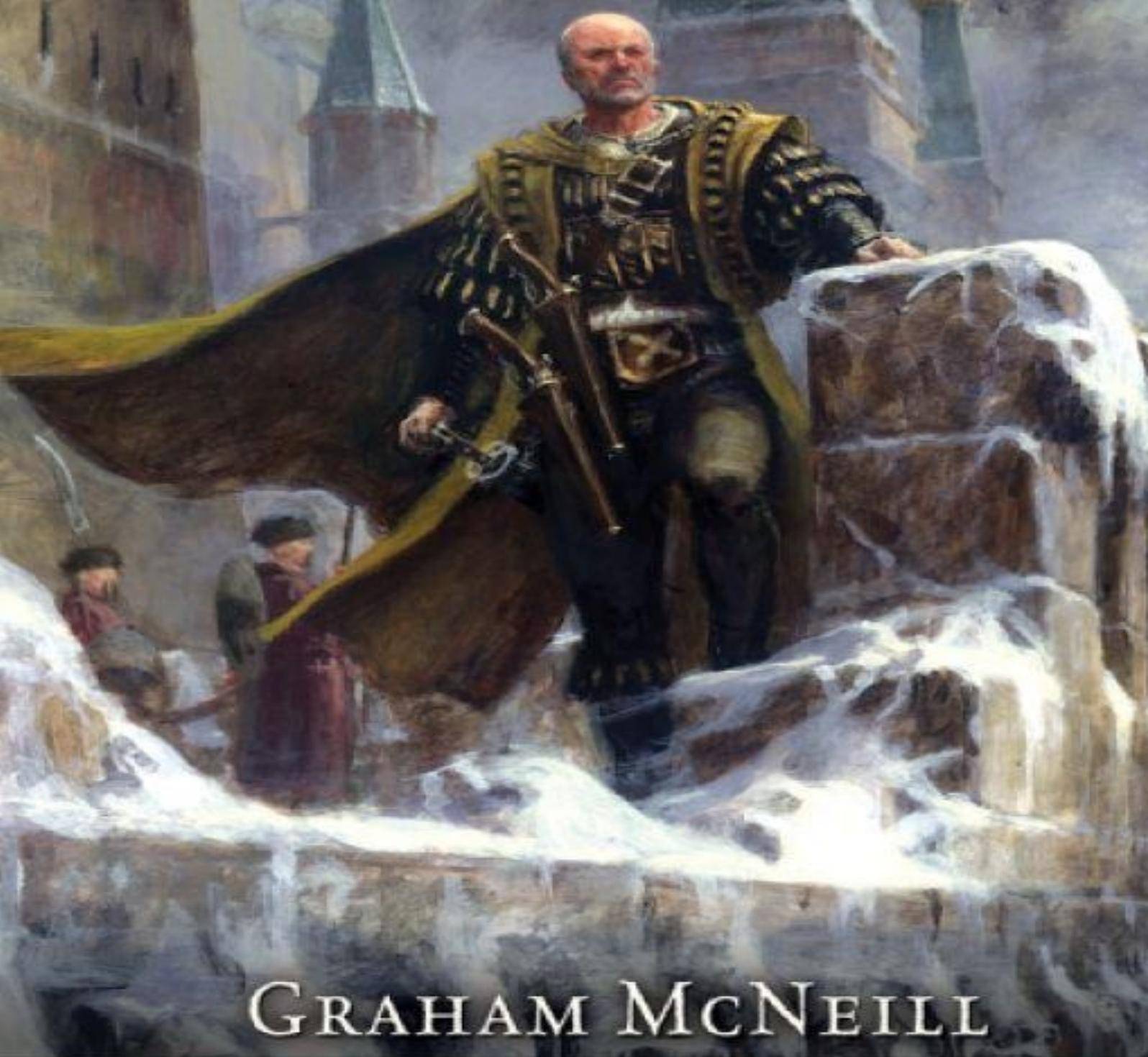


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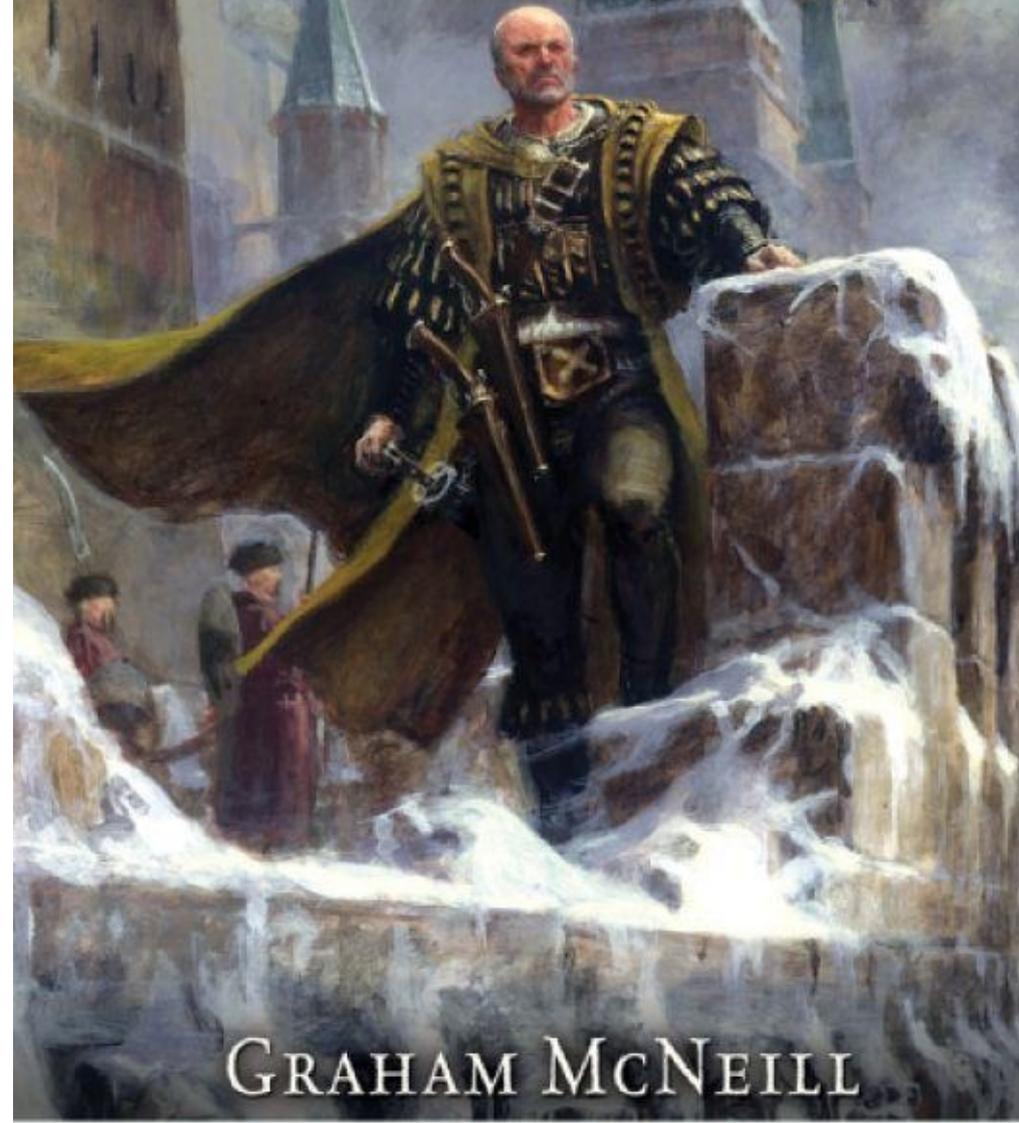


**GRAHAM MCNEILL**

*'Great characters, truck loads of intrigue and an amazing sense of pace.'* – Enig

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A WARHAMMER NOVEL

# THE AMBASSADOR

GRAHAM MCNEILL



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This is a dark age, a bloody age, an age of daemons and of sorcery. It is an age of battle and death, and of the world's ending. Amidst all of the fire, flame and fury it is a time, too, of mighty heroes, of bold deeds and great courage.

At the heart of the Old World sprawls the Empire, the largest and most powerful of the human realms. Known for its engineers, sorcerers, traders and soldiers, it is a land of great mountains, mighty rivers, dark forests and vast cities. And from his throne in Altdorf reigns the Emperor Karl Franz, sacred descendant of the founder of these lands, Sigmar, and wielder of his magical warhammer.

