

## The Duel

By Mark William Chase

I sensed him in the distance, and he sensed me. He called to me--challenging me--goading me to enter the blood-soaked heart of the raging battle. Under ordinary circumstances, I would not have entered the besieged city. As long as the regiments I command continue to out-flank and out-gun the opposing troops, I my swords would remain sheathed--both the golden sword at my side and the blazing sword of my mind. It was the duty of a Knight Empyrean to command and maneuver his armies to suppress the enemy, not to engage in acts of needless slaughter. But the presence of my adversary changed. He would turn the tide of the battle, raining fire and lightning as he brought the terrible might of his imperious order against the loyal soldiers of the Commonwealth.

Like a crashing sea of blood and steel, formations of men and war machines broke against one another, wave after wave--men screaming and dying, guns cracking and cannons thundering, and in the choking sky mighty airships burning even as they closed overhead. The opposing soldiers did not recognize me as I pressed my way through the decimated city streets of Korvica. I did not know how many stood against me, nor did it matter. Sword drawn, my body followed the necessary motions to suppress their attack, but my thoughts were tuned to locate my adversary. A ghostly image of the city revolved in the landscape of my mind, and I stretched out with my senses to find that whirlwind of blazing black fire amidst a sea of dim and dying embers. He was to the north, blocking the battalions I had dispatched to intercept the enemy's reinforcements.

I stepped over the suppressed soldiers and sheathed my sword. The few surviving men had fled, and I would not pursue them. I kill only as I must kill, for such was my solemn vow. The smoldering husk of a juggernaut blocked the road before me. I had scarcely taken notice of it, but I destroyed it all the same having crushed it from within and detonating the munitions inside. That is why a Knight Empyrean must resist the call of battle unless all else had failed--not for his own sake, but for the sake of others, enemy and ally alike. The soldiers of the Grand

Imperium were men with lives and families of their own, just as the soldiers of the Commonwealth. Only their leaders deserved the judgment of the sword. Those men who died on either side were tragic casualties of this terrible war, and I felt the pain of every needless loss.

But my opponent did not believe as I believed. He was a Tenebrean Adept, and he slaughtered indiscriminately, crushing entire lines of troops with a single incantation or wave of his staff. Whereas those of my order knelt before the altars of peace, wisdom, and freedom, he and his ilk drew their strength from the temples of power, domination, and tyranny. We were opposite in every respect: philosophically, politically, and morally. And in this great and terrible War of Wars, it fell to us to lead our vast opposing armies onward to a single, inevitable culmination of destiny and fate. This I knew, as all of our order knew--and as all of their order also knew.

The city passed below as I leapt from one rooftop to the next. Ever so gently, I alighted upon the shattered tiles of some burned-out building. The black clouds above glittered with crimson flashes, every flash a bomb bursting or aeronef exploding. Thunder rolled across the sky as airship barraged airship, and a steady fall of flack and burning debris rained down upon the fire-swept city. A blast erupted less than a block away, and I flew from the gable as the wall's last support beams gave way.

The liberation of Stavica, capital of Leleka, had come as the single greatest victory for the Commonwealth in this abhorrent war. Yet, even as we captured one city, another fell back into enemy hands. The elite legions of the Vrholv Eradicator still held much of northern Leleka, and all of Strigovia remained under the iron grip of the Grand Imperium. But here, in the city of Korvica, the fighting had been most brutal. The Vrholv Eradicator was entrenched in what little remained of this once bustling hub of shipping and commerce, barricaded behind walls of cannon-fodder soldiers and battered war machines. The generals in Duntara estimated that four regiments, dispatched from Tirandel and placed under my command, could capture the city in a week. They had not counted on the arrival of fresh Kendes legions led by an adept of the Tenebrean Order.

I came down in the center of a square at the base of a crumbled fountain that might once have been beautiful. A scattering of Vrholv troops and Kendes soldiers

held their position behind the ruins, yelling and firing the occasional pot-shot at me. I was now well behind the enemy's lines, and my presence must surely have alarmed them. The troops were of no consequence, and in an instant I was off again, charging swiftly across the square for a north running alley. Only six soldiers held that alley, crouching for cover behind a pile of rubble with rifles propped on top. Yet, their bullets never struck me. The twice-bound aetheric aura enveloping my golden battle armor proved unyielding to the soft lead rounds. But one among them was a grenadier, and even I could not survive a well-placed explosion. I closed the distance before he could toss and promptly suppressed my opposition.

