

The Oracle Paths

Volume 2: The First Ordeal

Chapter 97 - A pure novice

To understand the situation, it was necessary to come back a few moments earlier. In the beginning, the fight had proceeded as planned. Jake had made proper use of his Shadow Guide, executing perfect parries to the predictable moves of Khazus.

Khazus had even thought at the time that this recruit had talent. Then, as with Lu Yifeng and Lu Yan, he had gradually increased the tempo and power of his attacks in order to determine the actual level of the slave he was facing.

Even at this stage, Jake had continued to parry the attacks brilliantly, retaliating with unadorned gestures, aiming to kill. He was different from the Asian siblings. His speed was almost comparable, but he was much stronger than Lu Yan. As for his Constitution and Vitality, he was outclassing them completely.

Khazus soon realized that Jake's breath did not accelerate to such intensity and that he was much more resilient, like a tree rooted in the ground. Thinking he had discovered another prodigy, he had abruptly accelerated the intensity of his strokes, taking the fight to a whole new level.

That was when the fraud was revealed. Even with a perception of time three times slower than that of a normal human, he couldn't respond to lightning attacks requiring instant reflexes. Where Lu Yifeng had retained his technique, responding as best he could to the

avalanche of strikes, Jake's technique had completely vanished as if it had never existed.

"I see... It was just too slow for you, but you don't know how to fight," Khazus had grumbled to himself, before tackling the situation differently.

The Myrmidian Gladiator was having trouble solving this puzzle. How could someone handle his weapon so well and respond so perfectly to each of his blows, only to become a complete neophyte once the fight had been taken to the next level? It didn't make any sense. Technique and reflexes were supposed to be written in the flesh after thousands of repetitions.

To check if the recruit was trying to hide his true level, Khazus had dealt a real hit to the head, the same one that had knocked Gnaeus out between life and death.

CLANG!

Jake's head had been ejected to the side, the rest of the body following in his wake. The rookie had flown a few yards before crashing into the sand. Khazus had been left flabbergasted, just like the other gladiators. He was already regretting hitting a new slave so hard. If this one died in his hands, Servius Cassius would give him a dressing-down for eons. He had grimaced at the thought of it.

But what had happened next had shocked him even more. The victim of his sword blow to the head - which was powerful enough to whack an elephant - had got up as if nothing had happened. Jake had cracked his neck, opened and closed his jaw a couple of times to make sure he hadn't broken anything, and then he had been back on guard once again.

The combination of his two statuses had not disappointed him. His constitution had been one of his strong points before, but the Throsgenian Blessing had amplified it. His bones were more than 15 times stronger than those of a normal human. His skin was like leather, his muscles like extremely resilient plastic fiber. The benefit would not be as pronounced when he would regain his normal appearance, but during the time of the Ordeal he was a perfect tank.

The skin at the impact zone, near his temple, had just reddened a bit. That's what happened when one had a constitution and vitality considerably superior to one's strength and agility.

If Jake had to face himself bare-handed, he probably wouldn't be able to kill himself without hitting a soft tissue such as the eyes, genitals or the crook of the throat. Even the bleeding from a conventional cut would stop in 30-45 seconds.

What a freaking monster! These last recruits were each more terrifying than the previous one! Very few gladiators could take such a blow and get up again without a scratch. Yerode and Lu Yifeng had also been looking at Jake in a new light.

Yerode had suspected since their previous fight that Jake was an extremely tough amateur. He just didn't know to what extent. Nevertheless, he was rather reassured. With a sword, it didn't matter how resilient he was, he'd be stabbed the same way.

As for the siblings, they had just realized that Jake had more Aether than they did, but that he was indeed a beginner. He seemed not to have practiced any martial arts, nor to have actively played modern virtual reality games. Either way, it was better to have him on his side.

Most of them had suffered an important intelligence loss when they were altered into Throsgenian, but Lu Yan and his brother knew full well how important an advantage in constitution and vitality could be in such a long Ordeal. Those who were too foolish to realize this would understand it soon enough in the days and weeks to come.

‘White!’

