

The Duel

By Mark William Chase

I saw him in the distance--sensed him, as it were. I knew that he sensed me. His presence called me to battle. Under ordinary circumstances, I would not have entered the fray. As long as the regiments I command continue to out-flank and out-gun the opposing troops, I would keep my swords sheathed--both the sword at my side and the sword of my mind. A Knight Empyrean does not lower himself to the commission of common soldiery. A Knight Empyrean maneuvers his armies to suppress the enemy, but he does not engage in acts of needless slaughter. At least, not under ordinary circumstances.

But his presence changed everything. He would turn the tide, I knew, and he goaded me to move forward to counter his aggression. So I moved.

The opposing soldiers did not recognize me at first. They rushed me and fired upon me, even as I pressed my way through the decimated city streets of Korvica. I did not know precisely how many stood against me, and it did not matter. My body followed the necessary motions to neutralize their aggression, but my thoughts were focused on pinpointing the location of my adversary. A ghostly image of the smoldering city revolved in the landscape of my mind; I stretched out with my senses to feel that singular concentration of power that was resounding like a whirlwind of blazing black fire amidst a sea of dim and dying embers. He was to the north, blocking the battalions I had sent to cut off the enemy's reinforcements.

I stepped over the neutralized soldiers and sheathed my sword. The few surviving men in the squad had fled; I would not pursue them. I kill only as I must kill, for such is my solemn vow. The smoldering husk of a juggernaut blocked the road before me. I had destroyed it as well, having crushed the machine from within and detonating the volatile fuel and munitions inside. No shell of iron can guard against the weapons I wield. 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 only following orders, just as the soldiers of the Commonwealth. Only their leaders were deserving of the judgment of the sword. Those men who died on either side were regrettable casualties of this terrible war, and I felt pain at the thought of every needless loss.

My opponent did not believe as I believed. He slaughtered indiscriminately,

crushing entire lines of troops with a single incantation or wave of his staff. He was, after all, a Tenebrean Adept. Whereas those of my order knelt before the altar of knowledge, wisdom, and compassion, he and his ilk drew strength from power, domination, and tyranny. We were opposite in every respect: philosophically, politically, and morally. And in this great and terrible War of all Wars, it came to us to lead our vast opposing armies toward the inevitable culmination of destiny and fate.

The city passed below me as I leapt from one rooftop to the next. Ever so gently, I alighted upon the shattered slate tiles of some burned-out building. The sky above glittered with crimson flashes, every flash a bomb bursting or aerodyne exploding. Thunder rolled across the sky in waves as airships barraged airships, leaving a steady fall of flack and burning debris rained down upon the besieged city. A blast erupted less than a block away, and I flew from the gable just as the last beams of the supporting wall gave way.

The liberation of the Lelekan capital of Stavica had been a great victory for the Commonwealth. Yet, even as we captured one city, it seemed another fell back into enemy hands. The elite legions of the Vrholv Eradicator still held much of northern Leleka, while all of Phana and Lethan remained under the iron grip of the Grand Imperium. Here in Korvica the fighting had been most brutal, drawing on for months without end. The Vrholv Eradicator had entrenched themselves in what little remained of the city, barricaded behind walls of throw-away troops and half-functional war machines. The generals in Duntara had estimated that two fresh regiments, dispatched from Alran, could easily capture the city. No sooner had we arrived, however, than we discovered the Vrholv garrison had received support from those Kendes legions occupying Phana led by a cruel adept of the Tenebrean Order.

I came down in the middle of a square at the base of a fountain that, before the war, might have been beautiful. A scattering of Vrholv troops and Kendes soldiers had taken position in the ruins, yelling and firing the occasional pot-shot at me. I was now well behind enemy lines, and my presence must surely have alarmed them. But these troops were of no consequence to me and I charged swiftly across the square for an alley heading north. Only six soldiers held the alley, crouched for cover behind a pile of rubble with their rifles propped up on the top. The bullets never struck me--the twice-bound aetheric aura enveloping my body saw to that. One among them was a grenadier, and I knew that even I could not survive a well-placed explosion. Fortunately, I proved too quick for him and closed the distance

before he could toss.

