

# A Coward's War

By Mark William Chase

Bark exploded from the trunk of a tree as the crack of muskets erupted not far behind him. He stumbled, caught himself, and dashed behind the oak tree's welcomed cover. Close, he thought, so terribly close! His heart thundered like a steam engine in his chest, pounding pistons and all. He knew that with every second he waited to catch his breath the Lelekan soldiers were gaining. They were following him. Following him to finish him off. He was, after all, the last man in his company. Corporal Eyrnl Greuman--sole survivor of the 326th Tilshan auxiliary.

He shut his eyes tight and clenched his teeth. Was he wrong to have run? Was he a coward, or worse, a deserter? He could not erase the picture from his mind, the sight of his friends and comrades dying in the forest clearing--their bodies ruined by the land mines hidden in the ground. And the Lelekan troops--so many troops; at least a battalion's worth, if not more. They charged into the clearing, opening fire with cannons and rifles before anyone had a chance to draw arms or take cover. A hundred men, dead in less than a minute.

And he ran.

Another ball shot through the ground near his feet and a distant explosion resounded somewhere to the east. His ears rang and his chest heaved, and through it all the sounds of battle reverberated in his skull. From somewhere to the west he could just make out the rumble of the infernal war machines, those dread Kendes juggernauts, and smelled the burnt stench of blood and oil. He knew the end had come. Even if his battalion had survived the ambush, they would not survive the onslaught of those indomitable land ironclads. He didn't see the forest as he ran--not the branches that lashed against his skin, not the rocks and roots he stumbled upon, not the vines and bushes that tried to snare his feet--only the faces of his comrades. They were dead, all dead: Jolar Ternn, Sam Daveris, Lannie Parlynn, and the Lieutenant. Every one of them crushed beneath the heel of the Grand Imperium. The Lieutenant, didn't even make a sound--he just fell from his horse, the victim of a nameless sharpshooter.

There seemed no stopping them, these enemies from the north--Kendes, Kaldea, Leleka, and Darmania. In a year they had conquered half of Tarrona; in a year no one but Tilsha had risen to oppose them. Like so many young men, he had heard the King's rallying speech and joined the army with hopeful ambition and visions of glory. Tilsha would triumph he had said. Tilsha, with her vast fleets of airships, navel superiority, and military innovations to rival even those of hated Kendes. But even these were no match for the brutish forces the Grand Imperium had unleashed. They burned, and slaughtered, and decimated every town and village from Stavica to Tandalga. The enemy was far more advanced than the Tilshan generals had lead them to believe. He had seen first-hand their engines of war--iron beasts on crushing wheels, bristling with guns, cannons, and pikes; armadas of the air that dwarfed the Tilshan fleet; and legions of soldiers armed with rifles twice the range of their own; to say nothing of rumors that spoke of more dreadful things still. In camp, at night, soldiers whispered of the dark allegiances Kendes and Leleka had made, some with the Ogres of the far north and others with the Scaithi and Blood-Barons of Carsovia. With such monsters in their army and their combined arsenal of industry and sorcery, no nation could hope to stand against them. Not even the might of Tilsha.

So he ran, bolting for the cover of the deepening woods. Yes, he was a coward; he deserved a far worse fate than befell the men he abandoned. But what good was it to fight a battle one cannot hope to win? What honor was there in dying? What meaning could be found in their sacrifice? Death in this war was a cold and empty death. No heroes would be hailed, no kings remembered, no legends born. Only death and desolation would remain. Perhaps this was the last war, or at least he could hope. It was the War of Wars, so said the King--the war to end all wars. But Eyrnl Greuman knew better: war would always be.

Sunlight struck his face as he entered another clearing. He staggered to a stop, nearly falling down, and froze with wide-eyed terror. The body of a man lay in front of him sprawled on the ground. Another, a boy, lay not far away, and with him a woman and two frightened girls. They were just a family fleeing the onslaught of war. But there were soldiers present too, Lelekan soldiers, and they were not done with the family yet.

Silence fell across the burnt and wasted field, and the five soldiers stared down Eyrnl Greuman like wolves eying their prey. The soldiers were scouts, Eyrnl knew, or perhaps mercenary raiders. But it hardly mattered. They had the

woman and her girls in their clutches, and the woman looked at him, her eyes screaming through the silence for his help.

His help.

He watched, almost as if in a dream, as the enemy soldiers drew their arms yelling in rage. The commander threw the woman down, his eyes shot red with blood, and unholstered his pistol. The two men holding the girls released them and readied their rifles while the others drew swords. Eyrnl's hands went through the motions, crossing his chest and drawing his flintlock and saber almost automatically. The first round had hardly gone off before Eyrnl realized it was his own. The bullet pierced the commander's head and he toppled dead to the ground.

Moving one foot in front of the other, he charged for the remaining four men. His body, and those of the soldiers, seemed to slow down as if by some magic or enchanted spell. A bullet shot past his ear and another glazed his side, but Eyrnl hardly noticed them at all. He took aim with the second barrel of his pistol and squeezed back the trigger. Flint struck steel and sparks flew into the flashpan, igniting the powder in the chamber. With a crack, the ball flew true and stabbed through the heart of a rifleman. His flintlock empty. Eyrnl tossed it aside and braced his saber against the downward swing of one soldier's battle-pitted longsword. He ducked and came around again as the rifleman swung at him with the butt of his gun. The third remaining soldier cut his blade across Eyrnl's left arm, opening a bloody wound. At three against one, the odds were not in his favor.

Eyrnl grimaced, knowing it was suicide to continue the fight, but fight he did. He parried a flow-up strike by one of the swordsmen and gave him a heavy boot to the chest, sending him toppling into the rifleman. Almost effortlessly, he spun around and thrust his saber into the belly of the second swordsman. Just as quickly he withdrew the blade and turned away. Two against one now seemed better odds.

The last swordsman and rifleman struggled off the ground, cursing and barking obscenities at him. How much like animals they seemed. Eyrnl scooped up the pistol dropped by the commander and fired its shot into the last swordman's chest. The rifleman, now back on his feet, drew a curved knife from his belt. The edge of the black steel blade gleamed with blood-red hues, and at

once Eyrnl recognized it for what it was--a Scaithi kukri. Poisoned by Scaithi magic, one cut from the blade was said to kill even a giant. The soldier sliced low with the deadly weapon, forcing Eyrnl to jump back and knocking him off balance. Seeing his opportunity, the soldier pressed in and Eyrnl parried the next strike and the next, each one forcing him a little farther back. His adversary feigned a strike from the upper right and, just as Eyrnl moved to counter, spun left and swung for his unguarded right side.

But, in that split second, Eyrnl anticipated the attack. He jumped back one last time and watched as the soldier's blade cut through empty air just inches from his belly. His adversary stumbled past him off balance, and, seizing his opportunity, Eyrnl brought the edge of his sword down across the soldier's neck. The body fell limp to the ground.

Eyrnl dropped his sword and limped toward the woman, huddled with her children. Tears welled in his eyes, both of sorrow and relief. This was why they fought the war. This was the meaning of their sacrifice. This was why Tilsha would one day triumph. Unlike their enemy, they fought not for power, not for gold, not even for territory or vain ambition. In the end, they fought for one another, and for the very lives of all free people. Eyrnl Greuman--sole survivor of the 326th Tilshan auxiliary--saw no more noble cause, and he was not afraid. Against all odds and against all adversity, he knew one day they would win.