

The Obsidian Crown Unbound

Bal-Sagoth

[Episode IX: The Legions of the Imperium Storm the Cloud-Capped Palisades of Gul-Kothoth]

[Chapter 11: The Siege Begins]

And so the mighty and resplendent armies of the Imperium assembled before the towering cyclopean walls of ancient Gul-Kothoth.

It was some time before the billowing dust cloud raised by the massed arrival of the vast imperial host settled, ultimately dissipating as the shadows of dusk descended.

With nightfall, the imperial army's countless torches, braziers and cookfires illuminated the dark plain before the fortress like a coruscating sea, painting the stygian heavens the colour of flame.

And the high summer's night passed swiftly.

At length, the dawn approached tentatively, and with the first signs of the newborn sun etching its promise upon the skies, the martial preparations commenced in earnest.

A brief perfunctory exchange between the Imperial Herald and the fortification's Watch Commander held no surprises, and the Emperor's banner was duly driven into the seared earth before Gul-Kothoth with a chilling finality.

Vast siege engines and powerful ballistae were hauled inexorably into position, alongside a battery of katapelte and petrobolos.

The one hundred thousand strong Imperial Frontier Army, having planted their regimented blazons into the arid soil, waited with a disciplined patience born of never having met defeat in pitched battle or siege, the dreaded Imperial War-Leopards straining noisily against their iron-link leashes to the rear of the cohorts of conscripts and auxiliaries.

The pitiless Iron Phalanx and their Lord Militant Commander had assumed position at the head of the army's Alpha Wing, polished swords, spears and pollaxes reflecting the glow from the myriad torches and braziers which still burned about the Imperial Host.

And behind them were drawn of the legendary Legion of the Ebon Tiger, Pride of the Emperor, the infantry and cavalry famed throughout the Great Northern Continent, personal regiment of the feared general Baalthus Vane.

True to their martial reputation, the six thousand strong Legion were inscrutable in their jet black armour, their sable banner billowing in the chill breeze which skittered over the plain.

And finally, astride his azure-shaffroned warhorse and surrounded by his elite guard, the silvern-armoured Emperor Koord himself studied the precipitous gates with a disdainful scrutiny.

At the Emperor's right hand was the renowned Swordmaster of Kyrman'ku, an eastern bladesman of preternatural skill and the most revered and expensive mercenary in the Imperium.

At his left, the infamous Ogre-Mage of the Black Lake brooded silently, swathed in a stygian cloak and fuliginous cowl and exuding an aura of implacable malevolence, which unnerved even the bravest of the Imperial troops.

The Emperor had deemed the services of these two nefarious renegades pivotal to the execution of the Final Campaign, for they alone had knowledge of the mysterious arcane rite known as The Words Which Unfetter.

And, behind their titanic time-worn palisades, the defenders of Gul-Kothoth beheld this awesome force ranged against them and shuddered, not with fear, but with an awful and night-cold anticipation.

[The Emperor Koord:]

General Vane, we begin the final siege of this campaign with the rising of the sun.

The war which has raged for decades, shall finally be decided here, before the hoary walls of ageless Gul-Kothoth.

The Imperium's last and most glorious victory is at hand.
The procrastinating sybarites of the bureaucracy have been threatened and bribed into compliance over this venture.
This more than anything else is why I have deigned to grace this final battle with my Imperial presence, even against the advice of the Grand Vizier and the sage counsel of the Seers.

[Baalthus Vane:]

You shall enjoy watching the Ebon Tiger bloody its claws, sire.
Our victory here is assured.

[The Emperor Koord:]

You should not call your falcons before the hunt is done, my loyal servitor.
Overconfidence is but one of the many foes a general must face upon the field of war.

Today, the precepts and maxims of the Imperium shall be tested, and we shall see whether the velvet glove of diplomacy or the iron gauntlet of conquest has proved the more effective tool.

[Baalthus Vane:]

The days of the feudal suzerainties are long gone, my liege.
The Imperial Military Council is the only entity fit to govern the dominions.
The fall of Vyrgothia shall today render the truth of the Imperial Mandate self evident.

[The Emperor Koord:]

And yet I am vexed, for as you well know, the sorcerous emissary I dispatched to the Court of the Over-King has warned that the Vyrgothians may have recovered one of the artifacts comprising the fabled Trinity of Might; the legendary Obsidian Crown itself!
In the hands of a skilled thaumaturgist, it is said that the Crown may be used as a weapon of unparalleled destructive potency.