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 six soldiers dropped his weapon and fell to his knees before me, begging to be spared, I returned my sword to its sheath and hurried on my way. With the path now clear, save for the occasional soldier who wisely retreated from my approach, I came fast upon the position of the Tenebrean Adept. Although I did not long for the encounter with my adversary, neither did I fear it. I felt only the inevitable necessity to subdue his power and to extinguish the shadow of his presence.

The sounds of battle grew louder and thicker as I hurried from one embattled street to the next. The smoldering husks of juggernauts and the twisted wreckage of aerodynes lay scattered across every city block, mixed with the bodies of countless men--soldiers and civilians alike. This was the bloody price of war, I knew, but I could not allow the sight of such carnage to overcome me. Now was not the time for mourning. I bound the pain and sorrow together, as though trapping it in a cage, and buried it in the deepest recesses of my mind. Only later, after this battle was done, would I release the pain and grieve for those lost souls in my evening meditation.

I came around the corner of a building and entered the northwest plaza of the city. And there he was, the Tenebrean Adept, perched upon a great pillar before the burning remains of the courthouse, directing his troops in the city. He stood fully dressed in black chardite armor, save for his head which bore an ensorcelled ruby crown. Around his body flowed a red and black cloak; in his right hand he carried a mighty glaive, and his left hand sparked with arcs of aetheric energy. Before him stood ranks of elite Vrholv Eradicar and behind him waited five dark disciples, each carrying a red banner bearing his standard--a black fist gripping a serpent.

Even from a distance of three blocks his eyes met mine; I felt as though he was standing within reach. The sound of the battle faded away until it became a dim mummer and nothing else seemed to exist but he and I. He knew who I was, just as I knew him. Perhaps he had felt my presence earlier; perhaps he had been 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 easily suppress them to be sure, but to do so would drain vital

strength from me--strength I would need to defeat the Tenebrean himself. And he knew it.

With a single gesture of his gruesome glaive, the Tenebrean Adept commanded his subjects to attack. A company of Kendes troops closed in on me, lead by the fanatical soldiers of the Vrholv Eradicar. I closed my eyes, focusing my will upon the aetheric fluids circulating in the astral light, and channeled that pure-white energy into a defensive vortex around me. My feet hastened me forward, and with deft precision I drew my sword to engage the first wave of the onslaught.

It is a fundamental aspect of our training that we are taught to draw strength from all three levels of consciousness: physical, mental, and spiritual, each governed respectively 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 only an illusion; the only true physical power is mastery of one's self. Self-knowledge, then, 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, finally, is the enlightenment of the higher soul, or "the mind of the mind". Compassion must rule all actions of a Knight Empyrean, for in all things a Knight must act with kindness and benevolence toward all beings.

To resolve any given situation, a Knight Empyrean must first employ compassion, then wisdom, and finally knowledge. Only failing those avenues can a Knight explore more direct means of physical resolution. These things I had done, for in my compassion I 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 efficaciously liberate the city of Korvica. Under normal circumstances, victory would be assured; but the presence of the Tenebrean Adept on this battlefield tipped the balance of power. My duty, without question, 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 master. Not wishing to waste precious mental energy on these trivial soldiers, my sword served foremost as my weapon. Enchanted by my own hand, the golden starshard blade cut through men and armor with a single skillful swing. Even so,

the soldiers were many, and some fired their guns from afar, leaving me little choice but to call upon the aid of magical forces to bolster my attack. Around and around I danced, my sword a whirl of motion, spinning to the right and then to the left as I edged myself closer to my adversary. Those soldiers who withdrew benefited from my mercy; those who fought on found another kind of mercy.

All the while the Tenebrean silently observed my every move. Soon I found myself respecting his judicious leadership and his mastery of 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, even while he stood by and watched. I, on the other hand, would gladly go out to die in place 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 the right one and his the wrong?