But these are far from civilised times. Across the length and breadth of the Old World, from the knightly palaces of Bretonnia to ice-bound Kislev in the far north, come rumblings of war. In the towering World's Edge Mountains, the orc tribes are gathering for another assault. Bandits and renegades harry the wild southern lands of the Border Princes. There are rumours of rat-things, the skaven, emerging from the sewers and swamps across the land. And from the northern wildernesses there is the ever-present threat of Chaos, of daemons and beastmen corrupted by the foul powers of the Dark Gods. As the time of battle draws ever nearer, the Empire needs heroes like never before.





## Spring 2522

### I

Dawn was minutes old and already men were dying. From where he knelt by a smouldering campfire, Kaspar could hear their screams of pain, carried on the cold wind that blew from the valley mouth and silently commended their souls to Sigmar. Or Ursun. Or Olric. Or whatever deity, if any, might happen to be watching over them this bleak morning.

Scraps of mist clung to the ground as the sun weakly climbed through the pale sky, replacing the descending full moon and casting its watery light on the valley as two armies greeted the new day and prepared to slaughter one another. Kaspar stood stiffly, massaging his swollen knee and wincing as his aged bones cracked. He was too old to be sleeping on the ground again and he ached all over from the cold.

Thousands of men filled the valley: pikemen from Ostland, halberdiers from the Ostermark, archers from Stirland, Kossars from Erengard, swordsmen from Praag and scraps of bloodied regiments trapped in Kislev following the massacre at Zhedevka. They roused themselves from their blankets and stirred smouldering fires to life. From where Kaspar stood, he could see perhaps two-thirds of the army, some seven thousand men from the Empire and a further nine thousand from the city of Kislev and its surrounding stanistas. The mist and slope of the land conspired to conceal another six or seven thousand warriors from his sight.

It had been many years since he had commanded soldiers in battle and the thought of sending these brave men to their deaths, many of them barely old enough to shave, brought a familiar sadness and humility.

Hundreds of horses whinnied and stamped their hooves, aggravated by the presence of so many soldiers and the smell of cooking meat around them. Squires calmed their masters' steeds with soft words while Kislevite lancers painted their own mounts' coats with the colours of war and secured feathered banners to the saddles. Black-robed members of the Kislevite priesthood circulated through the army, blessing axes, lances and swords as they went, while priests of Sigmar read aloud from the *Canticle of the Heldenhammer*. Some men claimed to have seen a twin-tailed comet during the night and, while no one was quite sure what kind of an omen it was, the priests were taking it as a sign that the patron deity of the Empire was with them.

Kaspar himself had dreamed of the comet, watching it blaze across the heavens and bathe the land in its divine light. He had dreamed of the Empire wracked by war, its mighty cities cast down and its people exterminated: Altdorf burned in the fires of conquest and the northern fastness of Middenheim drowned in blood, its inhabitants hung by their entrails from the top of the Fauschlag. Barbarous northmen and monstrous beasts that walked on two legs rampaged through the ancient streets of his beloved Nuln, ravaging and burning everything in their path while a young, golden-haired youth, hefting his father's blacksmith's hammers, rose to fight them.

He shook off such melancholy thoughts and made his way through the army. He had slept apart from his comrades, unable to relinquish his guilt and unwilling to share his grief after what he had done at the foot of the *Gora Geroyev* the previous week.

Drays laden with bags of powder and shot plied their way across the muddy ground, sweating muleteers and muscled teamsters struggling to keep them from becoming bogged down. They lurched towards the higher ground where the banners of the Imperial Gunnery School fluttered above massed lines of heavy cannon. Braziers smoked where the gunners waited for the order to fire, and engineers in the blue and red livery of Altdorf plotted ranges for the mortars dug into gabion-edged artillery pits behind the cannon.

Kaspar moved around a dray carrying halberds, billhooks and pike shafts and made his way to where his black and gold banner billowed next to the purple gonfalon of the Knights Panther. His own horse was corralled with those of the knights and was being fed and watered by Kurt Bremen's squire. Kurt himself knelt in prayer with the rest of his knights and Kaspar did not interrupt their devotions, helping himself to a mug of hot tea from a pot steaming above a nearby fire.

Pavel snored beside the fire, his massive frame wrapped in furs, and despite everything that had transpired over the past months, Kaspar felt a surge of affection for his old friend. He sipped the hot tea, wishing that he had some honey to sweeten it with, but smiling at the ridiculousness of such a notion here and feeling the dregs of sleep fade from his head. He cast his gaze north, toward the mouth of the valley where forty thousand northern tribesmen of High Zar Aelfric Cyenwulf's horde also prepared for battle.

'Just like old days, eh?' said Pavel, finally emerging from his bedroll and reaching for a hide skin of kvas. He took a mighty swig and held it up to Kaspar.

'Aye,' agreed Kaspar, swallowing a mouthful of the strong liquor. 'Except we're both twenty years older.'

'Older, yes. Wiser, well, Pavel not know about that.'

'You'll get no argument from me on that score.'

'Do they come at us yet?'

'No,' said Kaspar, 'not yet. But soon they will.'

‘And we send them back north without their balls!’

Kaspar chuckled. ‘I certainly hope so, Pavel.’

---

Silence fell between the old comrades before Pavel said, ‘You think we can beat them?’

Kaspar considered the question for several seconds before saying, ‘No, I do not think we can. There’s just too many of them.’

‘Ice Queen say we will win,’ said Pavel.

Kaspar looked towards the top of the valley sides as the mournful bray of a tribal horn sounded from far away, desperately wanting to believe that the Ice Queen was correct. The mist and smoke from the campsite obscured all but one of the great standing stones that gave this valley its name.

Urszebya. Ursun’s Teeth.

A swelling roar built from the mouth of the valley, guttural chanting from the High Zar’s warriors that echoed in time with the clash of their swords and axes on iron-bossed shields.

The Ice Queen claimed these stones were worth fighting for.

Kaspar just hoped they were worth dying for.



# CHAPTER ONE

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## Six Months Ago

### I

*‘Neither the climate, manners nor diversions of the place suit either my health or temper and the only pleasures I may indulge in are eating and drinking – yet Sigmar knows I have scarce tasted much worse in my time as an ambassador of our noble Emperor than I found here.’*

– Letter to Altdorf, Andreas Teugenheim, former ambassador to the court of the Tzarina Katarina

Kaspar von Velten reined in his bay gelding and stared up at the great walled city of Kislev, unwinding a woollen scarf from around his face. Autumn was barely a month old, yet the day was bracingly chill and his breath misted in the air before him. He knew that winter came early in Kislev and it wouldn’t be long before the hillside the capital sprawled across was locked in its icy grip. A fine, wind-blown rain drizzled from the sullen sky and Kaspar could well understand the dislike of this country’s climate that Ambassador Teugenheim had expressed in his letters.

His deep-set blue eyes had lost none of the brightness of youth, but were set in an expression of tense anticipation, his skin tanned and leather-tough from years of campaigning across the Old World. Beneath his wide brimmed hat, he wore his thinning silver hair close cropped, his beard similarly neat and trimmed. A faded tattoo from his youthful days in the ranks snaked its way from behind his left ear and down his neck.

Sunlight glittered from the spear points and armour of soldiers walking the ramparts of the massive wall, their fur-lined cloaks flapping in the wind. Kaspar smiled as he remembered Teugenheim’s description of the first time he had seen the city in his letters home to Altdorf...

The city rises from the oblast like a jagged spike on the landscape, dominating the countryside around it in a vulgar fashion that only to be expected of this rude nation. The walls are high and impressive to be sure, but how high must a wall be before it becomes unnecessary? It seems that these Kislevites have built their walls higher than any I have ever seen, and the effect is, though impressive, somewhat gauche for my taste.

Kaspar’s trained eye swept the length of the wall and took in the lethal nature of the defences. Machicolations were cunningly wrought within the decorative gargoyles at the wall head and smoke curled lazily upwards from prepared braziers on the ramparts. The precise construction of the protruding towers and gatehouse ensured that every yard of rocky ground before the walls was a killing zone, covered by crossbows and cannon fire.

Teugenheim’s descriptions scarce did the scale of the fortifications any justice and Kaspar knew from bitter experience that an attacker would pay a fearsome toll in blood to breach these walls.

A cobbled roadway wound up the *Gora Geroyev*, the Hill of Heroes, to a wide bridge that crossed a deep ditch and led to a studded timber gate banded with black iron and protected by murder holes in the stone roof.

