

# The Oracle Paths

## Volume 2: The First Ordeal

### Chapter 88 – The Cantina

The cantina was a plain dedicated space under a covered courtyard supported by marble columns. The space opened directly onto the arena. The arena had been designed in this way, as gladiators trained with little interruption from morning to evening, going to the cantina for refreshments or a meal.

The space in question was covered with dozens of long rectangular tables made of sturdy wood. Benches of a similar composition and without backrests served as chairs. Fountains and faucets supplied by the aqueduct allowed them to hydrate themselves, while their meals were prepared by a team of cooks. The cooks looked rather filthy, with the heads of convicts doing their community service quota.

It was obvious that Servius Cassius, his wife and the rest of his family did not partake in the meals. Priscus and Gerulf were also absent, proof that they were treated differently than other gladiators.

By the time Jake arrived on the scene, most of the tables were occupied. The veteran gladiators were eating together in a corner while the less reputable gladiators occupied most of the tables, showing their superiority by taking up more space than necessary.

New recruits had to squeeze together unwillingly, having only a few tables left to accommodate them. The more conciliatory ones had resolved to eat on the floor in a corner to avoid trouble.

Gladiators as new recruits were lining up to be served their pittance. The truth was they had no real choice of meal. Large containers filled with a mixture of boiled beans and beans, or some kind of black porridge made from a certain oatmeal were waiting for them.

Looking at the gladiators' meal trays, it was obvious that they were entitled to more filling portions than their own. With his current Constitution and Vitality, Jake could handle a substantial amount of food. The stats brought by the Aether didn't require more food. Its performance was simply amplified.

It was different for his Constitution and Vitality from his Body Status. It depended on his physiology. By increasing his vitality and constitution, his regeneration and endurance had increased, as had his metabolism. If he avoided overexertion, he would not weaken too quickly, but if they planned to train with these portions, he might have a problem.

Priscus had warned them about constant competition for resources. For this evening at least, he had no intention of stirring things up.

He had to gather information first. He had to find out who the gladiators were that they should be wary of, and where his strength lay among all these professional warriors. Without this crucial information, he was facing risks that could have fatal consequences.

Seeing Kyle in the middle of the line, he waved his hand at him and then joined the line too with his tray. While he was queuing, he suddenly heard the sound of a bowl breaking. Looking for the source of the noise, he found a young slave kneeling on the floor, trying to pick up his gruel and the broken fragments of his bowl.

A man in a loincloth about two meters long and all muscular blocked his way with a sadistic smile. His body was covered with scars and

tanned by the sun. The slave only apologized profusely, judiciously deciding to lie on the ground. A participant.

Jake had recognized him as one of those bought by Servius Cassius at the Heliodas market, but above all the slave was far too calm for someone being bullied by a heavy brute in front of an unmoved audience.

‘Hahaha, Gnaeus can’t help hazing the new ones, it’s stronger than him !’ The gladiators on the stage commented in amusement, clearly with no intention of ending the show.

‘I think it’s because he remembers his own hazing by Khazus. Ever since he got his lesson, he feels he has been entrusted with a sacred task. ‘Another gladiator mocked as he bite into his bread.

Even if Kyle or a slave was brutalized or abused like that, Jake wouldn’t budge. Outside of the Ordeal he might have done otherwise, but the first four Ordeals were not deadly and were supposed to be challenging but doable. If a participant was eliminated from the race so easily, he could only blame himself.

Only with sufficient strength could he protect his loved ones. The stronger he would come out of this Ordeal, the better his scope of action would be.

When it was finally his turn to get served, he realized that he was only entitled to one portion of food, from the bowl he had been given. He grimaced when he saw that there was no satisfactory source of protein. Tactically, he filled his bowl with beans, hoping that his digestion would be good enough to keep him from bloating.

‘Why do these gladiators get more food than we do ? ‘He tried to fish for information by asking the cook filling their bowls. The old man

was missing most of his teeth, and his hair was sticky with sweat and cooking grease.

‘ Hmmm! Get out of here! Others are waiting behind you.’ The cook in question immediately sent him packing, dodging his question.

Jake clenched his fist, taking a deep breath to avoid feeding the old man his last teeth. The Throsgens hormones were putting his mood on edge, as if he were actually a woman six months pregnant. Those two months would be a real test of his self-control.

Taking it upon himself, he avoided the cook’s sputters before leaving to find a free table with his tray. All the tables were fully occupied. There were free spots at the veteran gladiators’ tables, but he would be a fool if he dared to sit at their tables. Judging by the black eyes of some of the slaves, some had already tried.

Looking for Kyle, he found him sitting on the floor, leaning against a column away from the other slaves. He seemed nervous, but his shrinking intellect and Throsgens hormones kept him from being afraid. Paradoxically, he was calmer than usual.

Joining him, Jake sat against the same column with the intention of dining in silence. No cutlery had been given to them, even though veteran gladiators had access to wooden tableware. They also had wine at their tables, fresh fruit and vegetables, and sometimes meat on their plates. Their treatment was completely different from their own.

Gifafomzl jvm vft hmqniuout ovuaz ozfarare juzu ukozuquiw uflw om taloarepalv. Tvuw jmzu fr S-lvfnut gzfrt artuiagiw aqnzarout arom ovuaz lcar jaov f gpzrare nmcuz mr mru md ovuaz lvmpituzl. Tvu qfzc md ovuaz Lfralof Suzsapl Cflapl.

Jake could only hope he could escape this branding. He didn't even know at the time if the scars from the Ordeal would be kept outside the Cube. However, considering it was impossible to die there, he could only hope that they were not.

During his meal, he was able to contemplate how other slaves who seemed more vulnerable and shy than the others were humiliated and provoked in turn. Some Throsgen slaves were hot-blooded and were unable to resist these provocations.

He was able to witness some memorable fights in the middle of the cantina, where bowls flew and water-filled amphoras and jugs were broken. In all cases, it ended with the unilateral beating of the provoked slaves.

Jake thought for a second that a gladiator intended to humiliate them when he saw him walking towards them, but as he stood up from the ground the approaching man suddenly changed his mind, choosing another target.

Sitting back down, he wondered what the hell had just happened, and then, unable to find an explanation, resumed eating his porridge and beans. All he could say was that these gladiators had strong instincts.

He was absolutely certain that he could knock out the gladiator in question with a single blow. But to show the extent of his strength too soon would undoubtedly have been detrimental to him. Apart from Gerulf, Priscus and the slaves at the auction in Heliadas, nobody knew what he was capable of.

Jake wasn't so naive as to think that none of the recruits would reveal any information about him, but if he could keep a low profile he would.

When Jake and Kyle finished their meal, wasting no crumbs, the Asian siblings joined them to thank him and apologize for his intervention at the auction.

‘No need to thank me or apologize. ‘Jake swept their apology away with a flick of his hand. ‘ I understand you were only following your Oracle, and I was following mine. I just didn’t know it could use us in this way. »

‘I’m glad you think so. Your show of strength was impressive. Especially for a Rank 2.’ The Asian brother replied in an admiring tone. ‘Let me introduce my sister and I. I am Lu Yifeng, and this is Lu Yan. »

‘Jake.’

‘Kyle.’

‘Nice to meet you. Why don’t we team up?’ Lu Yifeng proposed, sitting cross-legged in front of them along with his sister.