

# The Oracle Paths

## Volume 2: The First Ordeal

### Chapter 92 - First day of training

CRACK!

‘Everybody up, you maggots! Hurry your asses up and faster than that! »

The cracking of a whip on the stone floor of the corridor, followed by the bellowing of Priscus the lame, abruptly snatched the new recruits from the arms of Morpheus. Jake was no exception and grumbled in a bad mood as he heard the cries coming from all around him.

It couldn't be said that he had spent his best night ever. The straw bed wasn't inherently uncomfortable, but it clearly wasn't worth a good mattress. Add to that the lack of pillows, sheets and blankets, and it was downright painful for a householder like him.

Fortunately the climate near Heliodas was hot and dry. Temperatures cooled down in the evening, but they had no difficulty in enduring the coolness despite their simple tunic.

Many gladiators wore only simple loincloths with protective cups to protect their private parts. This was a dress style that Jake would eventually adopt over the next few days.

When he opened his eyes, the first thing Jake noticed was that it was still dark. His room didn't have a window, but it was far too dark in the hallway with the torches out. No wonder the wake-up call had

been so violent. He was still feeling drowsy, a sign that he was in the middle of his slow-wave sleep when he was suddenly awakened from his torpor.

Once up, he only had to put on the dubious looking leather sandals that they had been given after the thermal baths. A new tunic made of coarse cotton had also been supplied to them the day before, replacing the one they had sweated in during the forced march to the ludus.

Or iufsare val zmmq, jvahn immcut qmzu iacu f nzalmr huii, vu jficut giartiw om ovu mpolatu. Hu hmrezfopifout vaqluid dmz vfsare vft ovu emmt atuf om hvmmmlu ovu zmmq fo ovu urozfrhu md ovu hmzzatmz. lo lfsut vaq dzmq dpqgiare ar ovu tfzc frt lopqgiare msuz ovu movuz lifsul.

Outside, the yellow moon was full, casting its golden light over the inner courtyard of the ludus. Looking up at the starry sky, devoid of any pollution, Jake immediately felt better, feeling that the situation could have been worse.

This was directly confirmed by the slaves who came out of the dormitory wing one after another. Many of them had bruises or black eyes. One of them grimaced as he held his right hand against him, whose fingers were at a dangerously ominous angle.

The fight for a good room had obviously not made everyone happy. For every winner, there was a loser. Some people who had not even tried to participate found themselves involved in the scuffle and had been injured despite their prudence.

Kyle had his knuckles red and his lower lip swollen and covered with a scab, a sign that he was one of those idiots who had lost his temper in yesterday's fight. Unfortunately for him, he didn't have the

same stats of intelligence as Jake. So it was bound to happen sooner or later.

The latter had in fact tried in the first place to stay away from all this. Problem was, he still wanted a real bed, unlike Jake who didn't mind sleeping on the floor. If he had been in his right mind, he probably would have made the right choice. Regrettably, he had not, and he had learned his lesson.

'Haha, slept well?' Jake chuckled, barely holding his own laugh.

'Hmmf, I've known better...' Kyle snarled in response, trying to ignore Jake's amused gaze or else his aggression would resurface against the wrong person. If he attacked this brute, he wouldn't just get away with a few bruises.

Yerode and Lamine walked out of the building with their hands covered in dried blood, but this time it wasn't theirs. They had enjoyed themselves last night and were in a great mood.

The Asian siblings were doing well, as were Elias, Miya and Hugo. Other people like Jake had wisely chosen their rooms near the entrance so they didn't get involved in the brawl.

When everyone was outside, Priscus cracked his whip again and motioned for them to follow him. Contrary to their expectations, he didn't take them to the open-air canteen of the ludus for breakfast, but straight to the training grounds in the middle of the arena.

Jake found that gladiators bearing the mark of Servius Cassius sleeping on the floor above had not had to get up, proof that they were not all treated the same. The competition had already begun.