Though he had fought and led armies in Kislev before, Kaspar had never had occasion to visit the capital city before, but knew good fortifications when he saw them. These walls were amongst the most steadfast defences he had ever laid eyes upon, at least the equal of Nuln or Altdorf. However, unlike either of those cities, Kislev’s walls had a smooth, glassy look to them, as though the stone had vitrified under some intense heat.

Perhaps the most common tale sung by the more prosaic bards and troubadours of the Empire was of the Great War against Chaos, a mythic epic which told that in times past, hordes of the northern tribes had laid siege to this mighty city before being routed by an alliance of elves, dwarfs and men. It was a rousing tale of heroism and sacrifice, which had been embellished wildly over the years. The most common embroidery of the tale, added by its more imaginative tellers, was that the mutating powers of the dark gods had caused the solid stone of the walls to run like molten wax. Most scholars dismissed this as pure fancy, but looking at the walls of this city, Kaspar could only too readily believe every one of those embellishments.

‘Sir?’ came a voice from behind him and Kaspar snapped out of his reverie.

Behind him stood a black, mud-spattered carriage, emblazoned with the golden crest of Nuln. A scowling old man, his skin like craggy mountainside, was seated on the cushioned buckboard holding the horse teams’ reins loosely in his one good hand. Further

back were four covered wagons, their contents and passengers protected by oiled canvas. The drivers shivered in the cold and the horses impatiently stamped the muddy roadway. Huddled miserably on the back of the last two wagons were sixteen young men, the lance carriers and squires of the giant knights in shining plate armour who ringed the small convoy. The knights rode wide-chested Averland steeds, each dressed in embroidered caparisons and not one beast less than sixteen hands high. The armoured warriors wore the threat of their power like a cloak; a potent manifestation of the might of the Empire's armies. They held their heavy lances proudly aloft, purple, gold and lilac pennons attached below the iron tips fluttering in the breeze.

Grilled helmet visors obscured their faces, but there was no doubting the regal bearing of each and every knight. Damp panther pelts were draped across their shoulder guards and both the Imperial standard and Kaspar's personal heraldry flapped noisily in the stiff breeze from a knight's banner pole.

'My apologies, Stefan,' said Kaspar, 'I was admiring the fortifications.'

'Aye, well we should get inside the walls,' said Stefan Reiger, Kaspar's oldest and most trusted friend. 'I'm chilled to the marrow and your old bones don't take well to this cold neither. Why you insist on riding out here when there's a perfectly good carriage is beyond me. Waste of bloody time bringing it, if you ask me.'

The knight riding alongside the carriage turned his head, his displeasure at Stefan's familiarity obvious despite the lowered visor. Many an Empire noble would have had a servant flogged for speaking in such a familiar tone, but Stefan had fought alongside Kaspar for too many years for either of them to put up with such formal nonsense.

'Less of the "old", Stefan, you'll be in the temple of Morr before I.'

'Aye, that's as maybe, but I'm much better preserved. I'm more like a fine Tilean wine – I improve with age.'

'If you mean you become more like sour vinegar, old man, then I'm in total agreement with you. But you're right, we should get inside, it won't be long before it's dark.'

Kaspar dug his heels into the horse's flanks and dragged the reins in the direction of the city gates. The lead knight also spurred his horse, riding alongside Kaspar as they crossed the wide, stone bridge and approached the gate. He raised his helmet guard, revealing a chiselled, patrician face, lined with concern and experience. Kaspar slapped a gloved hand on the knight's shoulder plate.

'I know what you're thinking, Kurt,' said Kaspar.

Kurt Bremen, the leader of the knights, scanned the warriors on the battlements seeing several had trained bows on them, and his frown deepened.

'All I am hoping,' replied Bremen in his clipped Altdorf accent, 'is that none of the soldiers up there have loose bow fingers. How you permit the lower orders to address you is none of my concern. My only priority, Ambassador von Velten, is to see you safely to your post.'

Kaspar nodded, ignoring Bremen's oblique disdain for his current task, and followed his stare. 'You don't think highly of the Kislev soldiery, Kurt? I commanded many of them in battle. They are wild, it's true, but they are men of courage and honour. The winged lancers are the equal of any Empire knightly order...'

Bremen's head snapped round, his lip twisted in a sneer before he realised he was being baited. He returned his gaze to the walls and nodded grudgingly.

'Perhaps,' he allowed. 'I have heard that their lancers and horse archers are fierce, if reckless, warriors, but the rest are lazy Gospodar scum. I'd sooner entrust my flank to a free company.'

'Then you have a lot to learn about the Kislevites,' snapped Kaspar and pulled ahead of the knight. The gates swung wide on well-oiled hinges and Kaspar found himself confronting a man with the longest, bushiest moustache he had ever seen. He wore a threadbare surcoat depicting the bear rampant over a rusted mail shirt and chewed messily on a chicken leg. Behind him stood a detachment of armoured soldiers with crossbows and spears. He cast an appraising eye over Kaspar before sliding his gaze across to the carriage and wagons behind him.

'Nya, doyest vha?' he finally barked, obviously drunk.

'Nya Kislevarin,' said Kaspar, shaking his head.

'Who you?' said the man finally, his Reikspiel mangled and barely intelligible.

Bremen opened his mouth to speak, but Kaspar silenced him with a gesture, dismounting to stand before the gatekeeper. The man's eyes were bleary and red and he had trouble focusing on Kaspar. His breath was foetid and stale.

'My name is Kaspar von Velten, the new ambassador to the court of the Ice Queen of Kislev. I demand you and your men stand back from the gateway and allow my party to enter the city.'

Kaspar pulled a scroll bearing the Imperial eagle pressed into a wax seal from within his doublet and waved it beneath the gatekeeper's veined nose. He said, 'Do you understand me?'

In a brief moment of clarity, the man noticed the knights and the flapping banner and stumbled backwards. He waved a hand vaguely in the direction of the soldiers behind him who gratefully retreated into the warmth of the gatehouse. Kaspar replaced the scroll and swiftly swung back into the saddle. The gatekeeper sketched a drunken salute to him and Kaspar smiled as the man said, 'Good welcome to Kislev.'

## II

Kaspar blinked as he emerged from the darkness of the gateway into Kislev. A cobbled esplanade filled with market stalls and shouting traders lay before him, the air thick with the smell of fish and sound of cursing voices. Three streets led deeper into the

centre, each one similarly choked with people and pack animals. Kaspar inhaled the pungent aroma of the bustling city. The buildings here were well constructed of stone with tiled roofs of clay. The clatter of wagon wheels sounded behind him and he pulled his horse to one side as Stefan drove through the gate.

‘So this is Kislev,’ said Stefan, unimpressed. ‘Reminds me of Marienburg. Too cramped, too noisy and it smells of fish.’

‘You can moan about this posting later, Stefan. I want to get to the embassy before our intoxicated friend sends word ahead.’

‘Pah! That drunken fool probably doesn’t even remember us by now.’

‘Probably not, but it won’t hurt to be sure,’ said Kaspar. He turned in the saddle to address Kurt Bremen and waved his hand at the three streets ahead.

‘You’ve been here before, Kurt. Which is the quickest way to the embassy?’

The leader of the knights pointed up the central street, ‘There. The Goromadny Prospekt leads through the city to Geroyev Square. The embassy is behind the high temple to the wolf god.’

Kaspar laughed. ‘Even in their town planning they thumb their noses at us, putting a Sigmarite nation’s embassy behind Ulric’s temple. Oh, they are sly these Kislevites. Come, let us be on our way. I’m sure Ambassador Teugenheim will be only too happy to see us.’

The wagons and carriage began forcing their way slowly along the Goromadny Prospekt. The streets were thronged with people hurrying about their business, well dressed in warm fur cloaks and woollen colbacks. They were a fierce looking people, saw Kaspar shorter than most folk of the Empire, but they carried themselves proudly. Here and there he could see grim, swaggering figures clad in armour and furs, reminiscent of the Norse raiders who plagued the coastal settlements on the Sea of Claws. Bremen and the knight with the banner pole parted the sea of scowling Kislevites with their giant destriers, Kaspar and the others following behind.

Lining the gutters and street corners limbless beggars were pleading for a few kopecks, and painted whores hawked their wares with weary resignation. The city reeked of desperation and hopelessness. Much like any city in the Old World these days, reflected Kaspar.