The oath I took before the Praetorians of our order stipulated above all else the virtues of mercy and compassion. Thus, when the last of the soldiers dropped his weapons, falling to his knees before me begging to be spared, I sheathed my sword and hurried on my way. With the path before me clear, save for the occasional soldier who retreated from my approach, I closed in on position of my adversary. Although I did not long for the encounter, neither did I fear it. I felt only the inevitable necessity to subdue his power and extinguish the shadow of his presence.

The sounds of battle grew louder and thicker as I dashed from one embattled street to the next. The smoldering husks of juggernauts and the twisted wreckage of downed aeronefs choked every city block, mixed with the scattered remains of automatons and golems, and the broken bodies of countless men--soldiers and civilians alike. This was the bloody price of war, but I could not allow my grief to overcome me. Now was not the time for mourning. I rounded the corner of a building and entered the northwest plaza of the city. A company of enemy troops crowded the great square, with rank upon rank of grim faced soldiers, smoke billowing juggernauts, and clockwork machines of iron and steam. But these did not concern me.

I looked across the mustering ranks and files to steps of fire-engulfed courthouse. There he was, standing high upon a pedestal where once had been the marble effigy of Justice, a Tenebrean Adept fully clad in black chardite armor. Upon his head he wore an ensorcelled ruby crown, and around his body flowed a broad crimson cloak. In his right hand he held an ornately forged glaive, and his left hand

seethed with conjured flames of aetheric energy. Behind him waited his five dark disciples, each carrying a banner bearing the black sun-wheel--the standard of the Tenebrean Order.

Even from a distance his eyes met mine. The sounds of the battle faded until becoming a dim mummer, and nothing else seemed to exist but he and I. He knew who I was, just as I knew him. Just as I had sensed his presence, he had sensed mine; and he was waiting for me. Had I been a fool to rush so deep behind enemy lines to face him? While the troops he commanded were of no consequence, his disciples were another matter. I could suppress them to be sure, but to do so would drain me of my vital strength--strength I would need to defeat the Tenebrean himself. A cruel smile edged its way across his face, and I knew the trap was sprung.

With a gesture of his glaive, the Tenebrean commanded his subjects to charge. With spears, and swords, and muskets drawn, a full company of Kendes troops closed in on me, lead by the fanatical soldiers of the Vrholv Eradicator. Like the calm before a tempest drew over me, and I focused my will upon the aetheric fluids circulating in the Astral Light and channeled that pure-white energy into a shimmering defensive barrier. My feet hastened me forward, and with deft precision I drew my sword to engage the first wave of the onslaught.

Foremost in our training, a Knight Empyrean must draw strength from all three levels of consciousness: physical, mental, and spiritual, and to govern each of these by the virtues of knowledge, wisdom, and compassion. This leads us to the "triple-balanced power" which cannot be defeated, broken, or corrupted. Knowledge is our physical power, wisdom is our mental power, and compassion is our spiritual power. Brute strength is but an illusion, for the true physical power is mastery of one's self. Self-knowledge is the key that opens the door to wisdom. Wisdom is the enlightenment of the inner-mind, and is the key that opens the door to compassion. Compassion is the enlightenment of the higher soul, "the mind of the mind" that rules all actions of a Knight Empyrean, for a Knight must act with benevolence toward all other beings.

In any conflict, a Knight Empyrean must first employ compassion, then wisdom, and finally knowledge. Only failing those avenues can a Knight explore

more aggressive means of resolution. These things I had done, for in my compassion I had granted mercy to any enemy who surrendered, with wisdom I had invoked methods to erode the enemy's resolve, and with knowledge I had devised strategies to minimize casualties in our liberation of Korvica. Under normal circumstances, our victory would be assured, but the presence of the Tenebrean Adept had tipped the balance of power. My duty, both to my men and to the fate of Korvica itself, was to tip that balance back.