Publicly, the Emyrean Order denounced the Tenebrean Adepts as "sinister lords of darkness and masters of evil". Yet, within our council chambers even we still quarreled over the definition of evil. In my adversary I sensed no hatred, no malice, no sadistic disposition--only cold, calculating thought structured in the perfect order of rational comprehension. While no one outside their order knew what philosophy the Tenebreans espouse, it was clear to us that they, too, had developed an underlying code to govern their actions. For them, power, domination, and order seemed to be the greatest of virtues. Power, for them, is the sheer force of might to overcome physical obstacles; domination is the force of will and psychological manipulation of other minds; and order is complete and utter control over their defeated subjects. Order is, of course, a good thing, but it is the kind of order that the Tenebreans seek to bring about that is so troubling to us. Their for of "order" is tyrannical and totalitarian with conformity, obedience, and loyalty demanded of all those beneath their rule.

Indeed, the Tenebreans oppose all forms of chaos and disorder, even to a fault. They regard freedom and democracy as "paths to disharmony and a disordered society". Freedom, in their eyes, means anarchy, and it is here that they have erred. For freedom should be regarded not as anarchy, but "freedom from oppression"; it is a virtue embodied by the inalienable right to pursue one's own destiny. Likewise, equality among peoples and races is a ludicrous notion to the Tenebreans. In their misguided view, those who master strength of will and physical

might should rule over the lesser, weaker people. To us their ways are evil; but to them we must seem weaklings.

Without a doubt, we knights of the Emyrean Order must seem idealistic fools in the eyes of the Tenebreans, lending our strength to help the weak instead of dominating them, and fighting to restore a fading dream of liberty. They point to nature, which we also know to be good, and declare how it is the proper order of things for only the strongest to survive. As such, they view weakness as a disease and accuse those who help the weak of cultivating disease. This corrupt and twisted understanding has led them to the conclusion that it is we who are evil and must be thrown down. But, if we are idealistic fools, then they are surely fanatical tyrants.

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 with his hand and the remaining soldiers backed away, taking position around the perimeter of the plaza. With infinite grace, he leapt from the pillar on which he stood and touched down a full block from where he had been. Now, with less than a hundred paces separating us, we faced each other and waited.

Our battle would decide who stood victorious over the city of Korvica. With my death, the army of the Grand Imperium, lead 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. Still, he had the decided advantage. While I had fought my way to his position, he was fresh for the battle. Perhaps this would make him overconfident. After all, he had not sent his disciples to soften me for the kill, instead chosing to keep them in reserve. That alone told me that he was sure of his victory.

Nevertheless he waited, just as I waited, sizing me up and likely contemplating an infinite number of battle scenarios. I could only assume that his mastery of the thaumaturgical arts matched my own and that his perfection of the physical disciplines was of equal skill. His weapon was a glaive--a polearm measuring nearly eight feet in length, forged of solid black 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. Indeed, the weapon was 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 that glaive would kill a common man in an instant, perhaps even disintegrating him. While I could possibly survive a glancing blow, a solid strike would be the end of me. No doubt my adversary knew that the same was true of my own mystical blade.

Minutes passed and we remained locked in our meditative struggle. I felt his mind searching my own and immediately I flooded my aura with blinding astral 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. But the very fact that he had tried to steal my thoughts told me that he vastly underestimated my abilities. Then again, perhaps he had done so only to make it appear as though he underestimated me. Such subtle duplicity was characteristic of a Tenebrean Adept. Sheer power and force of will are their greatest strength in combat, but, like any true warrior, they know the battle is won long before the first blow is ever made. To that end, they often employ treachery, illusions, and all forms of deception to assure a swift victory.

The occasional blast of a bomb or firing of guns still erupted from one part of the city or another, but as time drew on the battle for Korvica came to a standstill. Both sides had realized their respective leaders were preparing for a duel. The very battle itself would soon be decided by which one of us stood victor. And yet, it seemed as equally probable that he would defeat me as it did 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 respective capabilities.

I ran our battle a hundred times through my mind. 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 in the art of combat or employ to hamper my own? Did he prefer a hard attack or soft attack? Did he preferred aggressive or defensive tactics? Did he favor grounded fighting above a form that kept in constant motion? There was much I could judge from his appearance and the powerful aura he radiated. His heavy armor told me that he preferred a more grounded form of combat, compounded by hard strikes and attacks. A glaive, by nature, is more defensive than a sword, as it is 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 aggressive, for should I be forced to take the defensive against a foe with such a weapon, I would never be able to close in for the kill.