Once in the arena, the first thing the slaves noticed was the water point with a tap under a canopy against the walls of the bleachers.

There were also all sorts of wooden boxes, presumably filled with equipment and other materials intended for their training.

Getting his first opportunity to observe all the new recruits in one place, Jake estimated that there were almost five hundred of them. An impressive number, even in an arena of this size.

Gladiators bearing the mark of the ludus were far fewer in number. Perhaps a hundred. That was of course without counting the guards and other gladiators now performing other duties.

The ratio of men to women was 70/30. Perhaps most of the women who didn't want to fight had been bought by someone else, as the Ordeal had a different fate in store for them. Jake had a hunch that their first test would determine whether or not they were fit for the training.

Those who didn't give their best could be turned back into simple servants. This could be a good way to get information if you were planning a real conspiracy, but counterproductive if you wanted to become stronger.

Priscus had them lined up in front of him with a great deal of whipping, the few idiots trying to drink from the tap rewarded with a nice gash in the back. The Throsgenian slaves were stronger than mere humans, but that didn't stop them from bleeding and gnashing their teeth.

The veteran gladiator then stood in the ground like an I, staring at them without showing any sign of movement in a painfully heavy silence. Slowly time passed. The golden moon faded behind the rising sun, a red and purple sky gradually replacing the night.

Even then, the lame old gladiator remained motionless and listless. At last, after what seemed like an eternity, the slaves heard the

sound of voices coming from the dormitories. The gladiators were awake.

Tm ovuaz talqfw, ovuw lfj ovu nzmdullamrfi eiftafomzl vuftare omjftzl ovu hfroarf, guearrare om duflo vfnnaiw msuz f vufzow gzufcdflo. Tjm eiftafomzl, vmjusuz, gzmcu fjfw dzmq ovu ezmpn frt jficut fimrelatu Pzalhpl.

The two warriors respectfully greeted him with one hand clasped over their hearts before moving to his left.

‘First, let me remind you of the facts. ‘Priscus abruptly broke the silence in a stern tone. ‘You are but vulgar slaves and nothing more.

‘... But it is up to you to become gods of the arena. Here in the Myrmid Empire, only strength is respected. No matter your origin or race, if you prove your worth in the Coliseum, everyone will worship you.’

‘If you fail... you will die. Training is not without risk of accidents. Training new gladiators is expensive. Anyone who decides to take this training will have to fight in the next games organized in honor of the Emperor’s victorious return. By will or by force...’

‘Rumor has it he’ll be back in a month, some say two. That’s how much time you have to train before your first fight.’

When Priscus dropped that bomb many indecisive slaves showed signs of hesitation. The gladiators had much better living conditions, but you had to be alive to enjoy them.

‘Those who do not want to fight, step forward. No harm will come to you, and Creece here will assign you other duties. ‘ Priscus declared, pointing to one of the two men.

This one was rather puny for a gladiator, but his muscles were extremely well defined. Like all gladiators in the ludus, his skin was tanned by the sun. His black hair was short and he wore a moustache that did not match the cuirass he was wearing. He looked more like a merchant than a fighter.

Ultimately, about ten people stepped forward to give up their gladiatorial training. None of them were participants. Satisfied with the small number of wimps, Priscus pointed his finger at Creece again.

‘For those who follow this training and hopefully will join our brotherhood, Creece is also named the smuggler in this ludus. ‘He revealed with a faint smile. ‘If you have any information to pass on or if you need something from outside the ludus, Creece is the one to consult. Of course, he’ll take his commission out of your wages... ‘

Jake memorized the smuggler’s features, sensing that they would be in frequent contact in the days to come. Creece abandoned them soon after, followed by the ten slaves who had renounced. Priscus’ faint smile gradually faded away, a cold and intimidating countenance replacing it.

‘Now that we are convinced of your determination, the time has come to commence the training.’