

# The Oracle Paths

## Volume 2: The First Ordeal

### Chapter 124 - Cassius' Tears

Unlike what Jake imagined, the owner of the Ludus showed no signs of panic, shock or sadness. Against all odds, he simply closed his eyes with a very long sigh. Cassius kept his eyes closed for a few more seconds, before finally reopening them with renewed serenity.

‘Take me to her. ‘

‘It might be better not to...‘ Kyle began to protest before he changed his mind before the Lanista’s very intense gaze. ‘All right, well...‘

Kyle, Lu Yan and her brother then guided Cassius accompanied by Jake, Lucia and Hugo to the corpse of Licinia. She was in her ‘playroom‘ when the mutiny began and Jake immediately understood why Kyle was so reluctant to show them the crime scene.

Licinia’s body was indeed there, but she was not alone. Elias’ naked, worm-like corpse lay next to her, his head rolled on the marble tile floor. The sheets and the white marble had been repainted red and a silver plate full of fruit had been knocked over. The wine carafe had also been broken and two originally full gold cups had rolled against the edge of the bed.

From Elias’ physical condition, there was no doubt that he had been poisoned with the same relaxant as the recruits by eating one of the fruits destined for Licinia. However, he had not lost consciousness right away and had tried to defend himself in vain. Perhaps it would

have been better for Licinia if she had eaten the fruit intended for her, because her murder was straight out of a nightmare.

The young woman's body was covered with burns and cuts. Her fingernails had been torn out and each of her fingers had been broken. Before, during or after that she had been raped as evidenced by the very manly fluids and smells covering her.

After having tortured and raped her to extract some information or simply to enjoy her body during the commotion, her throat was then slit.

The most horrible part of all this was that Elias' decapitated head was frozen in an expression of extreme hatred, a sign that he had not been killed straight away. He had been condemned to watch helplessly and paralyzed by poison the whole spectacle. He had been unable to prevent his wife and daughter from being devoured by a Digestor before his very eyes, and today he had failed to protect the woman whose bed he shared and who seemed to have grown infatuated with him.

More importantly, Elias wasn't really dead. He had just failed his Ordeal. Somewhere in the Red Cube through which the asian siblings had joined the Ordeal, the former fireman was brooding over his failure in search of revenge.

Esur ovmpev Jfcu jfl rmj qmzu mz iull hmrsarhut ovfo Suzsapl Cflapl vft rm nfzoahpifz foofhvquro om val jadu, vu zuffialut ovfo oval jfl rmo ozpu. Tvu Lfralof jvm vft zuqfarut nuzduhoiw lomah mz fiqmlom fo ovu frmprrhuquro md vuz tufov hiurhvut val dalol lm oaevoiw ovfo vu jfl lvfcare.

Approaching his dead wife, he closed his eyes, then pressed his forehead against hers before kissing her briefly.

‘I’m sorry Licinia. I should have cared more for you. ‘Cassius murmured as he cåressed her face one last time.

What happened next shocked Priscus and Khazus. The Lanista began to cry. No loud sobs or hysterical fits. Just a few tears escaping during a brief moment of loss of control. Immediately wiping them away with a swipe of his hand, Cassius then stormed out of the room and walked away to his office. He then slammed the door already half-destroyed behind him.

Deciding to ease the general embarrassment, Priscus ordered the group of survivors to help him àssess the damage. Meanwhile, Jake continued to inspect the room where Licinia and Elias had been killed, looking for details that would have gone unnoticed.

While examining Elias’ body, he discovered that Elias had written something with his blood using his fingers before he died. There were only three letters separated from each other by a space, and each of them was a consonant. This discovery would not have been of much use to anyone else, but two of the bloody letters immediately appealed to him. ‘Y’ and ‘L’.

It could only have been a coincidence, but gratuitous \*\*\*\* and murder was an act of debauchery that suited Yerode and Lamine well. The two Players had deserted the Ludus, a sign that they were in collusion with the traitors.

Recapitulating what he knew, he concluded that Yerode, Lamine and other traitors had been given the task of extracting information from Licinia at any cost, possibly including capturing her. Licinia had resisted, refusing to reveal anything until the end.

Her lecherous torturers had thus decided to have fun in another way, agreeing to declare to their superior that Licinia had committed

suicide, which was indeed the case. The young woman had bitten her tongue, choking herself shortly afterwards in her own blood.

The third initial was a 'C' (another alphabet of course). This could correspond to a lot of recruits, gladiators or guards from the Ludus, but the most likely hypothesis was that it was Creece the Smuggler. No sign of him had been seen since the end of the battle. No wonder he had been so wary of Jake a few hours earlier when he handed him his mail.

Jfcu lplnuhout ovfo vu jfl fhoare fl f tmpgiu feuro dmz f rmgiu dfqaiw, gpo ovu dfho ovfo vu vft iuo Waii jfzr vaq lvmjut ovfo vu jfl rmo jmzcare dmz ovu Qparopl, mz ovu iuoouz jmpit rusuz vfsu zufhvut vaq.

He then joined the others to help them take stock of the losses. He overheard Priscus's scream of rage in one of the rooms on the top floor where the armoured door had been broken down.

'Fucking traitors! They've taken everything! All the Ludus' blood supply has been robbed!'

Jake didn't need to be a genius to figure out what he was talking about. The room to the right at the end of the corridor and right next to Cassius' office was the treasure room of the Ludus where the most precious things were stored. Myrmid blood, which the recruits and gladiators trained with, was undoubtedly the most precious resource there was.

Upon entering the vault, Jake noticed that blood was indeed their target. The room was full of jewels, precious stones and chests full of gold coins, but none of it had been looted. Only the section full of precious blood had been emptied. Apart from the crushed ice for

preservation made by some unknown means, the container was empty.

They then spent much of the night tallying the absent, dead and wounded. It turned out that half the guards and gladiators were among the traitors. Many had been killed by the loyal guards, Priscus and Khazus, but more than twenty had escaped with their booty. Hector was one of those who had escaped when he had realized that the two Knights Templar were no match for Priscus.

He also learned that when Lu Yan and her brother came to Khazus' rescue, Khazus was embroiled in a fight against three of these Templars. Despite the poison's influence, like Priscus, he had managed to dominate the fight, even executing one of them with the help of Lu Yan and her brother. Kyle had limited himself to the small fry, but it was actually not bad that he didn't run away.

Lu Yan repeatedly tried to explain herself when she was away from her brother, but Jake ignored her all along. The day he could play the flute he would try to charm vipers, but that was not yet the case.

In the early morning he was finally able to retire to his room, whose door was miraculously among the few on the floor still intact. He then took out the Templar Player's bracelet that he had picked up and put on to make it look like a normal accessory. Priscus and Khazus hadn't seen anything special, but Kyle, Lu Yan and her brother had definitely guessed what it was. Nevertheless, none of them had tried to pressure him to share his find. Each had probably gotten their fair share of rewards that night.

Following the procedure explained by Xi, Jake connected his two bracelets and suddenly the Templar's bracelet began to liquefy, merging with his own in no time. Instead of becoming thicker or covering more surface his bracelet remained the same, but the

blackness of the metal became more intense, giving the impression of having become somehow more solid and mysterious.

[ Ozfhiu Dusahu pneztut! 2480 Auovuz nmarol mgofarut, ruj dprhoamr fsfaifgiu!]