The wars of the past year had brought hardship to all corners of the world and forever changed the landscapes of the Empire and Kislev. Whole swathes of the Ostermark, Ostland and southern Kislev had been laid waste by the march of armies, and famine stalked the land like a hungry killer. Following the calamitous defeat at Aachden, tens of thousands of blood-soaked tribesmen had invested the Empire city of Wolfenburg. The hopes of Kaspar’s nation now rested on this grand northern city holding out until winter when the enemy army would freeze and starve. Should it fall before then, the road south to Altdorf would be wide open.

Hordes of refugees, thousands strong, were fleeing south from the armies of the northmen and entire communities were now little more than ghost towns. These were harsh times to be sure, but there was something else as well – an undeniable tension that had nothing to do with the drums of war, as though people did not wish to linger outside any longer than they must. Strange...

A flash of colour further up the street drew his gaze and he saw a gleaming dark green carriage coming from the opposite direction. The design was old fashioned but regal and Kaspar noticed that the Kislevites happily moved clear of this vehicle’s path without the grumbling that accompanied his own passage. The lacquered door bore a crest depicting a crown encircling a heart and as the carriage passed, Kaspar caught a glimpse of a woman with raven black hair through the open window. She nodded towards Kaspar and he craned his neck to follow her carriage as it travelled the way they had just come. Soon it was lost to sight, turning a corner to follow the line of the city walls.

He turned his attention back to the street, wondering at the identity of the woman, and sharply pulled back on the horse’s reins as a black-robed figure leapt in front of him. The man’s garb marked him as one of the Kislev priesthood and his face was lit with an expression of lunacy that Kaspar liked not at all. He touched the brim of his hat respectfully and pulled the horse left to move round the man, but he stepped into Kaspar’s way once more. Not wanting any trouble with the local church, Kaspar forced a smile and pulled his horse away again. Once more the priest moved to block his path.

‘You will be judged!’ he yelled hoarsely. ‘The wrath of the Butcherman shall fall upon you! He will cut out your heart for a sweetmeat and your organs will be a banquet for his delight!’

‘Ho there, fellow,’ snapped Kurt Bremen, riding in front of Kaspar. ‘Be about your business. We don’t have time to dally with the likes of you. Go on now!’

The priest pointed a long, dirt-encrusted finger at the knight. ‘Templar of Sigmar, your god cannot help you here,’ he sneered. ‘The Butcherman’s blade will open your belly just as easily and his teeth will tear the flesh from your bones!’

Bremen drew his sword partly from its scabbard, showing the dirty-faced priest the gleaming blade meaningfully. The man spat the ground in front of Bremen and turned tail, sprinting nimbly away from the knight. The crowd soon swallowed him up and Bremen let his sword slide back into the scabbard. ‘Mad,’ he said.

‘Mad,’ agreed Kaspar and rode on.

The Goromadny Prospekt was a long street, running through the city for almost half a mile, an industrious place where all manner of business was conducted. Stallholders yelled at passers-by as footpads sprinted from their pursuing victims and fur clad citizens travelled back and forth. Most of the men sported shaven heads with some form of elaborate topknot and long, drooping moustaches while the women wore simple woollen dresses with richly embroidered shawls and furred colbacks.

Eventually the street widened into a tavern-lined boulevard, thronged with carousing men who sang martial songs and waved long axes. As Kaspar and his entourage passed, the songs swelled to new heights, the axes brandished threateningly towards the knights. The boulevard continued to widen until it opened into the granite-flagged centre of the city, Geroyev Square. Hulking iron statues of long-dead tzars edged its perimeter, and forming the square were ornate buildings of red stone with high peaked roofs crowned with onion domed towers and narrow windows.

But as spectacular as the buildings around the edge of the square were, they were but pale shadows of the mighty structure that dominated the far side, the palace of the Tzarina, the Ice Queen Katarin the Great. The mighty fortress rose in tier upon tier of white stone towers and colourfully festooned battlements that reached their pinnacle as a great golden dome. Its beauty was breathtaking, like a vast ice sculpture rising from the ground, and Kaspar felt a new respect for the Kislevites. Surely a people that could build such beauty could not all be savages?

Dragging his attention back down to earth, he guided his horse towards the temple of Ulric, a massive edifice of white stone adorned with statues of fierce wolves that flanked the black wooden doors. Knots of bearded, black robed priests stared at them with quizzical glances from its steps.

In the grassed centre of the square a wide corral had been set up with scores of ponies being walked in circles before a baying crowd of prospective buyers. These were plains ponies, sturdy beasts that thrived in the harsh climate of Kislev, but were slower on the gallop than the grain fed horses of the Empire. Even at this distance Kaspar could see that many were sway-backed. He gave none more than six months of useful life.

A narrow street ran along the side of the wolf god's temple, the buildings to either side shrouding it in darkness.

Kaspar waited until his carriage and wagons caught up to him before heading down the deserted looking street. It led into a wide courtyard with a bronze fountain at its centre, a patina of green covering its every surface. A dirty brown liquid gurgled from a small angel's cup, filling the fountain's bowl.

Behind the aged fountain and a rusted iron fence was the embassy of the Empire.

Having read Ambassador Teugenheim's letters on the journey from Nuln, Kaspar had expected the embassy to appear somewhat run down, but nothing had prepared him for the state of neglect and air of abandonment he saw before him now. The building's windows were boarded up with lengths of timber, the stonework cracked and broken, and illegible Kislevite graffiti was daubed across the doors. Were it not for the two guards lounging on halberds, Kaspar would have thought the building deserted.

'Sigmar's hammer!' swore Bremen, appalled at the embassy's appearance. Kaspar could feel his fury mounting towards Andrea Teugenheim, the man he was to replace. To have allowed an outpost of the Emperor to fall into such a state of disrepair was unforgivable. He rode through the sagging, open gate and as he approached the building, he saw the guards finally register his presence. Kaspar took no small amount of satisfaction from the look of alarm on their faces as they saw the Knights Panther and the Imperial banner fluttering behind him.

Had he not been so angry, he would have laughed at their pathetic attempts to straighten their threadbare uniforms and come to attention. They probably wouldn't yet realise who he was, but must know that anyone distinguished enough to merit an Imperial banner and sixteen Knights Panther for an entourage was clearly a man not to be trifled with.

He halted before the door and nodded towards Kurt Bremen who dismounted and approached the fearful guards. The knight's face was set in a granite-hard expression as he cast his critical eye over the two men.

'You should be ashamed of yourselves,' he began. 'Look at the state of your weapons and armour. I should put you on a charge right now!'

Bremen snatched one of the halberds and tested its nicked and dull edge with his thumb. Blunt.

He held the weapon in front of the guard and shook his head.

'If I were to try and enter this building, how would you stop me?' he bellowed. 'With this? You couldn't cut your way through an Altdorf fog with this edge! And you, look at the rust on that breastplate!'

Bremen spun the halberd and jabbed the butt of the weapon hard against the man's chest. The breastplate was rusted through and cracked like an eggshell.

'You men are a disgrace to the Empire! I shall be having words with your commanding officer. I am relieving you of duty as of this moment.'

The guards withered under his verbal assault, eyes cast down. Bremen turned to his knights and said, 'Werner, Ostwald, guard the door. No one enters until I say so.'

Kaspar dismounted and stood beside Bremen. He jabbed a finger at one of the guards and said, 'You. Take me to Ambassador Teugenheim immediately!'

The man nodded hurriedly and opened the embassy door. As he scurried through, Kaspar turned to Kurt Bremen and said, 'You and Valdhaas come with me. Leave the rest of the men here with the wagons. We have work to do.'

Bremen relayed the orders to his knights and followed Kaspar and the guard inside.

### III

The interior positively reeked of abandonment, the embassy's air of neglect and emptiness even stronger now they were inside. The timber-panelled walls were bare of hangings and the floorboards were discoloured where carpeting had obviously been ripped up. The guard reluctantly ascended a wide staircase that led to the next storey with Kaspar, Bremen and Valdhaas following behind. The man was sweating profusely. Kaspar noted, his every movement furtive and nervous. Like the ground floor, the second level of the embassy had been stripped of furnishings and decoration. They walked along a wide corridor, footsteps loud on the bare boards until finally arriving at an ornately carved door.

The guard pointed at the door and stammered, 'This is the ambassador's study. But he... well, he has a guest. I'm sure he'd rather not be disturbed.'