Again in the present, Khazus saw no point in pursuing the test. He could continue to increase the intensity of the trial, but it didn’t matter. This rookie was indeed a total novice and should therefore train with the same rookies who had to learn the basics. The only difference was that he would be supervised differently.

Lamine was given the color Red. In addition to being an excellent shooter, he was apparently also good with a blade. His strength wasn’t up to Yerode, Jake or the siblings, but his agility was terrifying. Not to mention his speed, his strikes were ridiculously precise and controlled, as if the wooden sword was just an extension of his arm.

The last one to be tested was Elias, the Lebanese fireman who had seen his wife and daughter being devoured by Digestors. Turns out he was a carbon copy of Jake. A thick brute without any technique, who made up for his shortcomings with an athletic body and high Aether stats in Strength and Constitution.

His body was noticeably more muscular than that of Jake’s due to his extensive training as a firefighter. Because their performance was similar, Jake had therefore more Aether.

Ir ovu urt, ovu lagiarel, Yuzmtu frt Lfqaru juzu ovu dmpz Pifwuzl vu jmpit vfsu om jfohv mpo dmz. Tvuw hmpit tudaraoui w vfzq vaq uypannut jaov f zufi jufnmr frt rmo f hzfnnw jmmtur ljmzt iacu ovu

mrul ar oval oulo. Esur ad vu vft om ftqao ovfo ovulu jmmtur ljmztl
juzu fgrmzqfiw lmiat...

When the test was over, each recruit went under a banner bearing the color they had been assigned to. White and yellow were the most numerous, while oranges and reds were more scarce. Lu Yan was alone, waiting patiently beside Khazus.

‘Here’s how it’s going to be.’ Khazus started talking again when each new recruit had joined their banner. ‘The top five veteran gladiators will be in charge of supervising you. Lutex will be in charge of the whites, Krona will be in charge of the yellows, and Hector will be in charge of the oranges and reds. I will supervise the training of...?’

‘Lu Yan...’ A small voice answered, hardly more audible than a whisper.

‘Lu Yan, the only one who got a black color. Now that the introductions are made, you can have a well-deserved meal. Training will begin this afternoon, so get your strength back! »

The new recruits joined the cantina while the gladiators already bearing the mark of the ludus began to train assiduously, recreation being over. Some planted six-foot-high posts (palus) into the ground, practicing their technique by striking them with a weighted sword and shield.

Others began practicing all sorts of body weight or weighted exercises, not much different from those practiced by the Crossfit athletes on Earth. The gladiators seemed used to this routine, moving regularly from one workout to the next.

The new recruits watched their training with curiosity as they ate, wondering if they could handle such a training pace. Priscus had

returned to oversee the training of these gladiators, and clearly they were not safe from his whip either.

With Lutex, Krona, Hector and Khazus staying with them, the slaves were able to enjoy a real meal, comparable to that of the veterans the day before. In addition to the infamous gruel of the day before, they had access to slightly dried red meat, fresh vegetables and fruit as well as bread and cheese. It was not as good as a 5-star hotel, but it was incomparable to the vomit they had been served the day before.

Exceptionally the quantities were not limited either and Jake did not hesitate to gorge himself. How much and what kind of food they would get afterwards would depend in addition to their future ranking in a week's time on how the gladiator supervising them would evaluate them at the end of the day.

Lpouk, f zfovuz dfo eiftafomz dmz f suouzfr zfrcut 5ov ar ovu iptpl frt ar hvfzeu md lpnuzsalare ovu Wvaoul, omit ovuq ovfo Pzalhpl jmpit film tzmn gw dzmq oaqu om oaqu om arlnuho ovu luzamplrull md ovuaz ozfarare frt om hvuhc jvuovuz ovu suouzfr eiftafomzl juzu ofcare ovuaz oflc md ozfarare ovu ruj zuhzpaol luzampliw.

Servius Cassius the ludus master also kept an eye on everything that was going on in the arena from his balcony. Taking it easy would thus be impossible and a very bad idea.

When they had finished feasting, Lutex guided the white recruits under his supervision into a secondary courtyard away from the arena. At last the training was ready to begin.