As they were slowly escorted to the large coastal city, Jake and the other slaves inquisitively observed the environment around them. This was all the more true for Earthmen like him who were experiencing their First Ordeal.

Now that it had begun, he had great difficulty determining whether it was some kind of virtual reality or a real world. Until now, everything seemed extremely real to him. The smells, the textures, the sensations, all his senses were completely deceived.

Jake could not explain, other than through virtual reality, how the Oracle System could guarantee their survival, or by what miraculous process it changed their appearance and gave them a false identity.

Being fluent in two languages that had been completely foreign to him just a few hours earlier were equally confusing. His instincts told him that he would not forget them once they were out of the Ordeal.

Another question mark. Apart from the main mission of surviving two months, he had absolutely no clues on how to improve the rating of his Ordeal.

So far, it only seemed to be an Open World configured in Sandbox mode. He had the feeling that no matter what he did during those

two months, as long as he was alive at the end, he would pass the test.

Art wuo, ovu Ozfhiu vft om vfsu suzw lnuhadah hzaouzaf om bpteu ovuaz nuzdmzqfrhu. lo jfl pn om vaq om dart ovuq. Wvahv gzmpevo vaq om frmovuz mgsampl dfho. Tvu Ozfhiu vft hmrdaIhfout fii ovuaz nmlIullamrl gudmzu ovu Oztufi ukhuno dmz ovuaz Ozfhiu tusahu. Hu hmpit fijfwl ofic om Xa, usur ad lvu vft rusuz guur qphv md f oficuz.

The functions of his bracelet were of course still available, with his rank of Private and the experience necessary to improve his Authority level clearly displayed. So all he had to do was wish for how best to perform in this Ordeal and the Prediction ability would give him a Path.

But how could he be sure that this Path would suit him? For example, becoming the new Imperator of the Myrmid Empire could certainly be achieved in many ways. By coup, execution, war, or even marriage of one of his daughters, if he had any. The possibilities were wide.

The ‘perfect’ plan might require him to be so unscrupulous as to eliminate infants or sacrifice children to achieve his ends. Some people may have been able to perjure themselves to succeed in this Ordeal, but Jake had his own boundaries. If he broke them, he would no longer be able to look at himself in the mirror.

‘Xi, what do you think I should do?’ Jake asked her mentally while he continued to follow the other slaves.

[The real question is why are you doing this Ordeal and what is the purpose of the Ordeal? If you know the answer, then what you have to do will come to you.] She answered him in an enigmatic voice, before falling back into her customary mutism.

‘Oh... In this case, it’s simpler than I thought. ‘ He concluded, his lips stretching slightly to form a smirk.

He was there to become stronger, and the Ordeal served the same purpose. In other words, no matter what he accomplished in this new world, if he came out weaker or the same as when he arrived, he would have wasted his time.

Nevertheless, simply surviving those two months couldn’t be so easy as passively following the storyline set up by the Oracle for them. If they followed the natural course of things without interfering with events, he would be sold to the highest bidder shortly.

If his buyer decided that he was an ideal beast of burden to work in the fields, he would spend two grueling months ploughing, but he would have wasted his time completely.

On the other hand, if he didn’t disobey and proved so efficient that he was recognized by his new owner, he would certainly have a better rating than the one who would only do the minimum required.

In other words, even a useless role could lead to different Ratings depending on the way it was carried out. What was important was what was learned from this experience. There were certainly many other criteria, but he would only know them when he finished this Ordeal.

The rating scale for the Ordeal was one of the things Cho Min-Ho was prevented from revealing to them, explaining that providing them with this information would be sanctioned. So the First Ordeal wanted them to solve this mystery on their own.

Oh, whatever, Jake thought. My goal was always the same. His Path 'I want to get stronger as fast as I can' was still in effect. His second path, 'I want to live.' was also perpetually active.

These were rather selfish *désirs*, which many shared, but few of them were pursuing these Paths with the same fervor as Jake.

Once he reaffirmed his convictions, the Coaching function began again, triggering the opportunity he had been waiting for.

[Side Mission: Show Your Value]

[You will soon be auctioned off in the great market square of Heliodas. Find a way to show that you are different from the other slaves. HINT: The talent you display will greatly influence the rest of your Ordeal.]

[Rewards:]

[- Better Rating]

[-Eknuzaurhu nmarol dmz Apovmzaow LuSui]

[Risks:]

[- Injuries/death]

[-To be sacrificed.]

[Probability of success: High]

[Probability of failure: Very low]

The content of the mission did not shock him in the least until he reached the 'risks' part. The probabilities of success and failure were the counterpart of each other, but neither could be ignored.

Real life was not a Manichean world and neither were the consequences of his actions. He could not really fail to prove his

worth. He could show some strength or character, that would be enough to accomplish this mission. In that sense, he had a good chance of getting the rewards of this quest.

However, the small chance of failure indicated that he could naturally fail to show his worth, but more importantly, it could easily backfire. The risk of being sacrificed was particularly worrisome and gave him the creeps, as he didn't know what it meant and why.

Of course, these probabilities were of little value. Without any Digestor present to load the dice, the Oracle's ability to forecast was all-powerful. If he imitated his Shadow Guide perfectly, he could not fail.

He hadn't improved his Agility for nothing. If Jake had confidence in one of his qualities right now, it was his ability to sync up and mimic his Shadow Guide.

Meanwhile, the slave party had reached the city wall of Heliodas, after wading down a dirt road wide enough to drive two chariots side by side. The dry earth mixed with horse dung and all sorts of excrement, making the ride in sandals particularly unpleasant.

The humans they passed by on their way were often slaves like them, coming from different countries conquered by the Myrmid Empire. Under the supervision of their owners or a foreman, they worked like ants at the task for which they were destined to slave until their death.

The sun was already high in the sky when they reached the city wall and they could now enjoy a better view. Dozens of carts full of goods were waiting for the great gate to open, eager to do business inside the city.

They could also glimpse as far as the eye could see fields of an unknown cereal, probably the source of the black bread they had eaten, as well as all sorts of buildings like the one they were confined in. A few villages were visible not far away, probably under the jurisdiction of the coastal city.

Under the escort of the legionnaires the group of slaves passed through the security checks without a hitch, the centurion inspecting them seemingly extremely familiar with their jailers. After exchanging a few banalities with the slavers, he let them circulate with big hand signals.