

Elegy of a King

By Mark William Chase

Distant thunder shook the foundations of Castle Darvahiem. The scarred volcanic moon, Atracus, hung dark and heavy in the east. Lightning danced to and fro across the northern horizon and black smoke rose in the distance shrouding the last rays of the sunken sun. But this was no ordinary storm, he knew--this was the cyclone of total and final war. When he woke this morning he was King Corolev of Phana, sovereign ruler of the Midlands of Tarrona and protector of some 200,000 souls. But tonight he knew his reign would end, and his life would be over.

He did not know how or why the war had started. The Grand Imperium invaded without reason or provocation, without warning, threat, or political declaration. They simply attacked, decimating all that stood in their way--an army of humans, ogres, and Scaithi measuring in the tens of thousands. And with them came columns of juggernaut war machines, vast fleets of the air, and according to some reports, great dragons from the furthestmost mountains of the north. Although Phana had always struggled against the constant raids from rogue lords, blood-barons, and petty warlords, never in over 200 years had an invasion been launched of such unfathomable scale. Not since the War of Tyranny had an army been amassed as great and terrible as this.

The castle shook again and the king tightened his grip on the balcony railing. Here, on the east tower, he could see for sixty miles in all directions. The Carsovian Mountains loomed to the north and the east, the jagged black peaks jutting up like shards of shattered stone rent from the earth in some long ago epoch. Beyond the Carsovian range lay the forbidden lands of Darmania, Kendes, and Kaldea. A generation ago those Dark Kingdoms had been little more than warring, feudal kingdoms--more of a threat to each other than to the southern nations of Tarrona. But those three realms of chaos had united and together forged themselves into an empire known to all as the Grand Imperium.

"Your Majesty," came a voice, "there have been no reports from the front lines in over a day. I fear there is no one left to issue a report."

The king turned to see a man, a young lieutenant, standing in the door frame behind him. He could not see his face--the other glow of the gaslight from

the room beyond painted him in silhouette. "Do you have family?"

"Sir, I--" The lieutenant drew back, as though unsure how to answer. "Yes, sir. A wife and daughter. In the city."

"Take them, and join the evacuation. Get as far from here as you can, to Brishar or Tilsha, and away from this madness."

The lieutenant jumped to full attention, his arms at his side and boot heels together. "Your Majesty, I am a lieutenant in the Royal Armed Forces of Phana. I shall stand and defend this castle to my last--"

"No, lieutenant. I have sent thousands of men to die. Tens of thousands... And all for nothing, for this is a war we cannot hope to win. Let this be my final order, the last order your king will ever give. You are a soldier; it is your duty to protect the citizens of Phana, or whatever is left of them. They are refugees now. Guard them well."

"Yes sir!" The lieutenant saluted and stepped away.

King Corolev look out from his balcony again and gazed across the burning fields of his country to the smoldering horizon. He could see their vanguard now--a vast armada of airships and aircruisers, flanked by deadly aerodynes buzzing through the sooty sky like swarms of so many wasps. Phana had no airships, just a few dirigible balloons and a handful of Tilshan aerodynes--all had been obliterated a week ago in their last, deprate attempt to turn back the invaders.

Minutes passed into hours as the king stood watching his capital burn. He had done everything he could. He had deployed every man in his army and mustered the reserves, and when the war looked hopeless he had ordered the evacuation of the capital and all remaining cities. He had only one final duty to perform, a duty he knew he would soon fulfilled. His right hand fell to the pouch at his side, hidden from view by his thick fur lined coat. He could feel the shape of the small, spherical device held within; a device a thousand years old, from a time long past when two great empires tore the world asunder with terrible weapons and harrowing magic. This was one such weapon, but he had just one chance to use it, and use it well.

And so, he waited. By midnight the encroaching army was upon the abandoned capital, burning and bombing everything in sight. Winged aerodynes screamed overhead, their ichor-powered engines driving them through the air on their merciless bombing runs. Airships fired volleys of artillery into the city, while

on the ground the ruthless army marched across the burning rubble. But they had not yet attacked the castle. Indeed, they would not attack.

Corolev closed his eyes as a dark chill sweep over him. He knew what was coming. The light behind him dimmed to a flicker, and he turned just in time to see the black swirl of mist form into the outline of a woman, assuming what he say could still be called woman at all.

"Checkmate," came her voice as her body materialized.

The king drew in a deep breath. She was not human, not any more at least. Her pronounced canines and pallid blue flesh attested to her sinister nature. He said nothing to her. He merely stared in defiance.

She grinned at him and waved her gaunt hand over the gas lamp on the table. The light grew in brightness, but changed somehow to the sanguine hue of blood. "Kneel, your majesty. Swear yourself body and soul to the Grand Imperium and you and your people will be permitted to live."

The king entered his chamber and closed the doors of the balcony behind him. He set his jaw and narrowed his eyes. "I shall not."

