



TOTAL WAR™ 

WARHAMMER

PRINCE OF ALTDORF



The old man cast warpstone into the burning brazier. The flames immediately took on a green tinge, and vile, noxious smoke filled the chamber. The man's milky eyes wept tears of blood, but nevertheless he inhaled deeply.

'Show me,' he whispered. His shoulders and neck arched as the smoke billowed into his head – entering through nostrils and mouth, bombarding him with a vision. He saw the life of a sovereign, an ascension from prince to emperor. Within minutes an entire future had been laid bare, with great events to secret meetings and even inner thoughts revealed. The vision clouded, the brazier burnt low.

The man returned to the now, and not a moment too soon, for the witch hunters were close. He grabbed his staff, made to leave, and beckoned.

The raven perched in the corner of the room. It had remained silent throughout the burning of the warpstone, and only now moved, fluttering across to the man's shoulder in a flurry of feathers. Its beady eyes regarded the old man, as if appraising. As if only it knew whether the vision was true...

This is that vision...

PRINCE OF ALTDORF

A novella by Andy Hall

*2470 – in the reckoning
of the Imperial Calendar*

The monsters came at dusk. On cloven hooves they approached the inn of the Black Boar. Snarling and braying, quiet at first, but then getting louder as man-stink filled their flaring nostrils. Reikscaptain Kurt Helborg knew there was something wrong even before the bray scream announced the beastmen attack.

'Reiksguard! Weapons out!' he shouted as he shot upright, sending his bowl of stew skittering across the table. The other fifteen men did likewise, vaulting from the trestle table where they had been eating moments before to grab their sword belts and scabbards. The familiar scrape of metal against hardened leather could be heard as the soldiers unleashed their steel. A few went for their armour, but most knew there wasn't the time. The inn was under attack and the Imperial family were in mortal danger.

A few hours earlier, the Emperor's retinue had come across the inn as they travelled a road that wended its way through the Drakwald. Daylight was fading, and with Altdorf still fifteen leagues to the north the young captain had no choice but to order a reluctant stop. The Black Boar was a large coaching house, with an attached stable and well-maintained yard surrounded by tall walls. The innkeeper had been beside himself to discover that Emperor Luitpold, his wife, daughter and young son were staying the night. He loudly proclaimed that his own chambers were at their disposal, although this didn't quite solve the problem where twenty of Helborg's best Reiksguard, plus numerous servants and serfs, would stay. There were other logistical issues too – such as how the stables would cope with all the horses, and whether the courtyard could fit the gun wagons, carriages and baggage trains that typically accompanied an Imperial party on provincial tours. In the end, it mattered not, for a loud bray outside signalled the beast's arrival.

Even as Helborg grabbed his weapon, gors leapt over the walls and into the courtyard, on the hunt for man-flesh. A couple of stable lads were the first to die. Moments later the wall at the front of the inn was pulverised as two minotaurs charged through. One immediately collapsed, the large blocks of drystone having taken their toll on the creature's head. The other, however, powered through, running up to the inn and ripping off the front door. Fortunately for the men inside, its muscled frame prevented it from running amok, although the whole building shook as the creature repeatedly thrust its great shoulders into the lintel. The breach in the inn's wall created by the minotaurs was all the watherd needed to flood in.

'You five,' pointed Helborg, 'accompany the Emperor's family to the chambers upstairs. Block the doors, protect them with your life.' The soldiers gave curt nods and immediately ran into the room opposite, to where the Emperor and his loved ones had been dining. 'Follow me!' the captain shouted to the rest. On the outside of the inn, five Reiksguard had been patrolling the perimeter while the others ate in the inn's common room. As the bray of the beastmen cut through the night, the on-duty soldiers had instinctively reached for their swords. Three raced into the courtyard, ready to face the six gors that now stalked towards the side door of the inn. The remaining two Reiksguard ran to the front to face the minotaur and the other bestial invaders. They lunged at the monster as it reached the inn. One the soldiers sprang forward, stabbing the bull-headed beast deep in its haunch. The creature swept its free arm around and sent the man flying.

Inside the coaching house, the Reiksguard escort had collected the Emperor's family and were ushering them upstairs. The rotund innkeeper blocked the way.

'I want you out!' he shouted in a trembling voice at the Emperor. 'Bringing this trouble here—' A Reiksguard grabbed him by the arm and bodily flung him down the stairs. The remaining soldiers trampled on his prone form, briefly stopping to aid the Emperor's wife-consort and her daughter over the inn's owner. Luitpold's wife glanced down in sorrow at the man, but then looked again at the baby son in her arms, and her face hardened. She continued up the stairs. On the upper floor, servants ran and screamed in panic, and were mercilessly pushed aside by the Reiksguard. At the end of the corridor was a heavy wooden door, past which were the innkeeper's chambers. Within were more wailing servants, but the Reiksguard paid them no heed as they escorted the Emperor and his loved ones inside, then closed and barred the door behind them. Mere seconds after, windows were smashed downstairs and beastmen poured in.

Helborg had no idea what had happened to the men who had been patrolling outside; truth was, he didn't have time to concern himself with them. He stood on the first step of the stairs, facing the front door, bellowing orders and striking at the cloven-footed monsters as they reached him. He was flanked on either side by his men, only two of who were in armour. The gors congregated on Helborg's position, clearly desperate to get up the stairs, but the Reikscaptain and his men fought with Sigmar's fury. Corpses littered the floor, clogging the hallway, making it difficult for more of their horned kin to attack. And yet, the beastmen were determined, and the Reiksguard began to fall. One man was gored in the arm and then dragged, shouting, into the horned morass. With every Reiksguard death, Helborg knew he was closer to failing in his sworn duty. As exhausted as he was, this made him

furious. He struck out in anger, swinging his sword and cleaving a beastmen in twain. Upstairs, behind him, he heard the smash of windows and knew the creatures must have scaled the walls. It would not be long before the beastmen took his head and that of the Emperor.

'Sigmar save them,' he uttered under his breath.

Suddenly, he felt a rush of wind as something flew past his left ear, missing it by the width of his moustache. A black shaft embedded itself into a gor he was facing. Then another came whistling past to strike a beast in the eye. Suddenly, the stairwell was filled with arrows all flying downwards, from behind Helborg, and all missing him to hit the beastmen he was facing.

Helborg knocked on the heavy wooden door. His hand was shaking and he quickly withdrew it – he didn't want the elf that stood next to him to see his shame. If the hooded sylvan had noticed, he didn't say anything.

'Yes?' answered an uncertain voice within.

Helborg recognised it immediately. 'Kroober, let us in... There is someone to see the Emperor.' The door was unbarred cautiously. Helborg strode in, closely followed by the elf. 'Your eminence, may I present, our... saviours.'

Emperor Luitpold stood up straight, relief on his face mixed with caution and curiosity. 'We are in your debt-' he began.

The wood elf gracefully but forcefully held up his hand to silence the Emperor. Helborg bristled but the elf took no notice.

'We care not for your gratitude,' he said in a strange accent. The elf fixed his emerald eyes on the baby held by his mother. He walked over and the Reiksguard tensed. 'I will not harm the child,' said the elf. 'He is far too important.' Luitpold calmed his men with a gesture. He could see elves stood silently in the hallway beyond and knew that if the capricious creatures wanted them slain, there was nothing he could do. The dead beastmen strewn across the landing were more than enough evidence. The elf looked upon the baby snuggled into his mother's arms, blissfully unaware of the danger he had been in.

'*Harathoi Koiran*,' whispered the elf, and placed a finger lightly on the baby's forehead. 'Do what your kind does best... break it...then make it whole again.' Without a further glance at the Imperial family, the elf withdrew. His kindred followed through the smashed upper windows, disappearing as quickly as they had arrived. In their absence, the baby began to cry.