Within minutes a third of the enemy company had fallen. While another third retreated, the remaining number pressed on--fearful, perhaps, of reprisal from their implacable overlord. Having no wish to waste precious energy on these trivial soldiers, my sword alone served as my weapon. Enchanted by my own hand, the golden starshard blade cut through men and armor with a single skillful swing. But the soldiers were many, with some firing their guns from afar, and I had little choice but to conjure the astral forces to bolster my attack. Fires blazed and lightning flashed; earth sundered and aether clashed. Around and around I danced, my sword a whirl of motion, spinning to the right and then to the left as I cut my way through the breaking fray. Those soldiers who withdrew benefited from my mercy; those who fought on found another kind of mercy.

All the while the Tenebrean stood silently as he studied my every move. I could not help but respecting his judicious leadership and mastery of battle strategy. In a way, he too was enlightened--although for him the better term might have been "endarkened." He would send a hundred men to die in his place while he stood by and watched. On the other hand, I would gladly give my life to save the lives of a hundred men. And yet, both strategies were equally sound, each being logical in their own right. Both strategies could guarantee victory, and both sought to employ the most efficient usage of resources. What, then, made my strategy right and his wrong?

Without exception, the Emyprean Order denounced the Tenebrean Adepts as "sinister lords of darkness and masters of evil." Yet, within our council chambers even we quarreled over the definitions of good and evil. In my adversary I sensed no hatred, no malice, no sadistic disposition--only cold, calculating thought structured in perfect order by a mastery of logic and reason. While no one outside their order

knew what philosophy the Tenebrean's espouse, it was clear to us that they, too, had developed an underlying code to govern their actions. For them, power, domination, and order were the greatest of virtues. Power was the sheer force of might to overcome physical obstacles, domination was the force of will and psychological manipulation of other minds, and order was the complete and utter control of their feudal subjects. Yes, order was preferable to chaos and anarchy, but the excess of order the Tenebreans enforced was troubling.

But here was their folly, for the Tenebrean Order demanded absolute conformity, obedience, and loyalty of all who knelt beneath their iron rule. They opposed freedom and liberty, for freedom, in their eyes, was tantamount to anarchy. So too did the Tenebrean Order regard equality among peoples and races as a ludicrous notion. In their view, those who mastered strength of will and physical might were meant to rule over the lesser, weaker people. They pointed to nature, which we also know to be good, and to how it was the natural order of things for the strongest to survive. Weakness was a disease, and they accused all who helped the weak of cultivating that disease. Such a corrupt and twisted understanding led them to conclude that it was we who were evil and must be thrown down. To us their ways were evil, and to them we surely seem idealistic fools, lending our strength to help the weak, rather than dominating them, and fighting to restore the fading dream of liberty.

With the last of his soldiers suppressed or withdrawing, I expected the Tenebrean to unleash his five disciples upon me. But he did not. Instead, he signaled for the remaining soldiers to back away and take position around the perimeter of the plaza. With infinite grace, he leapt from the pillar on which he stood and touched down a block from where he had been. With less than a hundred paces separating us, we turned to face one another and waited.

Our battle would decide who stood victorious over the city of Korvica. With my death, the army of the Grand Imperium, led by the Tenebrean Adept and his disciples, would lay waste to my soldiers. With his death, my forces would quickly overpower what remained of the Kendes and Vrholv troops. I took some consolation in knowing that, should we both perish, my forces would still capture the city, for we outnumbered the enemy three to two. Nevertheless, my adversary held a decisive

advantage. While I had fought my way to his position, he was at his full strength for the battle. On the other hand, this would make him overconfident, and overconfidence was the father of carelessness. He had not sent his disciples to soften me for the kill, and this fact alone told me he was all too sure of victory.

