

The Oracle Paths

Volume 2: The First Ordeal

Chapter 145 – Interlude (part 1)

‘Is this the place?’ A deep, overbearing voice asked curtly.

‘It is, Your Highness. Durn Gurum, the only remaining Throsngen stronghold that still stands against us.’ Another voice answered distinctly with extreme deference.

‘Let us take this city and go home.’ The first voice said.

‘It will be done according to your will, Your Highness...’

A few hours later, the bloodiest and most decisive battle since the beginning of the War against the Throsngens was in full swing. Durn Gurum was besieged on both sides, with the great gates blocking access to the heart of the city already completely destroyed long ago by the empire’s rams.

The Throsngenian capital had nothing grand and would have been considered little better than the slums of Heliodas. The three-meter-high terracotta wall resembled the creations of a kindergarten child playing with clay and most legionaries were able to leap over it in a single leap.

The defensive structures of the city were derisive in the face of a well-trained and orderly army like the Emperor’s. Most of the Throsngenian warlords had either been executed or captured since the personal intervention of Augustus’ Imperial legions, and the

surviving Throsgenians had lost battle after battle, eventually finding themselves cornered in their final stronghold.

Even so, a few horribly powerful Throsgenians had inflicted heavy losses on them during this military campaign, significantly mitigating the glory that the Emperor hoped to achieve by personal intervention. But this time it was the end for them. They were doomed.

The Emperor and his Generals marched calmly through the middle of the battlefield, gazing impassively at the thousands of Throsgenian warriors and civilians sacrificing one after the other in the hope of obtaining one more moment of respite for their loved ones.

From time to time, one of them would draw his sword at a speed too fast to be perceived and the air would suddenly whistle, decapitating the dozens of Throsgenians who had had the misfortune of being in his path. A few poorly positioned legionaries were also cut off in the process.

Qpahciw, fiiaul frt uruqaul fiacu lozfwut dzmq ovuaz nfov om fsmat guare hpo mdd gw qalofcu frt ovu lqnuzfomz frt val ezmpn md Guruzfil juzu fgiu om ftsfrhu nufhudpiiw jaovmpo vartzfrhu. Smmr ovuw zufhvut ovu mriw nifhu ar ovu hurouz md Dpzzr Gpzzpq ovfo vft rmovare om urSw om ovu fzhvaouhopzu md ovuaz uqnazu: Tvu Tuqniu md Tvzmlaur.

The monument had a poor aesthetic, being basically a huge stone tower. Its dimensions, however, were out of all proportion to the terracotta constructions that prevailed in the capital. The tower was as wide as the Colyseum of Heliodas, but stood so high in the sky that it was difficult to distinguish the top.

The Emperor found it hard to believe that these primitive, mentally retarded people could build such a thing, but given what he knew, it was obviously not the case. His mission today was clear.

Recently, he had been feeling that he was no longer completely himself. Sometimes he had blackouts, not remembering what he had done in the last few hours. Regularly, a terrible migraine pounded his skull, an indescribable pain invading him as if something was devouring his brain.

On top of that, these horrible headaches were accompanied by chewing noises that made these tortured episodes a nightmare. On more than one occasion he had consulted a physician in vain. But today was a good day. The headache was gone and he had an appetite again.

The sturdy corpses of the Throsgenians made his mouth water, but strangely enough it didn't bother him. From time to time he would take a break to tear off the arm of one of the dead, sometimes Throsgenian, sometimes Myrmidian, which he would then gobble up serenely as if it were a skewer of beef.

It froze the blood of the Myrmidian legionaries nearby, but the Generals who accompanied him remained stoic, although a trained eye might have noticed that they were also salivating profusely.

Soon Durn Gurum was under their control, only the Throsgen Temple having been spared. The Myrmidian Legionaries had formed a tight security perimeter around the building to prevent anyone from escaping. Nevertheless, no one took the initiative to attack the shrine.

Because inside resided the most terrible force of the Throsgen lands: The High Priestess and her Paladins. The former High Priestess had

recently died of old age a few days before the war began, but a new Priestess had come out of nowhere to take her place.

The mysterious young woman, accompanied by a few Paladins who never left her side, proved to be the most terrifying opponent the Myrmid Empire had ever faced. But this time, she would not escape.