'Hush, Karl-Franz,' soothed his mother. 'It will be alright.'

*2502 – in the reckoning
of the Imperial Calendar*

'Face it, boy, the time of the Reikland emperors is over.'

Karl-Franz balked at being called a boy, but did not remark upon it. Instead, he gave Boris Todbringer, Elector Count of the Grand Duchy Middenland, a curt smile. At the age of thirty-two, Franz was far from a boy. In fact, the last time he had been addressed as such was by his fighting mentor, Schwarzhelm, on the training field ten summers past.

'Don't get me wrong, your father was a good emperor, I suppose,' continued Todbringer, 'but it's now Middenheim's turn for the capital. Altdorf and that soot-stained nest in the south have benefitted from being the seat of the Emperor. Let my city have its day, I say.'

Franz knew he was being baited by the bore, but the death of his father – whose funeral had been only a week past – was still raw.

'The last I heard, the Ulricsberg was surrounded by beastmen. Do we need an emperor that can't even keep an eye on his own back garden?'

'Why, you impertinent, comet-worshipping, young—'

'My lords!' interrupted Maximillian von Konigswald as he approached. 'Graf. Prince von Holswig-Schliestein,' he said, bowing to each in turn. 'A close run thing, Boris, with eight votes, eh? Just two short of becoming Emperor. I bet the Ar-Ulric was cursing those who voted against you, and the three that abstained.' Von Konigswald gave a light-hearted wink. 'And you, my prince, four votes? Impressive for someone who had ruled themselves out of the election.'

Franz gave the Elector Count of Ostland a wry smile. Von Konigswald had always been a close ally of Emperor Luitpold's, and he was doing his son a favour by deflecting away Todbringer's blather to avoid causing a scene in the Volkshalle, the great council room at the heart of the palace. The prince glanced around to see the remaining fourteen electors chattering in their various groups, but all with their eyes on him and Todbringer. Close to the great Reikland sternoak doors of the chamber stood Volkmar, the Grand Theogonist, in deep discussion with his two arch-lectors and the Countess von Liebwitz.

'Thank you, my Lord von Konigswald, but it is time for another dynasty to wield the hammer. I cannot stop some from voting for me – as is their right – but most have made it known they think me too young to govern the entire nation. And to the truth of it, I know it myself. Now, if you'll excuse me, I must go on patrol with the Reiksmarshal. Seems the forest goblins have been getting bolder since my father's death. And, unlike Middenlanders, we in Altdorf like to deal with our pests.' Boris started to bristle once

more, but Franz swiftly withdrew from the group. Von Konigswald gave him a respectful nod as he left.

'It is decided! We will vote again in a fortnight,' stated the Grand Theogonist to all in the chamber as Franz swept by towards the chamber doors. For a brief moment their eyes locked, and the prince saw nothing but contempt in the face of Volkmar the Grim.

Kurt Helborg rode next to the prince. The veteran soldier had taken the Emperor's death hard. Karl-Franz noticed more lines around his eyes than before, and his famous moustache was no longer immaculate. It was extremely well-groomed, of course – still probably the best-kept tache in all of Reikland. But Franz knew Helborg's standards – he'd known the man all his life – and these whiskers were positively scruffy compared to normal. The prince didn't comment, even though, under normal circumstances, he would have been ribbing the Reiksmarshal all through their patrol.

Helborg glanced around to check the forty-strong Reiksguard knight regiment and halberdier block in Altdorf colours were following in tightly drilled formation.

'Every man here is loyal to the Holswig-Schliestein dynasty, my prince. We'd follow you to the Realm of Chaos,' assured the Reiksmarshal. Karl-Franz graced the old man with a smile.

'But they don't get to vote. Only the fifteen electors do.' He gestured to the knights behind him. 'Their job is to protect the next emperor, no matter who is elected.'

Helborg gave a dismissive shake of his head.

'Todbringer won't want Reiksguard – the clue is in the name. He'll be making those Midden-wolf barbarians his official bodyguard, and we'll be exiled to Reiksforts on the Kislev border.'

The Graf is no more certain to take the crown than any of the elector counts. The Grand Theogonist has never voted for a non Sigmarite candidate, and with his arch-lectors that is a voting block of three. That's why there has never been a Middenland Emperor. It's no wonder the worshippers of Ulric have complained about the system for centuries.

'My lord, hush!' whispered Helborg. The Reiksmarshal was studying the trees on either side of the road. 'I smell greenskin.'

'This close to Altdorf?'

'We have pulled back long-range patrols since your father's interment in Morr's garden. Draw your blade, my prince,' urged Helborg.

Karl-Franz unsheathed the Reikland Runefang in one smooth motion. The Prince of Altdorf fought better with a warhammer than

a sword, but a Runefang wasn't just any blade. His was known as Dragon's Tooth – its surface glowed with ancient dwarfen power. More swords swept from their scabbards behind the prince as the Reiksguard drew their weapons, while the sergeant of the halberdiers barked formation orders. Yet no enemy came forth. Karl-Franz looked about, seeing nothing but forest. Maybe his father's death had done more to the Reiksmarshal than even he thought?

The spiders attacked from above, falling upon the Reiksguard from the forest canopy. Two knights were immediately consumed as creatures the size of wolves dropped on them. Demented, howling, feather-wearing goblins immediately followed, grappling down the web lines left in the spiders' wake. They came yammering out of the undergrowth to attack the halberdiers. The initial onslaught was easily fended off as the infantry block was in a defensive posture, but more forest goblins followed and the halberdiers were quickly overwhelmed. Franz was knocked off his horse, and landed heavily on the ground. He felt the crushing weight of a spider crawl over him, the goblin riding on its back leered over expectantly. He had dropped the Runefang when knocked off his horse and his pinned right arm desperately scrambled for the hilt as the spider's hinged mandibles came within inches of the prince's face. But he found the hilt and immediately felt the power of its runes course through his hand. Franz swept his arm up in an arc as the creature lunged. The Runefang cut through the spider's head in one smooth motion, dumping gore all over the prince. The goblin rider's head was lopped off in the same swing.

Franz knocked the corpses off him and stood up. He was immediately joined by Helborg. All around, the Reiksguard fought forest goblins and their arachnid allies. A few soldiers were slain. Some had dismounted to fight, while most remained on their horses. The halberdiers fought on but over half their number were dead.

'I keep finding myself ambushed when I'm with you,' said Helborg sardonically. 'It does my reputation no good.' Before Franz could retort, the ground shook and a hiss echoed through the air. Trees parted as a monstrous spider came scuttling toward them.

'An Arachnarok!' warned Helborg. The creature was huge; a bestial, multi-eyed monster. The Arachnarok must have been twelve feet long and ten feet high, with an engorged abdomen on which was mounted a ramshackle howdah covered in webbing. The Reiksguard fighting around Franz faltered as the eight-legged behemoth crunched and scurried across the undergrowth.

'Hold your ground!' commanded Franz. The men took heart and refocused on their own foes. The Arachnarok continued to advance. Upon its howdah stood a goblin spell-spitter – it focused directly on Franz with a malicious grin.

The spider-beast charged.

'For Sigmar!' yelled the Prince of Altdorf, and ran to meet the monster. Helborg was a few steps behind, his own Runefang held aloft. The shaman spat out a hex, and Helborg stumbled. He dropped to the ground, desperately trying to get under his armour

and scratch the wicked itches that wracked his body. Franz ran on, dodging right as the spider's front legs lunged at him. The Runefang slashed out, cutting through the beast's outstretched leg at its upper joint. The creature's sudden loss of appendage, coupled with its momentum, caused it to pitch forwards out of control. Franz used his own impetus to move towards the flank of the collapsing spider. He climbed up the side of the creature in two great leaps and on to the rapidly tipping platform. Karl decapitated the goblin shaman before the greenskin could even chant a fresh spell, and in the same motion thrust the Reikland Runefang deep in the giant spider's sternum. The Arachnarok's intact legs gave way and the beast juddered to a fatal halt.