Still he waited, just as I waited, sizing me up as he contemplated countless variations of battle scenarios. I could only assume his mastery of the thaumaturgical arts matched my own, and that his perfection of the martial disciplines was of equal skill. His weapon was a glaive, a polearm measuring nearly eight feet in length, forged of cinnabar steel and crowned with a cruel cleaver of a blade. Focusing on the weapon, I sensed that it, like my own sword, held a living enchantment. And like my own, his weapon too was a talisman--an extension of its wielder's own spirit, surging and pulsing with every beat of his heart and seething with vast reservoirs of aetheric energy. One scratch from its blade would kill a common man in an instant, perhaps even disintegrating him outright. While I could perhaps survive a glancing blow, a solid strike would be the end of me. No doubt my adversary knew the same was true of my golden starshard blade.

Minutes passed as we remained locked in our meditative struggle. I felt his mind searching my own and flooded my aura with burst of blinding light, blocking what few psychic fissures he had managed to find. I had not even bothered to attempt to read his mind, for he was, after all, a proficient sorcerer. That he had tried to steal my thoughts suggested that he underestimated my abilities. Then again, he could well have done so simply to make it appear as though he underestimated me. Such subtle duplicity was characteristic of a Tenebrean Adept. Sheer power and force of will were their greatest strength in combat, but like all great warriors, they knew battles were won long before the first blow ever fell. To assure a swift victor, they employed every form of treachery, illusion, and deception at their disposal--just as we employed the same.

The blasting of a bomb and firing of guns erupted from one part of the city or another, but as time drew on the battle for Korvica ground to a standstill. No doubt both sides now realized their respective leaders were preparing for a duel, and that the very battle itself would be decided by which one of us stood victor. No one could guess who that victor would be, for it was as equally probable that he would defeat

me as it was that I would defeat him. His glaive against my sword; his strength against my speed; his will against my valor--neither was superior to the other, and both of us were matched in our capabilities.

I ran our battle a hundred times through my mind, each with a hundred question, a hundred scenarios, and a hundred different outcomes. What would happen if he attacked first? How he would wield the glaive given his stance and mannerisms? What spells and abilities might he use to empower himself or employ to hamper my own abilities? Were his techniques focus on hard attacks or soft attacks? Did he prefer aggressive or defensive tactics? Did he favor grounded fighting above a form that kept him in constant motion? There was much I could judge from his appearance and choice of arms. His heavy armor told me that he preferred a more grounded form of combat, compounded by hard strikes. A glaive, by its nature, was more defensive than a sword, as was used to keep an enemy at a distance. But his spirit burned with aggressive intent, and I knew that despite his choice of weapons defensive tactics were not part of his nature. Under these circumstances I would have to be more aggressive, for should I be forced to take the defensive against such a foe, I would never be able to close in for the kill.

Minutes more passed as we stood facing each other a hundred paces apart. He made no move to attack, and I waited patiently. The first to move would immediately reveal to his opponent every detail of his fighting style and tactics. But we could not remain as we were forever. In situations such as these, it seems almost dictated by fate that both would inevitably rush the other at the same time. Such was the case this night of fire and blood, for there was no delay or hesitation between the time I began my charge and the moment my adversary did the same.

Nothing else existed in the world--nothing but my enemy and me. The air rushed past my face as we closed the distance between us--ninety paces, then seventy, then fifty. His rigid, unflinching expression betrayed nothing of what he thought or felt, but his aetheric aura had become a haze of blazing red aggression. I gripped my golden sword in my right hand, feeling the electric crawl of its living essence rippling down the blade; my left arm I suffused with a flood of aethergy, enveloping it in a shield to parry any blow. He could strike from as far as seven feet with his glaive, and spinning it in place he could create a defensive circle over



fourteen feet across. My only chance at defeating him would be to penetrate that circle and strike before he could bring his glaive around to counter my blow.

We closed to ten paces, and the Tenebrean drove the butt of his glaive into the ground, vaulting himself into the air and pulling his weapon after him. I had erred in believing his form was grounded and stable; instead, his was a form where speed and maneuverability were paramount. As though demonstrating his perfect agility, my adversary twisted around in the air as he flew up and over me, landing with cat-like grace less than ten feet behind me. Without missing a step, he whirled into action, thrusting his glaive straight at me and forcing me to take the defensive just as I feared he would. I had little choice but to parry the attack and leap back to fix my center of gravity.