Fearlessly, Augustus drew his sword and kicked down the door guarding the entrance to the Temple. The Imperator was a man nearly two meters tall, with clean-shaven hair, imposing and shredded physique. Many scars covered his arms and neck, testifying to his extensive experience on the battlefield. His armor was plain and unadorned, but the bronze was of the highest quality. No matter what was behind that door, they would become his 'food'.

'Food? What am I saying?' The Imperator babbled as he finished gnawing the shin of one of his most loyal legionaries.

Once inside the temple, a large, perfectly lit hall with large stained-glass windows from which the sunlight could easily filter out revealed itself to him. Inside, apart from a modest statue of the hero Throsgen, who looked like a hunchbacked old man with a cane, a few people were waiting for him there.

Unlike the armada of Templars defending the Temple of Myrmid, these individuals were very different. Only a dozen, with a dress code impossible to associate with the very orderly and codified dress code of the Myrmidian Templars.

Some were shirtless, leaning against a wall with their arms folded. A bald man in shorts and barefoot sat cross-legged at the top of the statue, indifferently sharpening his claymore with a whetstone.

Two other young women in full armor and wearing fur coats were quietly drinking an infusion sitting on a leather sofa that was utterly

out of place in a religious building like this one. A few others were playing a local card game in a corner as if the war outside had nothing to do with them. And not far from them, sitting in a wheelchair, there was a woman.

Her legs partially hidden by a thin silk dress looked like plucked chicken thighs. They seemed to have stopped growing halfway down, forming two disharmonious stumps at the level of what should have been her knees.

Even though her ample dress hid her shapes, the Emperor's sharp eye could tell from her posture that she suffered from debilitating scoliosis. She was flat and perhaps too skinny, but despite all the problems that would have driven anyone else to despair, she was smiling.

Her face was comparatively quite pleasant to look at, if you disregarded her abnormally twisted nose to the right. Her skin was smooth like a jewel, her eyebrows and long snow-white hair falling down to her waist was captivating, but the most mesmerizing was her eyes.

Her left iris was a deep marine blue while the right one was amethyst coloured. A strange light seemed to pulsate behind them that even the Emperor could perceive and it gave him the disturbing impression that all his darkest secrets had been revealed.

ld Jfcu vft guur ovuzu, vu jmpit vfu aqquafouiw rmoahut ovfo ufhv md ovulu numniu jfl jufzare f gzfhuio. Efhv md ovuq jfl f Pifwuz!

'Ruby? Can I kill him?' The Bald Warrior sitting cross-legged at the top of the statue suddenly asked without ceasing to sharpen his weapon.

An angelic voice as soft as a swan's feather replied with a chuckle:

‘We should at least confirm his identity. Are you the Emperor Augustus?’

A vein of fury suddenly swelled over the Myrmidian leader’s temple. Were those wretched barbarians screwing with him? Anyway, he was in a good mood today. He could well grant them these few pleasantries. When he would sit at the table a few hours later and this brazen woman would be served to him, roasted in small pieces on a gold plate, they would see who would have the last laugh.

‘I am,’ Augustus finally guffawed scornfully.

‘Oh... Well, in that case, you can die now. ‘

In an instant, all the Players present vanished from their positions and a dozen deadly blades suddenly appeared around the Emperor a few inches away from him. Feeling danger like never before, all his instincts kicked in and his muscles flexed to escape in one swift burst.

But at that very moment, he lost control of his body. The twelve blades pierced his thorax from all directions, turning him into a sort of living masterpiece, a cross between a man and a sea urchin. Spitting blood and practically unable to move, he simply murmured with an expression of total disbelief:

‘Why?’

And then he noticed again the young woman in the wheelchair who hadn’t moved except for her hand whose palm was pointing at him.

‘Because life is unfair. I can’t walk, and you can’t live. With your death, perhaps one day I will walk. In that sense, your life will not have been in vain. Now, please die.’

The young woman's hand closed and suddenly the Emperor discovered with horror that the heart that had been beating rhythmically without fail since his birth had stopped beating. His vision became blurred, phosphenes invaded his sight and darkness engulfed him forever as his body collapsed to the ground like a disarticulated puppet.

The Emperor was dead.