Helborg stood back up, recovered the Runefang from the forest floor and set about creating a perimeter. By Helborg's count, eleven knights were dead, but after the initial surprise the highly-trained warriors were quickly getting the upper hand. The halberdiers had fared badly, but refused to panic and flee. The forest goblins, on seeing an incarnation of their many-eyed god felled by the Reikland Prince, began to dissipate. Soon the only greenskins in the area were dead ones.

The Reiksguard gathered around their prince, in part to laud him as a spider-slayer, in part to protect him from further attack. The branches of the web-shrouded trees blew in a breeze that felt unnatural, and Kurt was keen to be on their way.

'You.' He pointed at a closed-helmed warrior. 'Protect our prince.' The knight moyed towards Franz. The Reiksmarshal busied himself with ordering his remaining warriors and state troops to prepare the horses and collect the bodies. He didn't see the closed helm knight draw a dagger. The breeze blew strong once more. Franz was crouched, silently recovering from his recent fight, but he looked up in time to see the knight come at him with dagger in hand. He threw himself back and avoided a strike to the face, but with his back on the ground there was nowhere to go when the next thrust came...

Leaves flew around the prince as the air stirred in unnatural currents. An ethereal blade manifested to parry the thrusting dagger. 'None shall pass,' spoke a spirit clad in fine armour and bathed in a green glow. His sword swept past the traitor knight's guard arm and plunged into his neck. The assassin spasmed for a second, then fell in a heap as the spirit sword was deftly withdrawn. The ghostly knight turned to the prone prince and offered a hand to pick him up. Karl-Franz took the proffered arm, and was surprised to find it substantial enough to lift him back to his feet.

'Well met, sir. I'm sorry, I do not know your name,' said Franz.

'I have had many names over the centuries,' said the knight. Helborg strode to Franz with a retinue of Reiksguard.

'What is this?' he looked aghast at the spectral knight, levelling his sword at the stranger.

'Sheath your Runefang, Reiksmarshal, if this spirit wanted me dead, he would have done it by now, or would have let the traitor finish the job.' Karl-Franz gave the assassin's corpse a kick as he said it. 'Are you trying to get me killed, Kurt?' he asked with a wry tone.

'Apologies, my prince. What with ambushes and assassins, I admit it has not been our finest hour.' He knelt down and removed the helm to see the traitor's face. 'That is not one of my men.'

'It was a clumsy attempt,' said the ethereal voice of the knight. Karl-Franz detected an accent underneath the unearthly tone. 'I am far from home, and must return to the bosom of Bretonnia soon. But I have been sent by the Lady and I am oath-sworn to obey my Goddess' commands. I seek you out, Prince of Altdorf, for it is important you meet with my Lady's new king. And you must do it soon, before your country chooses its next sovereign. Dark are the times that come, and shadowy are the puppet-masters that pull our strings. We must be prepared.' With that, an ethereal steed wearing a green caparison leapt from the trees, giving a ghostly neigh. Helborg's soldiers scattered as the horse gracefully landed and cantered by the knight.

'Our nations have not always been friends, spirit,' said Franz, he was the only one that was unperturbed by the Green Knight's presence.

'That is the fault of kings and emperors from the past,' said the knight as he mounted his horse. 'Don't make the same mistake as them, or the Three-Eyed King will be only one to claim victory in the decades to come.'

'Who?'

But the question was left unanswered as the spectral horse reared up and charged into the undergrowth. The breeze was becalmed, and the prince and his army left alone.

The walls of Altdorf were a welcome sight. Karl-Franz rode with Helborg once more. He'd spent much of the journey back in silence, but on seeing his city he was heartened enough to talk.

'You will meet with the Bretonnian king?' asked the Reiksmarshal.

'If I can.'

'Because it is your duty?'

'Yes, I believe it is.'

'Yet you believe yourself too young for the throne?'

'There are older, more experienced nobles than I. If what this spirit knight said is true, then we may need someone like Todbringer, who has dealt with heads of state for much longer than me.'

'You are wrong, sire,' stated Helborg. Karl-Franz looked at his friend with a raised eyebrow. Many nobles would have had the Reiksmarshal exiled to Araby for saying such a thing, but Franz was of different stock. 'There are eleven elector counts, and most are greedy and power hungry. They know nothing of duty, unlike yourself. If I may be so bold, my prince, you confuse age with experience. They are not the same thing. Some electors have grown old and decrepit and never once been in battle, let alone fought monsters, or witnessed knightly spectres. You may be young but you have more experience than many of them combined. You should be Emperor. It is your selfish desire to shirk from power which makes you the best candidate.'

'Selfish?'

'Those that seek power think it will make their span easier. But from what I saw in your father, it is a terrible burden – no wonder you do not want it. But that is the selfish route. Yes, you may have time for your family and the riches of the Holswig-Schliestein estate, but that would be a great waste of your skills considering what lies on the horizon.'

The spider riders returned to the site of the ambush. The men had gone and taken their dead with them, but the corpses of spiders and goblins were still strewn about. The lead goblin dismounted, his spider giving an evil hiss as he did. Another goblin came stumbling forwards, his head cowed.

'Boss Raknik! Boss, it was 'ere.'

'I can see dat,' spat the warboss. His eyes quickly settled on the Arachnarok. He strode over and laid his clawed hand on the beast's head.

'Which humie zogger did dis?' he said.

'Da one we were sent ta get. Da prince wiv da glowee stabba.'

The goblin warboss gave a nasty, low howl of rage that even unsettled the wolf-spiders. He turned to the underling, gesturing at the dead.

'Gather dis lot and cook 'em up. Den we call all da gobbos in da Bloodpine. If it'z war da humies want, den dat's wot we'll give 'em. We gonna scuttle up to dere city and burn it all, or my name ain't Raknik Spiderclaw!'

The gobbos hooted and hollered at that, and began to build a pyre under the Arachnarok's corpse.

The election was still nine days away, but even so, most electors stayed within Altdorf's walls to politic amongst themselves, buy votes and barter favour. However, Franz was abroad once more. As his retinue approached Axe Bite Pass they saw a grand marquee, a tent of epic proportions in the colours of blue and red with gold trim. It was the pavilion of King Louen Leoncoeur.

Karl-Franz rode at the head of column. This time he was without Helborg, who had remained in Altdorf to keep the peace between the conniving electors. One of the counts, Maximillian, had accompanied the prince. He cantered up past the column of knights, handgunners and a detachment of state troops from nearby Helmgart.

'I don't like it, Karl-Franz. We should be back in Altdorf preparing your case amongst the other electors. This is merely a diversion, a crude attempt by the Bretonnians to influence the election,' he said, nervously fingering a brooch of deep sapphire.

'You did not have to come, my friend.'

'And leave you to face the new king alone? No. We have a saying in Ostland: "Never trust a Hochlander, unless there's Bretonnian in the room." We'll see what this king has to say, together.'

Franz managed a chuckle. 'You are as loyal a friend to me as you were to my father. I assume one of those four votes I received in the first round was from you? Even after I stated no interest...'

'You underestimate yourself, Prince of Altdorf. Your father was a good Emperor and friend. But you... you will be great!'

'Just because you and the Reiksmarshal want me to be Emperor doesn't mean I will be. I'm still not wholly convinced myself.'

A horn was winded from the Bretonnian encampment, ending the conversation. An escort of gaily-coloured knights rode out to meet Franz's party.