The Tenebrean pressed his attack, perhaps believing I was still unbalanced. I blocked his weapon with my energized left arm and side-stepped to the right. I had to seize the initiative--if I allowed his actions to control my responses, the battle would surely be his. The Tenebrean spun around to strike at me from my right, a move I had anticipated. Instead of simply parrying his attack with my sword, I took two steps in and ducked to the right, bringing my sword up to intersect the pole halfway down the shaft. Metal raked against metal in a shower of sparks, and I delivered a powerful kick to his chest, knocking him back.

But my enemy was not down even for a second. He rolled into his fall and flipped himself up, at the same time throwing a bolt of electrified aethergy from his left hand. It was only a distraction of course--the bolt was easily absorbed by my own protective aura, charged as it was with vibrant Astral Light. But even as my sword swept in for the kill, something in his own aura lashed back at me--something black and terrible, like crawling tendrils of pain and fire. I recoiled in shock, and my blade missed its target by an inch. I had only a second to prepare for his counter-attack as he drew back with his glaive and thrust toward me, his face twisted with malice joy at the sight of my agony. Despite the pain, I rolled left to evade and jumped back to my feet as his weapon passed overhead.

The burning pain from whatever malignant spell protected him continued to crawl like stinging ants across my right arm, but with a thought I contained the pain and sequestered it to a corner of my mind. I had hardly when I suddenly felt

burdened by a thousand pounds of weight. It was not that my own weight had changed--rather, the Tenebrean was exerting his mental influence upon the laws and principles governing the attraction of gravity. Although he could not crush me in this way, he could certainly slow me down, perhaps even stop me from moving all together. A few words whispered from my lips was all I needed to break his spell, but this gave him just enough time to conjure a deluge of crackling blue fire across my protective aura. Winced from the sheer power of the attack. While his mastery of sorcery may have outweighed my own proficiency in the thaumaturgical arts, I knew my talent for the sword outclassed his training with the glaive. And he knew it too.

Somehow we both seemed in agreement that the battle had dragged on long enough. The fire he conjured had been powerful enough to dissolve my aetheric aura, but before it had dispelled completely I launched a full-on attack. Striking right, then left, and then from above, I pushed the Tenebrean back as he block my attacks one after the other with the shaft of his glaive. Finally, his weapon's alchemically forged steel could no longer sustain the punishment. With the terrific screech of rending metal the pole broke in two at the middle. The Tenebrean staggered back, the two halves of the weapon still gripped in either hand. But he recovered quickly from his apparent his disadvantage, wielding the bladed end in one hand and gripping the lower half like a baton in the other. Although he now had two weapons instead of the one, neither was as long as my sword. The advantage had at last become mine.

Closing in, I ducked his first swing of the baton and side-stepped a thrust from the blade of his glaive. His awkward attack had unbalanced him for an instant, and in that moment I spun to my right bringing my sword above my head. Whirling around with all my might, I struck outward and down, feeling the slightest hint of resistance as the blade passed through the Tenebrean's own protective barrier and sliced from one ear across his neck to the shoulder. Even as his decapitated head tumbled from his body, a searing pain stabbed from my abdomen. I glanced down only to see the upper shaft of the glaive protruding from my stomach. The blade still held traces of its deadly enchantment, and the mortal wound burned with the freezing fire of black necrolic energy.

The Tenebrean collapsed on the ground before me, and I dropped to one knee beside him. I reached down with a trembling hand to extract the blade, but the pain was too much to bear. I could not even muster the strength of will to suppress the scream agony I felt. Tendrils of corruption crawled into every organ and limb of my body, rotting flesh, muscles, and bones. Paralyzed, I fell on my back and stared into the smoke filled sky. We had been equally matched--he a Tenebrean Adapt, and I a Knight Emyrean. We had fought an equal battle and died in equal folly. But I had won. The battle for Korvica would be long and hard on my men, and though many would die, there victory was now certain. With their Tenebrean master dead, my forces would overpower the Kendes reinforcements and at long last liberate what remained of city. It was only a matter of time. Even as I lay dying, I heard the fighting resume--bombs exploding, guns firing, soldiers crying.

Darkness consumed my vision, and the guiding beacons of the Astral Light shown down upon me...