[Baalthus Vane:]

The Shadow-Sword!
The Obsidian Crown!
The Ebon Sceptre!
Feh!
The power of the Trinity is but a myth!
No antiquated trinket wielded by a religious fanatic will prevail against the Legion, sire.
Our steel is proof against such diabolism!
Behold!
Gul-Tryarch has fallen, Gul-Azlaan has been given to the earth, Gul-Nomedes is naught but smouldering rubble, and soon we shall surge over the shattered remnants of Gul-Kothoth's renowned walls!
The Vyrgothian Alliance shall crumble when these gates are breached, and the Over-King himself shall stand before thee in shackles!

[The Emperor Koord:]

Indeed.
At any rate, I have been blessed with foresight enough to prepare a contingency should the foe fulfill that fearful potential which has been weighing heavy on my mind.
But now, the sun rises!
Let it begin!
Let the final chapter of our legend be written!
Give the word!
Raze Gul-Kothoth to the ground!

[The Imperial War-Skalds:]

An age of fire, sword and shield,

The thunder of the battlefield,
The clarions call, bring down the wall!
May the Empire's glory never fade,
Righteous fury guide our blades,
We march to war!

[The Wizards of Vyrgothia:]

Darkly bejeweled circlet of night, Crown of the Elder King,
Unfettered at last the Trinity of Might, the Sceptre, the Sword and the Ring
!

[Chapter 12: The Fall of Gul-Kothoth]

And so it was that a terrible and inestimable carnage was unleashed upon the field of battle.

Colossal stones, firebrands and howling iron-tipped missiles rained pitilessly down upon the hero-hewn walls of Gul-Kothoth.

Vast and serpentine cracks appeared in the ancient cyclopean edifice, and hundreds of warriors, both attackers and defenders, perished in the fray, either crushed beneath the ceaselessly assailed testudo, hammered to crimson pulp by the merciless storm of unforgiving stone, or burned to blackened husks by the nightmare onslaught of flaming quicklime and saltpetre.

Scaling ladders raised and repulsed in turn, storms of razor tipped shafts exchanged by the combatants, isolated skirmishes raging upon the ramparts, men blade to blade and clarions bellowing embattled defiance.

For seemingly innumerable hours the sanguineous battle raged, with no quarter asked nor given between the bitter ancestral foes.

And the gates held firm.

At length, the mightiest of the Empire's iron-hooked battering rams, dubbed The Bringer of Woe, was brought to bear upon the besieged fortress, and, with the shadows of dusk lengthening upon the field of war, the centuries old Primary Gate of Gul-Kothoth was finally sundered amidst an earsplitting cacophony of shattering oak and iron louder than any storm-born thunderclap.

With the rending of the mighty gate, and vast fragments of the ancient walls yielding, buckling and crashing to the blood-sodden earth, the Imperium's forces breached the defenses of Gul-Kothoth and surged into the Vyrgothian Alliance's last and most renowned stronghold.

And it was at that fate-steeped instant that an army of five score and ten, bearing the Obsidian Crown, arrived upon the field of battle.

[Chapter 13: The Wizards Do Battle]

[The Sorcerer:]

By Klatrymadon and Zuranthus!

They come!

They come, wielding the Circlet of Night!

The dire warning issued to me as I stood before Vyrgothia's Master Wizard has been proved no idle boast!

The citadel's spells of containment breached... the Black Crown is upon us!

[The Emperor Koord:]

It is as I have foreseen!

Be spry, my sorcerous lackey... join the Iron Phalanx in entertaining these latecomers while I prepare a reception worthy of their audacity!

[The Sorcerer:]

By your command, o' luminous Imperial majesty!

At once, the far-feared and martially renowned Iron Phalanx wheeled to face the newcomers, and at the command of a decurion, a volley of armour-piercing shafts screamed skywards to rain down mercilessly upon the foe.

And even as this transpired, the Emperor's Prime Sorcerer, emissary of the Imperial Court and master of those arts which speak to man in narcotic dreams

from the darkest and most silent places, summoned forth that black potency which lay entwined in stygian tendrils within his mind... an ireful power born of them who writhed upon the shores of Pangaea before man's progenitors ever erected their lofty spires to the restless skies.

And yet Vyrgothia's Master Wizard, unrivalled Arch-Mage and adept of that lost Eastern order who journeyed beyond the boundaries of time and space upon those nebulous wings born of the sacred Azure Lotus, rose to meet this power which lapped at the periphery of his mind like a midnight tide, and stood firm against its insistent siren call.