The prince entered the pavilion with Maximillian and two Reiksguard in full armour at his side. Inside the marquee was a large crowd of assorted Bretonnian nobles. The tent was as opulent within as outside. The floor was littered with the furs of large exotic cats and there was a massive fire pit in the middle, on which a boar was roasting upon a spit. Long banquetting tables, fully dressed as if for a state dinner, with silver cutlery, candelabras and ostentatious table decorations, lined the main gangway. This channel was about seven feet wide and led straight from the entrance to the rear of the marquee, where, on a raised dais, sat the king. He was flanked on either side by several figures. They were also sitting, and all looked equally powerful. A couple were clearly dukes, who stared at the Empire party with hostility. Next to the king there was a woman in her mid-thirties, and undeniably beautiful. She looked upon Karl-Franz with interest, and even benevolence. The king himself sat comfortably on his wooden throne. He wore chainmail and a sword by his side – his face, unreadable.

'Welcome, brothers from across the Grey Mountains,' said Franz, referencing the fact that the Bretonnian encampment was technically on Empire land.

'Greetings,' said the king in perfect Reikspiel, albeit with a slight Bretonnian accent. 'I must confess, "I do not know how to address you? Is it Grand Prince of Altdorf? Emperor Elect? Count of Reikland?'

'I am happy to be called Karl-Franz, which is my full first name, or even simply Karl.'

'How humble. Excellent. Of course, you may address me as "your majesty,"'

Von Königswald bristled at the intended slight. The gathered nobles chortled softly and were clearly amused. Franz focused on the king's face, but could not tell if he was jesting or arrogant. Perhaps both?

King Leoncoeur raised his arm and everyone fell silent. The woman turned to the king and whispered something in his ear. He nodded.

'I think I would be alone with this prince. We have much to discuss. What say you... Karl?'

'I will hear what you have to say.'

'Good.' The king looked around. 'Leave us.' The nobles filed out of the tent.

'I'm staying!' hissed Count Maximillian defiantly.

'I'll be fine,' reassured Karl-Franz.

'Yes, let me be alone with your prince, Count. We must talk sovereign to sovereign,' said the king as he dismounted the dais and moved to stand next to Karl-Franz.

'I'm no sovereign. I'm not the Emperor.'

'Not yet,' said Louen. Up close, the king gave off a much friendlier impression. The woman who had been sat by the king graciously took von Königswald by the arm and walked him out of the tent. She engaged him with chatter, diverting him enough to lead him away from the prince and king. Soon enough the tent was empty, the only sound was the crackling fire in the pit and the mouth-watering hiss of cooking boar.

'Apologies, Karl, for that little show. You'll understand soon enough. You have to play to your audience on occasion.'

'I wouldn't know about that.'

'Don't you?' said Louen with a smile. 'You haven't called me "your majesty" yet, so I think you know exactly what I'm saying.'

'Why did you send for me?' asked Karl, eager to change the subject and focus on the real reason for their presence. 'This is a critical time for my nation. If word got out that I was meeting with you, my rivals could imply I was your vassal, answering the summons of his master.'

'But you came anyway?'

'Your spectral messenger was convincing.'

'See, you are wise. The Green Knight only appears to those who are worthy. Yes, he was sent to bring us together, but not by me. I have no dominion over him.'

'Then who?'

'By the Lady of the Lake, of course.'

The orcs swarmed into Axe Bite Pass. The Necksnappers had been minding their own business, but then men had come and killed a few of their goblin sentries. Not that they cared about the lives of goblins, of course, but you couldn't have humies doing such things and getting away with it. And so they had streamed from their camp with choppas in hand, and had soon picked up the scent of lots of men and nags. Through the pass they strode, and there, in the distance, by the foothills to the east, they saw a large gaudy tent.

Franz and Louen walked around the pavilion deep in conversation, the king explaining the many frustrations he had come up against after only a few years of his reign.

'You are right to try to avoid it,' said Louen. 'Only a fool seeks the chains of governance. But for men like us it is our responsibility.'

'I still don't understand why you and your goddess care.'

'Because you must be Emperor!' said the king, raising his voice for the first time. He immediately softened. 'The Lady showed me a vision, the Old World in ruins. The Ruinous Powers supreme. Don't get me wrong – normally, I would not care who your nation elected as long as you still bought Bretonnian wine, although of course your Wissenland swill is still inferior... But Bretonnia needs a strong neighbour to form a bulwark against the predations of the Dark Gods and their followers in the north. The mortar to build such a defence is weak. Your rivals are feeble. Only with Emperor Karl Franz on the throne does mankind stand a chance.'

Suddenly, from outside, came the sound of steel clashing and then the unmistakable battle cry of the orcs. The king went for his sword. Franz pulled Dragon's Tooth from its sheath.

'Strange that greenskins come now?' said the king, pointedly. He turned to Franz. 'We may not speak so candidly again. The Lady insisted you know this – if we are to save ourselves from Chaos, something must be broken, shattered, before it can be remade anew.'

Franz stared in askance at the king, but was interrupted by a tearing sound as the orcs charged in. They ran towards the pair with long, hungry strides. One orc obliviously smashed through the fire pit in his desperation to close with the men. Hot coals and roasted boar were scattered everywhere. The Runefang met the charging orc's choppa with ease, and Franz quickly pivoted and brought the sword down through the greenskin's shoulder, cleaving the beast in twain. The prince and the king stood back to back as the orcs attacked. King Leoncoeur wielded the Sword of Couronne with a knight's grace, slicing two orcs with a fatal whirl that ripped their necks open. Acrid smoke filled the tent as the scattered coals set alight to the furs on the floor; the blaze quickly spread to the tablecloths and then the walls.

'Orc filth!' spat the king as he despatched another. He and Franz moved slowly towards the rear of the tent, even as burning canvas fluttered around them. The prince lunged under the king's arm and slew a goblin. The sneaky git had sought to stab the Royarch in the ribs. Louen nodded his thanks. 'I thought you Reiklanders were fops? Nice to see at least one can wield a sword.'

'You should see me with a proper weapon, a warhammer!' retorted Franz as he lopped off the head of another orc.

The greenskins continued to pile through. Both royals managed to slay a few more, but exhaustion was creeping up on them, rapidly aided by smoke and heat as the tent blazed.

'It seems our subjects took my order to have a private audience with you quite literally.'

Karl-Franz could only nod between choking breaths as he blocked another orc. He sliced downwards, gouging deeply into the greenskin's chest and putting the beast out of action. He gave a great barking cough and smoke filled his lungs.

The front of the tent all but exploded, burning fragments falling way as Knights of the Realm charged through at full tilt. Horses jumped through tables as their riders skewered the rampaging greenskins. Others ran down the gangway, scattering orcs with lance and sword. And in their wake came the state troopers with halberdiers and the Reiksguard, killing with every blow.

Handgunners marched into formation through the massive hole the knightly charge had created. They took a firing stance and there was a familiar crack as the guns fired. Greenskins died in droves, heads and chests peppered with shotte. Blackpowder explosions were a harsh sound, but Franz could not have hoped for a better melody.

'About time,' said the king.

The yeomen bowed before their king, and remained in their submissive pose as one spoke.

'There is no doubt, your majesty. Our scouts have picked up tracks leading into the mountains. The orcs were lured here.'

The king looked displeased. In the midst of the smoking tent an informal audience had gathered: Franz and Maximillian, with the two dukes. The king turned to Franz with anger, but this was no performance for the home crowd.

'So you come to parley and lead us into a trap?'

The prince hadn't expected such an accusation, but quickly regained his composure.

'You requested this meeting,' he pointed out sternly. 'This isn't our design.'

'Opportunistic, then? A chance for an early scalp, to impress your elector counts?'

'By the comet! This is baseless,' said Franz, his voice rising.

'Even Hochlanders are more trustworthy than Bretonnians,' whispered von Konigswald into Franz's ear, his fingers nervously clasped around the brooch upon his chest.

'What was that?' demanded one of the dukes.

'Enough!' stated Franz, speaking as if he'd been dealing with capricious heads of state all of his life. He looked at the king.