The vampire cocked her head. "Then you wish death for yourself and your people?"

"My people have been evacuated."

"But not all. There are enough to keep the ogres' bellies full for a time." She formed a wicked smiled, her canines all too visible. "And mine."

It was a sick joke. The king bit his lip. "Long have we lived in the shadow of the Carsovian Mountains. I do not fear your kind as others do, at least no more than I would fear a rabid dog. You will just have to kill me."

She frowned. The king took satisfaction in her disappointment. "Don't be a fool!" she rebuked. "You'll only make this harder for your people. Give yourself to us and you will keep your throne. Consider all the good you could do to protect your subjects even under the banner of the Grand Imperium."

Of course, that was why she had hesitated to kill him. If they could keep him as king he would maintain the legitimacy of rulership, thereby extinguishing any flames of rebellion and mitigating any reprisal from other nations. But he knew better than than to play her game. "May I request a dignified death?"

The vampire hissed and seemed to become a bit more pallid, if that was

even possible. "Arrogant human! I sense your thoughts. But know that your death will not inspire your people to rise up against us. Even if they did, they would only be butchered!" She drew closer to him, her body gliding effortlessly across the stone tile floor. "You are blind, king. Blind to the truth of our glorious cause."

King Corolev shook his head. "I fear you are the one clouded by darkness. And I do pity you."

She bore her teeth, her eyes burning with an predator's gaze. But just as quick she restored her composure. "Look at the world! There is only chaos, crime, murder, and poverty. We seek to eradicate all these things and establish a new age of prosperity and empire--an empire of perfect order and everlasting peace!"

"You cannot forge an empire of peace through the conquest of war. The Triclops tried that 200 years ago and they were defeated by the united armies of Clovis, Azzard, and Soren of Celaphania. Just as they fell, so too shall your empire's fall."

Her eyes widened with a gleam of madness. She seemed not to look at him, but through the window to something beyond. "The Grand Imperium cannot be defeated by any army in this world! We are stronger than Tilsha, greater than Suddaea, and even mightier than the kingdom of Armillia. Lethan and Lelekan have already given in to us, and Ostarh will soon fall before our legions. With Phana under our dominion, we will control half the continent of Tarrona. In a years' time, all will be ours!"

Corolev followed the gaze of her eyes out the window to the east, where Atracus hung on the horizon. His right hand fidgeted with the device hidden at his side. "Yes, you are mightier than all the nations individually, but they will unite against you as they united against the Triclops Tyranny. No empire that crushes liberty under its heel has ever withstood the test of time. It is the inalienable right of all people and all races to be free, and that is a right that no army, no dictator, no government can ever burn away."

"You are wrong about us. We give liberty and freedom to our people. But we do so justly--giving rights to those who deserve them, not with blind indiscretion to every worthless beggar and peasant in the land."

The king had heard enough. He stepped past the vampire and made his way further into the room. "If you will not kill me, what are you to do with me?"

"You will be taken and held until my superiors decide your fate."

Below, deep within the castle, he heard the sound of soldiers battering in the doors. There would be no one to oppose them, for the castle was all but abandoned. "No one but I shall decide my fate. I am free, as my people are free. As they will always be free, even under your iron regime. They will fight you to every last man and woman. And then, even if you are victorious in the end, you will have nothing but death and desolation for a kingdom."

"Yes," she whispered darkly with a smile. "Peace and order--at last."

Corolev reached into his coat and withdrew the artifact from the pouch. He held his breath and popped the top of it open.

"What are you doing?" the vampire asked, stepping closer.

A small silver disk sparkled with streaks of blue, shimmering in the dim crimson light that permeated the room. "It's old," he said. "So very old. To think that such a tiny thing would have such power--even your empire has yet to advance as far. I was told there are only three left in the world. Well, now there are only two I suppose. It's already active, as you can see. It draws its power from the aether, like a siphon, building until it can hold no more."

"What is it?" she hissed in his ear. "Give it me, now!"

"It's a Maradian artifact. Or maybe it's Gollan. Who can tell? After all, that war was a thousand years ago and ended in the complete obliteration of both empires." He looked out the window to Atracus. "It seems only fitting that you die by its light. You, me, your soldiers, this entire castle--" In his palm, the device began to heat, and a near inaudible hum pierced the air. "Such light, they say. All from so small a device."

The vampire snatched the device from his hand and shoved him to the ground. "Tell me how to turn it off! Tell me now!"

The king only smiled. He saw her bones when the light flashed, like a shadow of a skeleton that disintegrated instantly into ash. It was a small victory, he knew, but it was all the victory he needed in the face of overwhelming defeat. They would never find his body in the glassy crater where the castle had been, and would certainly find no trace of hers. With his death the people of Phana would struggle on in defiance of the hated invaders.

And one day, when the world had again united in common cause against the tyrants and oppressors, they would win.