‘Then this really isn’t his day,’ snapped Kaspar, twisting the handle and pushing the door open. He entered a room as plushly furnished as the rest of the building was empty. One wall was dominated by a huge oaken desk and drinks cabinet while on another a log fire blazed in a marble fireplace before two expansive leather chairs. Seated in the chairs were two men, one of whom was obviously a Kislevite, with a drooping moustache and swarthy complexion. He was enjoying a snifter of brandy and a cigar and regarded Kaspar and the knights with only mild interest. The second man, whip-thin and dressed in a red and blue doublet sprang from his seat, his face a mask of forced bluster.

‘Who in the name of Sigmar are you?’ he demanded in a reed-thin voice. ‘What the devil are you doing in my private chambers? Get out, damn your eyes, or I shall call for my guards!’

‘Go ahead, Teugenheim,’ said Kaspar calmly, ‘for all the good it will do you. I doubt one in ten of them has a weapon that wouldn’t shatter on the armour of these knights here.’

Bremen stepped forward, resting his hand on his sword hilt. Ambassador Teugenheim blanched at the sight of the two fully armoured knights and the pelts over their shoulders. He stole a glance at the seated man and licked his lips.

‘Who are you?’

‘I’m glad you asked,’ said Kaspar, holding out the same wax sealed scroll he had earlier shown to the gatekeeper. ‘My name is Kaspar von Velten and this will explain everything.’

Teugenheim took the scroll and broke open the seal, quickly scanning the contents of the document. He shook his head as he read, his lips moving soundlessly.

‘I can go home?’ he wheezed slowly, sinking into the leather seat.

‘Yes. You’ve been recalled to Altdorf and should leave as soon as your effects can be gathered together. There are dark times coming, Andreas, and I don’t think you’re up to facing them.’

‘No,’ agreed Teugenheim, sadly. ‘But I tried, I really did...’

Kaspar noticed that Teugenheim kept throwing mournful glances towards the seated figure and turned his attention to the large man, asking, ‘Sir, would you be so good as to give me the pleasure of your name?’

The man rose from the chair and Kaspar suddenly realised how huge he was. The man was a bear, broad shouldered and slab muscled. His gut was running to flab, but his physical presence was undeniable. Bremen moved closer to Kaspar and stared threateningly at the man, who grinned indulgently at the knight.

‘Certainly. I am Vassily Chekatilo, a personal friend of ambassador.’

‘I am the ambassador now and I have never heard of you, Chekatilo. So unless you have some business with me, then I’m afraid I’ll have to ask you to leave.’

‘You talk big for a little man,’ rumbled Chekatilo. ‘Especially when you have shiny soldiers with you.’

‘And you are a fat man who doesn’t understand simple requests.’

‘Now you are insulting me,’ laughed Chekatilo.

‘Yes,’ said Kaspar, ‘I am. Do you have a problem with that?’

Chekatilo grinned and leaned in closer, ‘I am not man who forgets insults, von Velten. I can be good friend to those who remember that. It would be foolish of you to make enemy of me.’

‘Are you threatening me in my own embassy?’

‘Not at all... ambassador,’ smiled Chekatilo, draining the last of his brandy and taking a huge draw on his cigar. He blew the smoke into Bremen’s face and laughed as the knight spluttered in the blue cloud. He dropped the cigar butt and crushed it into the carpet with his boot.

Kaspar stepped closer to Chekatilo and hissed, ‘Get out of my embassy. Now!’

‘As you wish,’ said Chekatilo. ‘But I warn you, I am powerful man in Kislev. You do well not to forget that.’

Chekatilo pushed past Kurt Bremen towards the door and sketched a mocking salute to him before departing with a derisory laugh. Kaspar fought down his anger and turned to Valdhaas, pointing at Teugenheim.

‘Escort Ambassador Teugenheim to his chambers and have your squires assist him in packing his effects. He will remain here until we can arrange his transport back to Altdorf.’

The knight saluted and indicated that Teugenheim should follow him.

Teugenheim rose from his chair and said, ‘I don’t envy you this posting, von Velten. This place is a haven for beggars and thieves, and there are so many excesses and disorders that after sunset nobody dares venture abroad without sufficient company.’

Kaspar nodded and said, ‘It is time for you to go, Andreas.’

Teugenheim smiled weakly, ‘As the lord Sigmar wills it,’ and followed the Knight Panther from the room.

Kaspar slumped down in one of the chairs and rubbed his forehead with both hands. Bremen stood beside the fireplace and removed his helm, tucking it in the crook of his arm.

‘Now what, ambassador?’

‘We get this place back on its feet and make it a post worthy of the Empire. War is coming and we must be ready for it.’

‘Not an easy task.’

‘No,’ agreed Kaspar, ‘but that’s why they sent me here.’

Night was falling as Kaspar put aside his quill and carefully reread the words he had just written. Judging the tone to be erring on the correct side of caution he dusted sand over the ink before folding the letter carefully and sealing it with a blob of red wax. He pressed a stamp with the imprint of a twin-tailed comet into the soft wax and set the letter to one side.

He pushed back the chair, rising stiffly from behind the desk and walking to the window to stare down into the street below. Tomorrow one of the Knights Panther would deliver his missive to the Winter Palace, requesting an audience with the Ice Queen and the opportunity to present himself with a formal introduction. He just hoped that whatever damage Teugenheim had done in his time as ambassador would not prejudice the Tzarina against him.

His exact knowledge of what had gone on in Kislev was limited, though, given the state of the embassy and its emptied coffers, seemed clear that Chekatilo had been extorting Teugenheim or otherwise blackmailing him. Andreas Teugenheim should never have been appointed to Kislev, it was a war posting and the man had neither the temperament nor the strength for such a position.

With armies on the move throughout the Old World, men of courage and steel were needed to fight the coming battles, and the powers that be in the court of Altdorf had decided that Teugenheim had neither. The first blow of any real invasion of the Empire would have to come through Kislev and thousands of his countrymen would soon be marching north towards this desolate, wind-blown country. Men who understood war would be needed to ensure that they were able to fight alongside the Kislevites and Kaspar knew his years of service in the armies of Karl-Franz made him an ideal candidate for this posting. Or at least he hoped he did. The art of war he could understand, but the subtleties and etiquette of courtly life were a mystery to him.

Years before, Kaspar's wife, Madeline, had made sure he was a regular visitor to the royal court at Nuln. She understood better than he the value of the Countess-Elector Emmanuelle von Liebewitz's patronage and, despite his protestations, dragged him to even one of her legendary masked balls and parties. His tales of battle and life on the campaign trail always thrilled the effete courtiers and made him a popular, if reluctant, guest at the palace.

After Madeline's death he'd withdrawn from court society, spending more and more time alone in a house that suddenly seemed much bigger and emptier than before. Invites to the palace continued to arrive at his door, but Kaspar attended only those functions he absolutely had to.

But his reputation had spread further than he knew, and when the summons to the countess's palace had come, and the courtiers from Altdorf had offered him this posting, he knew he could not refuse it.

Kaspar had left for Kislev within the week.

He sighed and drew the heavy curtains across the window, moving towards the crackling fire in the hearth.

The tremendous crash of the door slamming open startled him from his melancholic reverie and he spun, reaching for his sword. A hulking figure with an enormous grey beard filled the doorway, carrying a bottle of clear liquid in one hand. He stepped into the room and placed the bottle on the table next to the leather chairs.

'By Tor!' he rumbled, 'I am told that we have new ambassador here, but no one tells me he is so ugly!'

'Pavel!' laughed Kaspar, as the man strode towards him. The giant pulled him into a crushing bear hug and laughed heartily.

Kaspar slapped his old friend's back and felt immense relief wash through him. Pavel Korovic, a fellow campaigner from his days in the army, released him from the embrace and cast his gaze over Kaspar. A savage warrior, Pavel had been a great friend to Kaspar during the northern wars and had saved his life more times than he could remember.

'Perhaps you look less ugly when I am drunk, yes?'

'You're already drunk, Pavel.'

'Not true,' protested the giant. 'I only drink two bottles today!'

'But you'll drink more won't you?' pointed out Kaspar.

'So? When I rode into battle I had drunk many bottles before we fight!'

'I remember,' said Kaspar, picking up the bottle. 'Did your lancers ever fight sober?'

'Fight sober! Don't be foolish, man!' roared Pavel, snatching the bottle back from Kaspar. 'No Dolgan ever went into battle sober. Now we drink kvas together, like old times!'