'Believe what you will, but know I came here in good faith. If it was my enemy, then, by your own Lady's will, they are your enemy too. Which is why we must trust each other.'

Louen was silent for a moment.

'You see. Wise,' said the king. A grin started to slide across his face. 'We gave those greenskins a taste of what mankind can do, did we not?' He laughed and Franz joined him. The count and dukes stood motionless. The yeomen were still bowing, desperately waiting to be dismissed. The king noticed them for the first time since they had delivered their report and waved them away. He turned to Franz.

'Go back to your capital, Karl. Win this election. Not for you, or me. But for the Old World.'

The Great Temple of Sigmar was a marvel of mannish engineering. It dominated the temple district and shared a plaza with the south wing of the Emperor's Palace. That it was so close to where Karl-Franz had lived all his life and yet he was a stranger in the temple was an irony not lost on the prince, nor, it seemed, the Grand Theogonist. Volkmar was head of the Cult of Sigmar and one

of the four members of the electorate who were not provincial counts, therefore could not become Emperor themselves. The other three were the two Sigmarite Arch Lectors, and the Ar-Ulric. In theory, the arch lectors' votes were independent, but the Cult of Sigmar had always cast as a block of three since the electoral system had been put in place. The Ar-Ulric was the high priest of Ulric, based in Middenheim; his vote was Todbringer's.

Franz hoped he could convince the Cult of Sigmar's three voters of his candidacy. After all, they had voted for the last two Holswig Schliestein Emperors – his father and grandfather. But as he sat opposite Volkmar in the Grand Theogonist's vestry within the Great Temple, Franz knew it was going to be a hard sell.

Sitting opposite each other across a desk of sternoak, Volkmar glowered at the prince. Franz met his eyes, but desperately wanted to look away from the Theogonist's grim stare.

'The problem, my prince, is that I doubt your piety. I cannot remember the last temple service you attended. It was not that long ago since you were the talk of the city, cavorting in gambler's dens and taverns.'

'That was a good few years ago, Grand Theogonist. I have a wife and son now.'

'Still, you have a reputation, which is why my arch lectors and I abstained in the first round. We could not, in good conscious, vote for Todbringer, an Ulric worshipper. And you are still... unproven.'

'I am faithful to Sigmar, even if my attendance at the temple makes it seem otherwise.'

'The next, and I believe final, vote is in four days. You still have time to convince me.'

'It is not just a matter of faith,' said Franz. 'I have visited the Bretonnian King, brought together by their Goddess. Darkness is coming and we must be united even if I hav—'

'What!' shouted Volkmar, shooting to his feet. 'You listen to the words of some foreign god, rather than partake in the unyielding righteousness of Sigmar's glory? Out! Get your heathen nonsense out of that chair and away from this temple!'

Franz moved slowly. He was probably the only one in the Empire who would not cower and run from the fury of Volkmar the Grim. Nevertheless, he left knowing that he had made a terrible mistake. Maximillian was waiting in the antechamber, looking extremely uneasy.

'I take it that didn't go well.'

'No,' said Franz as the two electors left the temple and walked into the plaza. The crowds were gathering for mid-morning prayer. Karl-Franz immediately noticed the presence of Middenlanders. Priests of Ulric and Sigmar jostled for position to begin sermons. Altdorf had always been a cosmopolitan city, and, as the capital, it attracted countrymen from all the provinces. But Altdorf was

filling up; Todbringer had brought his followers in at an unprecedented level, and tensions were rapidly rising. Franz knew that if the issue of the next Emperor was not resolved soon, there could easily be blood on the streets.

'What next?' asked von Königswald fidgeting with his brooch. The Ultricans in the burgeoning crowd were giving both nobles strange looks.

'We get off the streets, seek out the other electors and make our case. If faith will not get me the votes I need, then I shall have to dance in the gutter. Summon the elector counts.'

It was the evening of the same night that Karl-Franz had been ejected from Volkmar's chambers. He and Maximillian were in the back room of the Haunted Calf, a tavern of dubious reputation not far from the Reiksport.

'I understand why you're meeting with Elder Hisme Stoutheart... But why is he coming as well?' asked Maximillian.

'Because, like you, he is a good friend, and he has an interesting outlook, and he owns the neighbouring province,' answered Franz. There was a knock on the door. It was rapped in the unmistakable tune of 'Hawthorns and death', an old Averland nursery rhyme. Before Franz could answer, the door was flung open to reveal a richly dressed man, and behind him, an angry-looking halfling. The man swanned in.

'There you are, Frazier, what a delightful place. Full of local colour! I bet the stevedores are loving all these Wolf-shaggers hanging around the city. Aw, looky, it's Max! Been a while, hasn't it? What happened to you? You were flouncing around all the courts in the south, and then you disappeared for a year. No one heard hide nor hair.. I see it wasn't to update your wardrobe.'

'Leitdorf, always a pleasure,' jibed von Königswald. The Count of Averland was unaware of, or chose to ignore, the sarcasm.

'Marius,' said Karl-Franz in greeting. They gripped arms at the elbow in a brotherly gesture.

'What's all this about you becoming Emperor, Frazier? Thought you wanted the quiet life?'

'Well, it's not because I—'

There was loud throat clearing from behind Marius. All three electors turned to the halfling in the doorway.

'I'm sorry, little chap, I'd quite forgotten you were there! Come, come – meet the Prince of Altdorf.'

'Elder Stoutheart, accept my apologies,' said Franz.

'I don't care for it. I'm used to longshanks like you forgetting us in the Moot. What is far more offensive is inviting me to a meeting where there are clearly no refreshments!'

'I have a man downstairs. I'll get him to rustle up some beer and see if there any oatcakes baking by the fire.' That seemed to placate the halfling for the moment.

'Here, your man in the common room... It's not Helboring, is it?' asked Marius with a mischievous look.

'No, he has his hands full with the Watch at the moment. Boris' supporters are causing mayhem across the city, roaming the streets in packs,' said Franz.

'Pity.'

After the Ostermark ale and oatcakes had been brought in, the Elder of the Moot was in a much better mood.

'Mind you, roast a goose next time you entertain me,' he said. 'Now, to business. I didn't vote for you last round and I see no reason to now. The Graf is a great warrior, older, more experienced. Maybe it is time we gave the Middenlanders a chance at ruling.'

'Tell me,' started Franz, 'how far away is Middenland from the Moot?'

'It is a way, I grant you.'

'Why do you think your predecessors always supported a southern Emperor?'

The question was intended for the halfling, but Marius interrupted.

'I know this one! Mootlings are small, easy to forget, simple to suppress and crush under the boot,' said Leitdorf, nudging the elder with his elbow. Of course, on a normal-sized man, the elbow would be lightly nudging the subject's flank in a ribald gesture. On a halfling, the count's elbow was infuriatingly knocking the elder in the side of the head. 'You need the Emperor close, so you can remind him you're there. Ha! Do you think Todbringer will give a goblin's chuff about you? Ha-ha!' Whether Marius' words were well intentioned or not, Franz could not say, although they clearly stung, as Stoutheart's face grew red.

'Elder Hisme,' said the Prince. 'I do not want a vote from somebody out of fear. What is it I could do for your people as Emperor?'

'The League of Ostermark,' answered Hisme. Karl-Franz raised his eyebrows.

'You want the province of Ostermark?'

'No, no,' shook elder's head. 'I want its beer, mutton and wool trade.' The halfling picked up and started eating an entire cake, but kept talking despite a mouthful of oats. 'Ostermark isn't a rich land but what they can grow is grass for their sheep, a hardy variety of barely and hops to make their beer. It is no dwarf brew, true, but Ostermark's ale is exported throughout the Empire, and it all flows down the River Stir to Altdorf and Nuln.' Now the prince began to understand.

'If I put a high barge tax on the Stir...' Karl-Franz began.