And upon that arid field of war, the sentinels of light and shadow spoke to each other in tongues dormant since the Third Moon fell burning from the heavens, and not sweet were the words they uttered.

Until at last, with the armies poised to clash, and with dusk painting the sky a deep crimson exceeded in its vibrancy only by that bloody rubicund hue which stained the battlefield below it, the Emperor's mage fell and the aeon-old might of the Obsidian Crown was finally brought to bear against them who had breached the walls of ancient Gul-Kothoth.

[The Imperial War-Skalds:]

Sundered the gate of the ancient fortress,
Besieged! Now breached stand the walls.
And lo, there an army of five score and ten,
Behold! The Obsidian Crown.
Embattled, the wizards, their weapons arcane,
Untrammelled, the circlet, the Prime-Sorcerer slain,
The Crown's peerless power, the Emperor's bane,
Dark magicks and havoc, now red carnage reigns!

Like the prow of a blood-hungry vessel of war rending the waves of a midnight sea, a luminescent blade of shrieking cerulean light lanced from the legendary black circlet locked tight within the gnarled hand of the Master Wizard, and clove mercilessly into the glorious ranks of the Imperium.

And all who were touched by this ruinous arc of coruscating radiance knew no more...

Men and beasts reduced to blackened husks, charred shells of smouldering ash, lifeless effigies which toppled to the seared earth to be dissipated by the whispering breath of the wind.

Again and again the ravaging radiance smote the ranks of the Empire, leaving a noisome charnel-pit of nightmare in its crackling wake.

The forces of the Imperium were plunged into a howling vortex of disarray, and, faced with the unthinkable prospect of defeat, the unprecedented first routing of the Emperor's glorious army began to become a grim reality.

Yet for all the unparalleled carnage which had erupted about them, there was one regiment of Imperial troops for whom the taste of fear was bland compared to the sharp tang of rage which sat bitter upon their noble tongues...

[Baalthus Vane:]

By all the gods of war!
Stand fast, hounds of the Imperium!
'Tis true... steel is no use against this ignoble magical trickery!
But if our souls are bound for the Pit this day, we'll damn well take a few of these bastards with us!
Onward, my Legion!
Alpha formation, banners high!
Glory to the Emperor!
Into the foe!
Show them the Tiger's claws!

[The Legion:]

Never quarter, never mercy, never retreat!
Praise the Emperor!

[The Emperor Koord:]

My sorcerous thrall has fallen, but he has bought us time enough to riposte.
And general Vane's mettle may yet turn the tide of war back in our favour.
Now, let the final act be played out!

I call thee forth, Ogre Mage of the Black Lake!

I call thee forth, Swordmaster of Kyrman'ku!

It is time!

Now, I charge thee, for the glory of the Imperium...

Speak the Words Which Unfetter!

And so, it began... the two pivotal players in the Emperor's plan, the two key figures in the Imperium's contingency, stepped forth to fill their most vital of roles in that grand theatre of carnage which now ran unchecked on the field of battle.

The Ogre-Mage and the Swordmaster began to utter fearsome words in a tongue which was ancient ere the gleaming stars shifted upon the fathomless countenance of the distant heavens, words which in truth were not words, but rather a resonant key which would aspire to unlock a dire power which had reposed shackled since the fall of the legendary Shadow King himself, whose ebon circlet's power they even now sought to thwart.

The incantation they gave voice to in the midst of that sanguineous turmoil which engulfed them was not so much heard by those within earshot as perceived, sensed as a vague disturbance in the fabric of reality, as fuliginous ripples on the surface of a hitherto still and placid pool, growing ever larger and more far reaching; an unnerving and unnamable sense of change which insinuated itself into the mind of the listener and suggested with a cold and disturbing quasi-certainty that something of preternaturally ineffable magnitude was transpiring, as surely as a festering and gangrenous corpse would split to spill its noisome gore.

And as that maddeningly implacable incantation reached its resounding climax, a momentary silence enshrouded the battlefield, swathing the vista of chaos in an aura of noiselessness more pure and untainted than the tranquility of the boundless and stygian void.

It was as if time itself had halted for one immemorial moment.

And it was in that oddly immeasurable instant that the dark and peerless power unfettered by those grim pseudo-words finally, ultimately, made itself known before the sundered gates of ancient Gul-Kothoth...

[To be continued in Episode X: The Shadow King Reborn]