He yanked the cork free with his teeth, spitting it into the fire, and took a mighty swig of its contents. He passed the bottle to Kaspar.

'It is good to see you again, old friend!'

Kaspar took a more restrained swig and handed the bottle back, coughing.

'Ha!' laughed Pavel. 'You go soft now you not soldier! You cannot drink like old Pavel, eh?'

Kaspar nodded between coughs. 'Perhaps, but at least I'll never be as fat as old Pavel. No horse would take your weight now.'

Pavel patted his round belly and nodded sagely. 'That I give you. But Pavel does not mind. Now Pavel carries the horse instead. But enough! We will go now and drink. You and I have much catching up to do.'

'Very well,' said Kaspar, knowing that he would be in for a night of serious drinking. 'It's not as though there's much I can do here tonight. And anyway, what in Sigmar's name are you doing here? I thought you were going home to the Yemovia stanista to breed horses.'

'Pah! My people, they say I am *lichnostyob*, a lout, and do not want me back! Pavel comes to the city and his uncle Drostyia gets him job in the embassy as reward for his years of loyal service in army. They call me the Kislevite liaison to Imperial ambassador. Sounds impressive, yes?'

'Oh yes, very impressive. What does it actually mean?'

Pavel sneered. 'With that spineless fool Teugenheim, it means I can drink most of the day and get to fall asleep in office rather than smelly tent on steppe. Come! We go and drink at my house. You will be guest until you are rid of Teugenheim!'

Kaspar could see that his old comrade in arms would not take no for an answer. He smiled; perhaps it would be good to catch up with Pavel and relive the old days. Besides, until Teugenheim was gone he had no wish to stay in the embassy and did not relish the prospect of staying in a tavern. He put his arm across Pavel's shoulder.

'Let's go then, old friend. I hope you have more of that kvas at home.'

'Have no fear of that,' Pavel assured him.

## V

Kaspar sipped his kvas as Pavel threw back another glass of the powerful spirit. The lancer's fondness for kvas was legendary and it appeared that the years had not lessened his capacity for the drink. Kaspar could feel the effects of the alcohol already and had been nursing the glass in his hand for the past hour. Two bottles had been emptied and his companion was now roaringly drunk. They sat before the fireplace in Pavel's kitchen, barely five hundred yards from the embassy, the wagons and carriage safely tethered within the courtyard of the townhouse. Stefan had declined Pavel's offer of lodgings, preferring to stay at the embassy where he could be assessing what needed to be done to make it more presentable. With the exception of Valdhaas, who stood guard outside, the Knight Panther had taken quarters at the embassy. Kaspar did not envy the slovenly soldiers billeted there the wrath of Kurt Bremen.

Pavel grinned as he poured another drink and belched. Despite all outward appearances, Kaspar knew that Pavel was a shrewd man indeed. The limited correspondence they had traded in the last few years had indicated that a number of highly lucrative contracts to provide mounts for the Kislevite army had made Pavel Korovic a very wealthy man.

'So, who is this Chekatilo?' asked Kaspar.

Pavel hiccupped and scowled at Kaspar. 'Very bad man,' he said finally. 'Is *nekulturny*, no honour. Is killer and thief, run everything illegal in Kislev. Has many fingers in many things. All must pay his "taxes" or suffer. Fires, beatings. Killed his own brother they say.'

'So what was he doing with Teugenheim then? Were the two of them in league together?'

'With Chekatilo, nothing surprise me. Teugenheim was probably selling off embassy to him to pay off debts. Perhaps ambassador has expensive taste in whores,' suggested Pavel. 'Who knows, maybe Kislev get lucky and the Butcherman will take Chekatilo?'

Kaspar's interest was suddenly piqued. He'd heard the name already. 'Butcherman? Who is he anyway? I had some mad priest raving about him earlier.'

'Another bad one. A madman,' said Pavel darkly. He lit a pipe with a taper from the fire and passed it to Kaspar. 'No one know who the Butcherman is or even if he is man at all. He kills men, women and children then vanishes into shadows. He cuts out victim's heart and eats their flesh. Some say he is an altered, that bodies have flesh melted from bone. He kill many and *Chekist* cannot catch him. A bad one indeed. People are afraid.'

Kaspar nodded, remembering a similar spate of killings in Altdorf some years ago, the so-called 'Beast' murders. But that murderer had eventually been caught and killed by the watchman Kleindeinst.

'How many people have been killed?'

Pavel shrugged. 'Hard to say. Dozens probably, maybe more. But people die all the time in Kislev. Who can say if all are the work of the Butcherman? You should forget about him. He is crazy and will be caught and hanged soon.'

Kaspar drained his glass and slid it across the table towards Pavel. He stood and stretched, saying, 'I don't doubt you're right. Anyway, I'm exhausted and the days ahead are sure to be busy. I have to meet the rest of the embassy staff tomorrow and I would prefer to do that without a hangover. I think I'll call it a night.'

'You do not want to stay up till dawn and sing songs of war! You are soft now, Kaspar von Velten!' laughed Pavel, gulping down his kvas.

'Maybe, Pavel, but we're not the young men we were,' said Kaspar.

'Speak for yourself, Empire man. Pavel will drink the rest of bottle and sleep beside the fire.'

'Goodnight Pavel,' said Kaspar.



# CHAPTER TWO

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## I

Kaspar shook his head in exasperation at the sight before him. Thirty soldiers dressed in the blue and red livery of Altdorf stumbled staggered and lurched towards him, their breath ragged and uneven.

Despite the chill air, their faces were streaked with sweat, red and burning as they completed their fifth circuit of the walls of Kislev. The Knights Panther had finished almost a full hour earlier and stood to attention beside Kaspar and Pavel's horses, barely having even broken a sweat.

'Not an impressive sight,' commented Pavel needlessly.

'No,' agreed Kaspar, his voice low and threatening. 'These soldiers wouldn't last half a day in the ranks. One skirmish and they would be food for the crows.'

Pavel nodded and took a huge draw on an evil-smelling cheroot, blowing a filthy blue cloud of smoke skyward. 'Not like before eh?'

Kaspar allowed himself a tight smile. 'No, Pavel, not like before. The men we fought alongside were ten feet tall and could smite an army with one blow of a halberd! These sorry specimens would have a hard job lifting a halberd, let alone swinging one.'

'Aye,' laughed Pavel, taking a swig from a leather canteen. 'Often I wonder what became of those men. Do you see anyone from the old days?'

'I exchanged a few letters with Tannhaus for a time, but I heard later that he got himself killed when he joined a mercenary company that set off for Araby.'

Pavel took another drink. 'That is shame. I liked Tannhaus, he could fight like a devil and knew how to take drink.'

'The damn fool was in his fifties,' snapped Kaspar. 'He should have bloody well known better than to go off glory hunting at his age. War is a young man's game, Pavel. It's not for the likes of us now.'

'By Olric, you are in a sour mood today, Empire man!' muttered Pavel, offering the canteen to Kaspar. 'Here, take a drink.'

Without taking his eyes from the exhausted soldiers, Kaspar took the proffered canteen and took a swig. He'd swallowed a huge mouthful before he realised the canteen contained kvas and was bent almost double by the powerful spirit. His gullet burned with liquid fire and he coughed, his eyes watering.

'Damn it, Pavel!' swore Kaspar. 'What the hell are you doing? It's not even midday!'

'So? In Kislev is good to drink early. It make rest of day not seem so bad.'

Scowling, Kaspar wiped the back of his hand across his mouth and said, 'As a favour to me, try and keep sober, yes?'

Pavel shrugged and took back the canteen, but said nothing as the embassy soldiers finally reached them, collapsing in utter exhaustion. Kaspar could feel his already foul mood darkening even more. That his predecessor could have allowed his soldiery to lapse into such a disgraceful state was unbelievable and, given the choice, Kaspar would have sent every one of them back to the Empire.

However, under the circumstances that was not an option. Kurt Bremen had assured him that he could whip them into shape and had spent the week since they had arrived in Kislev doing just that. Resplendent in his shining plate armour, panther pelt draped impressively around his shoulders, Bremen strode through the panting guards, his face like thunder.

'Call yourselves soldiers!' he roared. 'I've known serving wenches with more stamina than you lot! An hour in the battleline and you'd be begging the enemy to gut you!'

At least the soldiers had the decency to look ashamed, noted Kaspar. Perhaps there were still some amongst them who might yet be worthy of the Emperor's uniform.