'Ha! The beer factors and mutton traders would have to move their goods on land south, through Stirland and into Mootland, taking barges from there along the River Aver into Nuln,' said a delighted Count Marius. 'When the goods reach your docks, you'd place a hefty tariff of your own, though one low enough to make the detour from the Stir worthwhile. Brilliant! What a cunning little, hairy-footed creature you are, Elder Stoutheart. With the Moot already the breadbasket of the Empire, in one move you would become the nation's largest food and beverage supplier. And we in Averland would benefit from being your neighbours, no doubt!' The halfling gave a half-hearted smile in return.

'The Chancellor of Ostermark wouldn't take kindly to that,' said Franz.

'That is the cost of my vote,' stated Elder Stoutheart.

'Then I will pay it,' said the prince, reaching across the table to shake the halfling's hand.

The three elector counts left the Haunted Calf soon after. The elder was keen to stay on and drink more of the beer he might soon be taking a cut of. Franz kept his manservant there to escort Stoutheart safely back to his residence. The nobles walked from the Reiksport towards the Old Emperor Bridge and from there into the Palatz Distrikt, where the electors were staying. The nobles were on their own with none of their usual retainers or bodyguard, for the meeting had been secret. The streets were busy, but Franz thought that a good thing, as they did not attract too much attention. Everywhere were roving bands men in blue and white, Todbringer's Middenheimers, as well as rival Sigmarite locals. No wonder the Reiksmarshal was so busy, working closely with the Watch to prevent the whole city going up like a blackpowder keg.

'Well, well, what do we have here?' said a man in his late twenties, sporting a short red beard and several wicked-looking daggers dangling from his belt. One blade was in his hand, which he blithely used to pick dirt from under his left forefinger nail. Behind him stood another six toughs all dressed in blue and white. 'It looks to me like we have a little prince, running around his city like a rat catcher's mutt off his leash.'

'That is not a respectful way for a guest to address his host,' said Franz. He had stopped several feet short of the group, with Marius and Maximilian by his side.

'Your city, is it, Sigmarite scum? Not for much longer. Now, if you want to live, I need to know where you've been.'

'By the gods! Such threats! All spoken by a man with a ginger beard! Shall I piss my breaches right where I stand?' Marius laughed. 'Mayhaps instead we should have a jolly good scrap? I could do with a workout before this evening's buttermilk bath.'

Before anyone could react to the mad count's interjection, Leitdorf strode the three long steps to the leader of the Middenlanders and head-butted him on the bridge of his nose. The short-bearded man collapsed like a ragdoll, dropping his dagger. Marius scooped

up the falling weapon by the hilt and with a deft wrist movement, spun the point around and plunged it into the neck of the nearest thug.

'Well, Frazzer, am I going to do all the work?'

Two Middenlanders grabbed the count with murder in their eyes. Franz stepped forward; he was armed with a short sword, but kept it sheathed. Instead he rapidly closed the distance and brought his fist round in a strong punch to dislocate the chin of another Middenlander who had dared to intercept. Von Konigswald kept back, fidgeting with his jewellery. One of the thugs that held Marius revealed a dagger with his spare hand, preparing to plunge it into the Count of Averland's chest. Franz didn't hesitate and brought his boot up hard and fast into the man's comets. He folded.

'I say, the Watch, the Watch!' shouted Maximillian impotently from behind.

Marius spun on the lone thug holding him with a baleful gleam in his eye. He started singing and drew his own blade. The Middenlander looked terrified.

'Oh, I'm going to have blood in my buttermilk tonight!' screamed Leitdorf, and jabbed with his dagger. The thug took a deep cut on his wrist, then turned and fled. His remaining friends did likewise. Two members of the Watch and a Reiksguard came running over the bridge, but there was little more they could do. They eyed the three nobles suspiciously until they realised who they were. It would be gaol for the four Middenlanders on the ground, although the one with a dagger in his neck would probably be going straight to the morgue. The prince ordered the bodies to be moved immediately, as he didn't want the sight to enflame tensions even more. The electors hurried on their way.

'Well, that was fun!' said Marius.

'I've certainly been a target of late,' sighed Franz. 'I never got to ask, did you vote for me in the first round?' he queried.

'Obviously,' said the count.

'I made it known I wasn't standing.'

'Yet now you are. Come, Karl-Frazzer. Some men are destined for greatness. They're touched by it. Unlike me, I was touched by something else... You were always going to be part of this election, even the insane can see that.' He clapped Franz heartily on the back. 'Now I need a bath. Say hello to Helboring for me!' The Mad Count of Averland strode away, over the bridge and into the Palatz Distrikt.

Graf Alberich Haupt-Anderssen banged his heavy fist on the table. The Elector Count of Stirland was a stout man with large sideburns: Bacon rashers slid across his plate as he thumped the table while breaking his fast with the prince. They were in Franz's private quarters, inside the Imperial Palace.

'My people starve and your father never gave it a second thought!' spat the Graf.

'Emperor Luitpold had to address many concerns...

'Nonsense! What's more important than his hungry people?'

'Stores had to be diverted. Armies march on their stomachs and the Empire's borders need constant defence.'

'Utter tosh—'

'The Emperor's subjects in Stirland are also your subjects, Graf Alberich,' interrupted Karl-Franz with steel in his voice. 'Yet you are clearly far from starvation.'

'Well... Stirland needs a strong, healthy leader,' he said, momentarily caught off guard by the prince, although he quickly rallied.

'Don't lecture me about defence! We of the Grand County of Stirland are the ultimate defence. Who do you think keeps Sylvania in check? Who keeps the dead pinned against the Worlds Edge? Stirlanders, that's who! And my people are running out of food. It creeps out of Sylvania, you know?'

'What does?'

'A pall of death. It withers crops, blackening heaths, emaciating my folk. It is fell magic, sent by vampires and liches!'

'I thought the vampires were no more?' said Franz.

The Graf let out a deep-throated, mocking laugh. 'They are not gone, boy, they just haven't fully revealed themselves is all. Even now, I have it on good authority that some necromancer calling himself Zelig van Kruger has taken Drakenhof.'

'What of the peasants residing in Sylvania? They are in your charge. Do you abandon them to this necromancer?'

'That's what I'm trying to tell you. They need aid. They are serfs, enslaved to Sylvanian nobles, and I cannot vouch who still breathes from them. We scoop up the refugees that do make it out, of course. But going into Sylvania is a costly offensive. I've tried.'

'Graf, if I have your vote, you have my word we'll deal with the undead threat, even if I have to drag witch hunters to Sylvania myself. As for your food supply issues, do your people like mutton and beer?'

'Why?'

'Because if I become Emperor, Ostermark will be sending vast quantities though your province on its way to the Moot...'

Karl-Franz moved the eel around on his plate, but he had no appetite. Only that morning he had dined with Graf Alberich, and now, a few hours later, he was having a lunch of several courses – including roasted lamprey, which he despised – with Count Wolfram Hertwig of Ostermark. The elector count studied the prince without saying much. He sipped his wine, daring Franz to speak – they both knew why they were meeting.

'If you elect me Emperor, I will put a barge tax on the River Stir,' opened the Emperor Elect. Hertwig spat out his wine.

'What? Have you lost your mind? You intend to cripple my economy and expect my vote?' Before Franz could answer, both nobles were distracted by angry shouts and the unmistakable sounds of weapons drawn, bottles smashed, and bloody skirmish. 'They're rioting! In your city! You need to get this place under control before you think to take the throne.'

'My Reiksmarshal and Watch Commander are doing their best. It is Todbringer that pours his Middenlander thugs onto the streets.'

'Nevertheless, the sooner I'm back in Ostermark the better! Even this residence won't be safe for long.'

'Order will be quickly restored,' said Franz, although even he was unsure how. Both men returned their attention to the meal in front of them.