Minutes more passed as we stood facing each other a hundred yards apart. He made no move to attack, and I waited patiently. The first to move would immediately reveal to his opponent every detail involving 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 should inevitably rush the other at the same time. Such was the case now, for there was no delay or hesitation between the time I began my charge and the moment my adversary did the same.

In that instant, nothing else existed in the world--nothing but my enemy and me. The air rushed past my face as we rapidly closed the distance between us. His cold, 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, making it a veritable shield to parry any blow. He could strike from as far as seven feet with his glaive; 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.

Then, just as we closed to ten paces, the Tenebrean drove the butt of his glaive into the ground and vaulted himself high into the air, pulling his weapon after him. I had erred in believing his form to be grounded and stable; instead, he had taken up a form where speed and maneuverability were paramount. As though to demonstrate his perfect agility, my adversary twisted around in the air as he flew up and over me, landing with a cat-like grace no less than ten feet behind me. Without missing a step, he whirled into action, thrusting his glaive directly at me and forcing me to take the defensive as I feared he would. I had little choice but to parry the attack and leap back to find 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 knew 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 inward 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 in an instant, at the same time throwing a bolt of electrified aethergy from his left hand. It was merely a distraction--the bolt was easily absorbed by my own protective aura, charged as it was with astral light. But even as my sword swept in for the kill, something in his own aura lashed back at me--something black and crawling, like tendrils of pain and fire. I recoiled, and my blade missed its target by an inch. I had only seconds to prepare myself for his counter-attack as he drew back with his glaive and thrust toward me, his face twisted with joy and malice at the sight of my agony. Having no other choice, I rolled to my left to evade and jumped back on my feet as his weapon passed overhead.

The pain from whatever malignant spell protected him continued to crawl like a swarm of stinging ants across my right arm; with a thought I contained the sensation and quarantined it in a corner of my mind. Hardly had I recovered when it felt as though my body weighed a thousand pounds. It was not, of course, that my weight had changed--the Tenebrean was exerting his considerable mental influence upon the laws and principles governing the attraction of gravity. Although he could not crush me in this way, he knew he could 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 storm of crackling blue fire powerful enough to sap the energy from my protective aura. My spirit winced with the duplicity of his attack--it was just like a Tenebrean to pervert an otherwise civil dual to a contest of magical will. 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.

We both seemed to agree that the battle had dragged on long enough. The fire he had conjured was just powerful enough to dissolve my aetheric aura, but before it had dispelled I launched a full-on attack. Striking right, then left, then from above, I pushed the Tenebrean back as he struggled to block my attacks with the shaft of his glaive. Finally, the forged black steel of his weapon could no longer sustain the punishment I inflicted upon it. 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 quickly recovered and made the

most of his disadvantage, wielding the bladed end of the glaive in his right hand and holding the lower shaft 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.

As I closed 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; in that moment I spun in a circle to my right and brought my golden sword up 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 through his neck to the shoulder. Even as his decapitated head tumbled from his body, a searing-hot pain shot up from my abdomen. I glanced down and saw the upper shaft of the glaive protruding from my stomach. The blade must have still had a trace of its deadly enchantment, for the wound continued to burn and sizzle deep inside my body.

The Tenebrean collapsed on the ground before me, and I dropped to one knee beside him. I reached up with a trembling hand to extract the blade, but the pain was too much for me to bear. I could not even muster the strength of will necessary to block the screaming agony I felt. Tendrils of corrupting energy crawled into every organ and limb of my body, rotting and poisoning everything they touched. Paralyzed, I fell on my back and stared up into the smoke filled sky. We had been equally matched--he a Tenebrean Adapt, and I a Knight Emyprean; 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, but I was confident in the capabilities of my captains. With the Tenebrean dead, my forces would soon overpower the remaining Kendes troops and, at last, liberate the 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 soon came over me, and I saw those guiding beacons of the astral light before me...