'My knights completed this jaunt in full armour and not one of them has a face as red as a Tilean's arse.'

'We ain't done any training in nigh on a year,' complained a reedy voice from amongst the soldiers.

'That's plain to see,' snapped Bremen. 'Well, that laziness stops now. I'm in charge of you and I swear that you men are going to hate me more than you've ever hated anyone before.'

'We're already there,' came another voice.

Bremen smiled, but there was nothing reassuring in his expression.

'Good,' he snarled. 'Then we've begun. I will break you down to nothing, cause you pain until you plead with me to kill you just to put you out of your misery. But I won't. I'll break you and then build you back up into the best damn soldiers under the Emperor's command.'

Kaspar turned his attention to the city walls as he heard laughter drift down from the ramparts looking out over the hillside. Groups of Kislevite soldiers lounged on the wall head and clustered around smoking braziers, laughing and pointing at the Empire soldiers' exertions.

Kaspar was damned if he would allow this mockery to go unanswered. He raked his spurs back, startling the gelding, and

cantered forward past Bremen then pointed towards the walled city of Kislev.

He unwound the scarf from around his neck, his breath feathering in the air as he spoke. 'You see those men on the walls?' Kaspar began. He did not raise his voice, but every one of the soldiers recognised the years of authority it contained. He swept his hand in a gesture along the length of the wall saying, 'These Kislevites are warriors! They live in a land constantly threatened by creatures from your worst nightmares. They must be ready at a moment's notice to fight and win. And right now they are laughing at you!'

Kaspar wheeled his horse, walking the beast through the mob of soldiers. 'And they are right to laugh, because you are all pathetic, worthless pieces of shit that I wouldn't piss on even if you were on fire! You are the worst soldiers that I have ever commanded and as Sigmar is my witness, I will not be shown up by your shortcomings.'

Angry scowls met Kaspar's words, but the new ambassador was not finished yet. 'You are all this and more,' continued Kaspar, 'but that is what you are *now*. What you will *become* is something much more than that. You are soldiers of the Emperor Karl-Franz and you are my men, and together we will become something to be proud of. Ambassador Teugenheim allowed you to forget that you are soldiers of the Emperor. But he is gone now, and I am in charge. I will not let you forget!'

Kaspar turned his horse again as a coarse, heavily accented voice sneered, 'Things was just fine 'till you showed your face.' He looked down to see a man whose muscle had long since been replaced by flab and whose features bore all the hallmarks of a lifetime's abuse of alcohol. His bearded face was twisted in an ugly mask of contempt, hands planted confrontationally on his hips. Kaspar knew his type; he'd met countless variations of the same personality in his life as a soldier.

He swung smoothly from the saddle and landed lightly on the muddy ground, handing the reins to Kurt Bremen and walking coolly towards the man. More of the soldiers rose to their feet, some placing themselves close to the bearded man, others deliberately keeping their distance. Kaspar recognised the criticality of this moment; he could win or lose the men here in an instant. Kurt Bremen also realised this and moved to stand behind Kaspar, but the ambassador waved him back. He must do this alone.

'What's your name?' hissed Kaspar, taking the measure of the man before him.

He was a big man, but out of shape, with great, meaty hands that Kaspar knew would hit like anvils.

'Marius Loeb,' replied the man, breath sour with last night's rotgut.

Loeb folded his arms across his chest. Kaspar could see that the man was confident in the support of the soldiers at his back. The man had it easy here at the embassy and he'd be damned if this old man was going to get in the way of that.

'Loeb....' mused Kaspar, casting his gaze across the rest of the soldiers. 'Yes, Herr Korovic has told me of you.'

Pavel smiled and raised his canteen in a friendly gesture as his name was mentioned and Kaspar continued, 'You are a drunk, a thief, a bully and a lazy, good-for-nothing piece of horse dung. You will be gone from here by morning.'

Loeb's face flushed and his eyes blazed in self-righteous fury. Kaspar saw the punch coming before it was halfway. He stepped forward and pistoned his fist into Loeb's face, a short, hard, economical boxer's punch, and Loeb's nose cracked audibly under the impact. The big man reeled, blood pouring from the centre of his face, but to Kaspar's astonishment, he remained on his feet. Snarling, he launched himself forwards, his massive rock-like fists swinging. Kaspar sidestepped and launched a jab into Loeb's gut before delivering a thunderous right cross to his jaw.

The big man staggered, but kept coming, aiming a wild punch at Kaspar's head. The blow was poorly aimed, but caught Kaspar across the temple. Lights exploded before his eyes. He rolled with the punch and moved in close, thundering a vicious series of jabs into Loeb's mashed features. Blood and teeth flew from the man's jaw as soldiers gathered round the combatants, shouting encouragement to both fighters equally.

Kaspar was tiring and he knew that this was getting out of hand. He had hoped to put Loeb down with one well-aimed punch, but the man just wouldn't give up. Under other circumstances that would have been an admirable trait in a soldier, but now...

Loeb's eye was swollen and blood poured down his face. He was practically blind now, but that didn't seem to impair him much. He roared and aimed a kick between Kaspar's legs. The ambassador stepped aside and hammered his elbow into the man's cheek, feeling bone break under the impact. Loeb's eyes glazed over and he collapsed to his knees before falling face first to the mud.

Kaspar stepped back and massaged his knuckles where the skin had broken.

He stared directly at the few men who had stood behind Loeb and said, 'Get that fat piece of filth back to the embassy and stitch up his wounds. He goes back to the Empire tomorrow.'

As his compatriots bent to pick up the unconscious Loeb, a young soldier stepped forward and said, 'Sir?'

Kaspar placed his hands behind his back and marched to stand before the young man who had spoken. He was perhaps twenty, slim with an unruly shock of dark hair and finely chiselled features.

'Who are you then? Another troublemaker?' asked Kaspar.

'Leopold Dietz, sir, from Talabecland,' replied the young soldier, staring at a point over Kaspar's shoulder. 'And no, sir, I ain't a troublemaker. I just wanted you to know that we ain't all like Loeb. There's some good lads here, and we can be better than we's been so far. A lot better.'

'Well, Leopold Dietz, I hope you're correct. It would be a shame if I had to crack some more skulls today.'

'That it would, sir,' agreed Leopold with a wry grin. 'Not all of us have got glass jaws like big Loeb.'

Kaspar laughed and said, 'I'm glad to hear that, son. Because I need tough soldiers doing their best.'

He turned away from Dietz and pointed towards the soldiers struggling towards the gates with the giant Loeb.

'That man...' began Kaspar, 'was a cancer. He infected every man here with the desire to do less than he was capable of, less than his duty demanded. That cancer has been cut out and from now on, things will be done in a proper manner, as befits a garrison of the Emperor's soldiers. I am a hard man, but a fair one and if you prove to me that you are worthy of this post, then I shall see you

rewarded for that.'

Kaspar turned back to the scowling Kurt Bremen. He could see the Knight Panther did not approve of his methods, but having come from the ranks himself, he knew there was only one way to earn the respect of the common soldiers. He took the gelding's reins from Bremen and, hooking his foot into the stirrup, swung onto its back.

Pavel leaned in close and whispered, 'Your first punch was good, but you go too easy on him I think. You forget all Pavel teach you about gutter fighting? Eyes and groin. Go for his, protect your own.'

Kaspar smiled weakly, clenching and unclenching his fist. Already he could feel his fingers stiffening and knew that the skin would soon be colourfully bruised.

'Big man almost had you with punch to head,' commented Pavel. 'Perhaps you are right. Perhaps you are too old for soldiering.'

'Aye, he was a tough one alright,' acknowledged Kaspar. He pulled on his black leather riding gloves as Pavel tapped him on the shoulder and nodded in the direction of the city gates, where a trio of horsemen silently observed them.

Kaspar shielded his eyes from the sun and watched the small group as it wound its way down the road towards them. Two bronze armoured knights with bearskin cloaks flanked a thin, ascetic featured man shrouded in a blue cape with a leather colback planted firmly on his head.

'Who's that?'

'Trouble,' grunted Pavel.

Kaspar glanced at Pavel's normally laconic features, apprehensive at the look of hostility that flickered briefly across his face. He indicated to Bremen that he should continue with the soldiers' training and kicked back his spurs.

'Come on then, Pavel. Let's meet trouble head on.'

'The Gospodars have saying, my friend: "Do not seek out trouble. It find you quick enough",' muttered the giant Kislevite as he pulled his overburdened horse after Kaspar's.