'You were telling me how you're going to tax my river trade...' said Wolfram, with a sneer.

'It is for your benefit,' said Franz, taking a morsel of lamprey and pretending to savour it.

'By the comet, explain yourself!' Hertwig's anger was quickly rising, which was exactly where the prince wanted him.

'Your rivalry with Talabecland...'

'Don't talk to me about Feuerbach.'

'Count Feuerbach's goods travel down the Stir too, only he has the advantage of being closer to Altdorf, Nuln... Marienburg. Talabecland furs, lumber and game get to your customers sooner.' Wolfram was suddenly quiet, intrigued. Franz continued. 'The river tax I am proposing affects the length of the Stir, not just Ostermark.'

'Go on.'

'What if the levy was phased by distance from the capital? The closer you are to Altdorf the higher the tax. Talabecland would

be stung as Altdorf rests on its border, but your traders in Ostermark – all the way in the north – would have a much lower tariff. No one could argue with the logic that the Stir is congested, and that those who clog up its busiest stretches should pay the dragon's share.'

The elector count was silent, and sipped his wine once more in a placated gesture.

'And those thieving Kossars?'

'Talabecland has a small part of its border with Kislev, so it's beholden on them to take some responsibility in protecting the nation. As Emperor I shall instruct Feuerbach to send Talabheim troops north, and share this burden with Ostermark.' The elector count finished his wine, a smug smile spread across his face. Franz allowed himself his own smile. He had spoken with Count Feuerbach earlier in the day, between meals, assuring him that the soldiers of Talabecland would share in the glory of protecting the Empire's northern border as well as any trade opportunities with Kislev that the League of Ostermark had rebuffed. The river tax might come as a shock, but with Maximillian promising that Ostland would open up tariff-free trade routes to Nordland, Franz was certain the Talabecland vote was his. As was Ostermark's, judging by Hertwig's self-satisfied look. Now he just had to get through dessert.

Karl-Franz was returning from the Celestial College with Theoderic Gausser. No ploy was needed to get his vote; just a promise that Franz's first edict as Emperor would be to repel the Norse raiders who were pillaging and enslaving along his Nordland's coast. Franz had found that Todbringer – either through over-confidence or a lack of understanding of the subtleties in statecraft – had simply kept to his private residence and hoped his followers swarming Altdorf would be enough to intimidate the other electors into voting for a Middenland Emperor. Soon they would see, as the election was mere hours away.

The nobles hurried back to the Palatz Distrikt but their way was blocked – the Templeplatz was in disarray. A mass of Middenlanders stood before the temple of Sigmar, throwing detritus at the great edifice. Sigmarites were arriving in droves to defend their faith, and priests from both cults preached calm and hate. Volkmar stood on the temple balcony looking out, unimpressed, seething but quiet.

'Perhaps another route, Prince Franz?' asked Gausser.

'No.'

'But we are unarmed, and without our guards.'

'Did Sigmar have guards? No, this has to stop. Now.'

Karl-Franz strode into the mob. Ulricans tried to block his path, but the prince would not be waylaid. The crowd murmured and jeered – some with hope, others with enmity. Franz didn't stop until he reached a raised platform where daily preaching was normally held in lee of the temple. A warrior priest stood there, but surrendered the position under Franz's determined gaze.

Franz looked at the crowd, and they looked back with anger and fear. They were broken. Scared of the future. For the first time above all others, he knew he must be Emperor; mankind needed certainty to survive, or else Chaos would skulk through the fractures of insecurity and bring ruin.

'I am like you,' he shouted. The crowd looked back, hostile. What did this southern prince know of them, of their lives? Franz steeled himself.

'I am like you,' he repeated, with conviction. 'I am but a man in a world of terrors. I do not speak for Ulric. I have never worshipped the god of winter or wolves.' The Ulricans in the audience grew anxious at this; they knew Karl-Franz didn't represent them, and yet saying it out loud made them even more uneasy. 'I do not speak for Sigmar either,' continued Franz. 'Even the Grand Theogonist has made that point. I cannot remember the last temple service I attended! Some in the crowd tittered at that admission. 'I may not recall all the psalms and battle hymns, but what I do know of these holy beings is they are both warrior gods!' The crowd began to lift. 'I know that they fight for mankind, that they are both dedicated to our survival. Why should Sigmarite and Ulrican tear each other apart when there are so, so many enemies at our borders, all too willing to fall on Empire steel!' The cheers rose in volume. 'Sigmar was a warrior in life, he worshipped Ulric as a mortal man, and so we of Sigmar's creed must do the same. It is right we honour Ulric, it is right we adulate Sigmar Heldenhammer, for only together can we overcome the darkness and bring order! We must unite! For the god of battle and winter's fangs! For the Heldenhammer!'

The crowd roared and Karl-Franz walked down the dais to cheers from both factions. He knew that some skirmishes would continue, but hoped he'd put relations on the right step. Franz made his way through the crowd and on toward the palace, lauded as he went.

The assassin followed.

Karl-Franz strode with purpose. The electors would have already gathered in the Volkshalle and the second vote beginning. He entered the palace grounds, waved through by the Reiksguard.

The assassin struck from behind a large conifer. The man was swathed in black, apart from his eyes, which revealed a dusky skin tone around them. An Arabyan. He moved in an exotic way, unfamiliar to an Old World fighting stance.

His first blow caught Franz on his armoured shoulder. It hurt, but didn't pierce the flesh, which was a good thing, for assassins often coated their blades in poison. The scimitar wielded by the man in black jabbed forwards, and Franz stepped back.

'Guards!' he called, but none seemed forthcoming. The swarthy assassin stuck out again, pushing Karl-Franz towards the conifers, off the main path. Franz dodged under the blade and back onto the main drag. 'Guards!' he shouted once more. Where was Kurt when you needed him? He'd settle for Leitdorf at this point, too. The prince dodged back again as the scimitar cut the air just in front of him. Then another swing came, but this time Franz ducked into the Arabyan's arc and delivered a hefty blow to the man's chest with his fist. It was the assassin's turn to step back.

And then, the personification of rage broke from the conifer's foliage. A warhammer swept down in a vertical strike, hitting the assassin between the shoulder blades. The man fell to the floor, instantly dead; Volkmar stood over him and spat.

'Sigmar curse you,' he said.

'My thanks,' said Franz as he stepped down to unravel the material covering the assassin's face.

'None are needed. It is my duty to protect Sigmar's chosen. Come, let us get to the vote.'

'Wait! That mark, I recognise it.' Franz was looking at a tattoo etched onto the dead man's neck. On seeing it Volkmar made the sign of the comet.

'That is an ill rune!'

'I have seen it before.'

'You may have seen northmen sport it. It is a sign of their fell god.'

'No, more recently! We must get to the vote!'

Franz and the Theogonist ran towards the Volkshalle.

'That speech, it shows you are ready,' said the Theogonist as they ran.

'It makes me a hypocrite,' answered Franz. 'I talk about unity, but have spent the last few days dividing the electors.'

'Some things must be shattered before they can be made whole again,' said Volkmar.

'The King of Bretonnia said the same thing.'

'Then maybe you were right to meet with him. Perhaps Sigmar spoke with their goddess and deigned it.'

'Is that an apology?'

'I don't apologise,' said Volkmar, with a rueful smile. 'But maybe even I struggle to see Sigmar's divine will at all times.'

The election was held. Overseen by the Imperial chancellor, all electors cast their vote. The result was quickly confirmed. Prince Karl Franz von Holswig-Schliestein, Elector Count of Reikland, was declared Emperor. He had won every vote bar one. Even Boris had voted for him, and his staunch followers had cast theirs likewise. Todbringer was the first to bend the knee.

'Your eminence,' he said.

'Why, Graf Todbringer?'

'Because we need a strong Empire. That's more important than my desire... and I am not blind, I have two good eyes, I could see which way the tide was turning. I hope this means we might start a worthy friendship?'

The Emperor nodded.

The real shock of the vote was the one elector that voted against Franz – Maximillian von Konigswald. Franz didn't let it bother him. The electors moved from the Volkshalle to the Imperial throne room, where the rest of the gathered nobles awaited the official coronation.

The ceremony was long and full of pomp; Franz could not bear it. Priestly representatives of all the religions in the Empire – from Morr, Taal, Shallya and many more – came before Franz and acknowledged his reign. The nobles of every rank bowed, from elector count to squire of the smallest fief, and from beyond the walls of the palace, cheering could be heard. With news of Todbringer and the Ar-Ulric voting for Franz, the last of the tensions disappeared and a festival atmosphere replaced fear on the streets. The ceremony came to an end when Volkmar placed the sacred warhammer, Ghal Maraz, in the hands of the Prince of Altdorf.

'Arise Emperor Karl Franz!'

The Emperor rose and the court bowed once more.

'You may stand,' bade the Emperor, the court obeyed. 'Elector Count von Konigswald, approach the throne.' The court descended into nervous whispers as the one man who had voted against the Emperor humbly walked out of the crowd and made his way to where Karl Franz stood.

'Yes, your eminence?' he said meekly, as he bowed before the might of the Emperor. Ghal Maraz was lifted and swung. The warhammer went down in a deadly arc and Maximillian keeled over, quite dead. The court descended into uproar.

'Traitor!' shouted some. Todbringer looked agog. The Countess Emmanuelle hid her reaction behind a fan, while a few other ladies of the court made a show of fainting.

'Murdering a political rival? Not on. Not on, I say!' shouted Henry van Hankinhof, a vassal of Graf Alberich. Only Volkmar, and the arch lectors that flanked him, seemed unfazed.

'Calm yourselves!' ordered the Emperor with a voice of iron that demanded to be obeyed. The court went silent. Then Maximillian began to scream. It was not the scream of a mortal man. His prone body started to liquefy and bubble. The former elector count's fingers rolled up the wrong way, and mouths with needle teeth and leering, probing tongues sprouted from the bubbling morass. The court filled with screams again.

'Silence!' This time Volkmar shouted. The crowd fell silent despite the terror unleashed before the throne.

'The Elector Count of Ostland has been dead for a long time,' said the Emperor, even as the thing before him bubbled away, leaving a pile of acid-eaten rags that had previously been von Konigswald's fine raiment. In the centre of the rags was the count's brooch. It shined malignantly at Franz, its shape matching the tattoo on the assassin the Palace grounds. The Emperor stepped forward and brought Ghal Maraz down on the object, destroying it utterly.

'Too many times assassins and thugs knew of my whereabouts. Attempts on my life, my allies' lives, luring orcs into important covenants... It could only be him,' said the Emperor, although only those closest to the throne heard him.

'It is the sign of the Great Deceiver, my Emperor. A god who has many servants. They may not have the vanity of other Ruinous Powers, but their master likes to leave subtle clues. It treats all our lives as a game,' warned the Grand Theogonist.

'Then it is a game we must all play,' said the Emperor. He raised his voice so all could hear. 'Grand Theogonist, take Ghal Maraz away. Lock it safely in the vaults. Although it is my right to wield it as Emperor, I am not worthy of the warhammer until the nation is healed. Already reports come from the south of secessionists that wish to leave us, just as Marienburg did before. They seek to take advantage the discord this election has sewn to secede, but I will not have it!'

He locked eyes with the Elector Count of Nordland.

'We must also put an end to the Norsean raiders. The Celestial College has been helpful in locating where the northmen will appear next. There is much work to do!' With that, the Emperor strode out of the throne room, as the assembled nobles and dignitaries bowed low once more. A raft of servants and close advisers followed in the Emperor's stead.

Emperor Karl Franz paced through the wide corridor of the palace, keen to get to his private chambers and see his wife and young son, Luitpold. The Imperial Chancellor – the same one who had served his father – sprinted after the Emperor, out of breath but desperate to match his sovereign's speed.

'Your eminence, here are the plans for the tour of Reikland,' he said, handing over a scroll.

'There is too much to do here.'

'The people must see their new Emperor,' chided the chancellor. 'It will be a short tour.'

'Very well. Approach Count von Raukov about taking the mantle of Elector Count of Ostland.'

'Very good, your eminence. They're an old Ostland family and were loyal to your father and grandsire.'

'If the other Ostland nobles disagree, then send Schwarzhelm.'

The chancellor nodded his approval, then spoke.

'There is another matter... A blind man awaits an audience.'

'Many people wish an audience with the Emperor. If my father had granted such with every common man, there would have been no time to govern.'

'This person is very convincing – eccentric, even. He, erm... knows things that no man of his station should. He claims to have once been of the Light College. And he brings dire news of movements beyond our borders. Greenskins, dwarfs, even the undead – all are preparing for war.'

The Emperor sighed.

'Very well, I shall see him in my private chambers later. Then we will begin. If our enemies insist on bringing total war to the Old World, then the Empire will be ready!'

Time unknown... – even in the reckoning
of the Imperial Calendar

Teclis was staring into the Pool of Isha. It was an ornate font standing at waist height. Clear water of Ulthuan's rivers was poured into its shallow bowl to create a perfect, horizontal mirror. Teclis' smooth face furrowed at the vision he saw in the crystal water's reflection.

'High Loremaster,' said the slender servant who stood deferentially in the doorway. Teclis looked up from his reverie and beckoned the elf forward. 'We have received a message from the Empire of Men. They have a new sovereign.' The retainer reverently stepped forwards into Teclis' chamber and handed the scroll to the mage. Teclis took it in delicate hands, although those same hands could wield spells that had the power to shatter nations. He quickly read the contents.

'Haven't they only just changed their Emperor?' mused the High Loremaster out loud. 'Emperor Mattheus was it not?' he glanced at the scroll again. 'Well, I am sure we will be called to solve their problems once again. No matter who takes the mantle of the Heldenhammer. Do they still worship the Dragon with Two Tails?'

The servant wasn't sure if this was rhetorical or asked directly. He chanced that he was being called upon to answer, which was fortunate as he had learned the lore of some Old World customs.

'They view it as an omen, master.' Teclis shot him an ill-tempered look. The servant silently cursed the gods of the Cytharai – it had been rhetorical.

'The news is mildly diverting, but not relevant. There are portents far more prevalent that concern me.' Teclis looked into the pool again and saw an image of a swirling maelstrom. He turned to the servant, with urgency in his almond eyes.

'Prepare my ship. We voyage to the City of the Moon.'

- The End -





WWW.TOTALWAR.COM

 /TOTALWAR

 @TOTALWAR

 TOTALWAROFFICIAL

 TOTALWAROFFICIAL



MIS-TWWHOW-BOOK-UK

© Copyright Games Workshop Limited 2017. Warhammer, the Warhammer logo, Old World Edition, GW, Games Workshop, The Game of Fantasy Battles, the twin-tailed comet logo, and all associated logos, illustrations, images, names, creatures, races, vehicles, locations, weapons, characters, and the distinctive likeness thereof, are either ® or TM, and/or © Games Workshop Limited, variably registered around the world, and used under licence. Developed by Creative Assembly and published by SEGA. Creative Assembly, the Creative Assembly logo, Total War and the Total War logo are either registered trademarks or trademarks of The Creative Assembly Limited. SEGA and the SEGA logo are either registered trademarks or trademarks of SEGA Holding Co., Ltd. or its affiliates. All rights reserved. SEGA is registered in the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. All other trademarks, logos and copyrights are property of their respective owners. AMD, the AMD Arrow logo, Radeon and combinations thereof are trademarks of Advanced Micro Devices, Inc.