The thin man reined in his mount, a bay gelding from the Empire rather than a smaller Kislevite plains pony, which immediately marked him out as a man of means. Unusually for a Kislevite, he was clean-shaven and his lips curled in distaste as his eyes flickered to the unconscious Loeb, telling Kaspar that he had seen the brawl.

The man gave a perfunctory bow to Kaspar, ignoring Pavel, and inquired, 'Do I have the pleasure of addressing Ambassador von Velten?'

Kaspar nodded. 'You do indeed, though you have me at a disadvantage. You are...?'

The man seemed to swell within his voluminous cloak before he answered. He drew himself up and said, 'I am Pjotr Ivanovich Losov, chief advisor to Tzarina Katarin the Great, and I bid you welcome to her land.'

'Thank you, Herr Losov. Now how may I be of service to you?'

Losov produced a vellum envelope, wax-sealed with the crest of the Ice Queen herself, from his cloak and handed it to Kaspar.

'I bring you this,' he said, 'and hope you will be available to attend.'

Kaspar took the envelope and broke the seal, withdrawing an invitation, sumptuously scripted and printed on heavy paper with the royal cipher as a watermark. In gold embossed lettering, Kaspar read that he was cordially invited to be presented to the Tzarina at the Winter Palace tonight.

Kaspar replaced the invitation in the envelope and said, 'Please convey my thanks to the Tzarina and inform her that we will, of course, be honoured to attend.'

Pjotr Losov's brow furrowed in confusion. 'We?' he began, but before he could say any more, Kaspar continued: 'Excellent. My Kislevite liaison and captain of the guards will no doubt enjoy the evening also. I have heard many fabulous tales regarding the splendour of the Winter Palace.'

Losov frowned, but said nothing, realising that to deny Kaspar guests would be a breach of protocol.

'Of course,' replied Losov, casting a look of distaste towards Pavel. 'The Tzarina will be most pleased to receive them also I'm sure.'

Kaspar smiled at the barely concealed sarcasm and said, 'My thanks for your delivery of this invitation, Herr Losov. I look forward to meeting you again this evening.'

'As do I,' replied Losov, doffing his colback to Kaspar and hauling on his horse's reins. He and his escort rode back up the hillside, joining a caravan of wagons and fur-wrapped peasants as they made their way to the city.

Kaspar watched Losov's retreating back and turned to Pavel.

'I take it you two know each other then?'

'We have dealings in past, yes,' confirmed Pavel neutrally, but said no more. Kaspar filed that nugget away for later and raised his eyes to the low autumn sun. It was still bright, but he knew it was already several hours past noon.

'A reception tonight! She might have given us bit more bloody notice. I've been waiting all week for an audience with her!'

Pavel shrugged, his usual enthusiasm returning as Losov vanished from sight. 'It is the Tzarina's way, my friend. Come, we must return to the embassy and prepare. Pavel must make sure you are presentable for Ice Queen.'

Kaspar plucked at his plain grey shirt and cloak and mud-stained boots, realising what a backward peasant he must have looked to the Tzarina's envoy.

'I take it that it would have been bad form to decline this?' asked Kaspar, waving the envelope.

The very idea seemed to horrify Pavel and he nodded vigorously.

'Very bad, yes, very bad. You cannot decline. Etiquette demand that the Ice Queen's invitations take precedence over all other previous engagements. Even duty to the dead must be set aside, for mourning does not release a guest from appearing at a court

ceremony.'

'And the prospect of free food and drink has nothing to do with your steadfast desire that we attend this damned thing...'

'Not at all!' laughed Pavel. 'Pavel just wishes to make sure you do not offend Ice Queen in some way. Were it not already silver Pavel could turn your hair white with tale of last man who displeased the Tzarina. All I say is that it was as well he and his wife already had children!'

'Then let us go, my friend,' grinned Kaspar, walking his horse towards the city gates. 'I have no wish to suffer a similar fate.'

Kaspar glanced back at the soldiers, who had begun jogging around the city walls once more. He noted that Leopold Dietz led from the front, keeping pace with Kurt Bremen and exhorting the others to push harder. He hoped that the young soldier's optimistic words were not so much hot air. He would need soldiers to be proud of in the coming months if his ambassadorship was to be taken seriously.

## II

Kaspar pulled on his long coat and admired himself in the full-length mirror. He wore black britches tucked into grey leather boots and an embroidered white cotton shirt with a severely cut, black frock-coat. Every inch a servant of the Empire, he considered. Despite his fifty-four years, he had tried to keep himself in shape and his body was wiry and lean.

Since the departure of Teugenheim earlier in the week, Kaspar had taken the previous ambassador's quarters as his own, refurbishing it at his own expense. He was not living in the manner to which he was accustomed, but it would do for now.

Returning from the cold outside the city walls two hours ago, he had bathed using a Kislevite herbal soap that had a strange, but not unpleasant aroma, and then shaved, twice nicking the edge of his chin with the knife. It was typical, thought Kaspar, that he could shave most mornings while half asleep and not cut himself, but the moment an important function came up, it was as though he hacked at his skin with a rusty axe blade.

A knock came at his door and before he could respond, Stefan entered the room, a colourful bundle of fabric draped over his good arm. His left arm ended at the wrist, a beastman's axe blade having taken his hand a decade ago.

'What do you think?' asked Kaspar.

'Oh no, no, no!' retorted Stefan, casting a scornful gaze over Kaspar's apparel and rolling his eyes. 'You're not going to a funeral, you damn fool, you're going to be presented to a queen.'

'What's wrong with what I'm wearing?' asked Kaspar, raising his arms and turning to face the mirror again.

'You look like a schoolmaster,' commented Stefan, dropping the bundle of fabric on a chair by the window.

'This is Kislev,' continued Stefan. 'They're a dour enough race without everyone going about in black all the time. Royal events are an excuse for the Kislevites to dress up like peacocks and strut around in all their finery.'

As if to underscore Stefan's words, the door slammed open and Pavel strode into Kaspar's chambers, grinning like a fool and dressed in a riotous mix of silks and velvet. He wore a cobalt-blue doublet and hose, stretched across his wobbling belly, patterned with silver stitching and sequined with glittering stones sewn into the lining. An ermine trimmed cape hung to his knees and his boots were fashioned from a ridiculously impractical white velvet. To complete the ensemble, Pavel had waxed his long grey moustache into extravagant spirals that reached below his chin.

Kaspar's jaw dropped at the sight of his comrade as Stefan nodded in approval.

'That's more like it,' he commented. 'That's how you dress for court in Kislev.'

'Please tell me you're joking,' growled Kaspar. 'He looks like a court jester!'

Pavel's face fell and he folded his arms. 'Better a jester than a priest of Morr, Empire man! I will be most handsome man tonight. Women will weep when they see Pavel!'

'Of that I have no doubt,' commented Kaspar dryly.

Pavel smiled, missing Kaspar's ironic tone, and the next twenty minutes were spent in heated debate as Stefan and Pavel attempted to persuade the ambassador to consider a more colourful selection of clothes. Eventually, a compromise was reached and Kaspar changed into an emerald green pair of britches and, as a concession to his Kislevite hosts, a short scarlet dolman, slashed with gold and trimmed with a border of sable. The short cape hung loosely about his shoulders and felt completely impractical to Kaspar. Too small to provide any warmth and just awkward enough to get in the way while walking, it was typical of the Kislevite aristocracy to design a garment with no practical purpose whatsoever.

At last Kaspar and Pavel descended to the main doors of the embassy to find Kurt Bremen waiting for them, his armour shining like polished silver. The knight was without his sword belt and Kaspar could see how much it chafed him to be unarmed. Bremen looked up at the sound of their approach and Kaspar saw him visibly fight to restrain a smirk at their outlandish attire.

'Not a word,' warned Kaspar as Bremen opened the thick wooden door.

The sky was dark as they emerged into the cold of a Kislev night. It was still early evening, but night had fallen with its customary northern swiftness and the chill cut through Kaspar.

'By Sigmar, these clothes don't hold a scrap of heat,' he growled. He stamped his feet on the cobbles to work in some warmth and set off down the steps to the embassy gates where a lacquered and open-topped carriage awaited them. On the tiny coach-box sat a huge driver with a long beard, wrapped in a vast greatcoat and wearing a square red velvet cap. He clambered down and opened the door and saluted as Kaspar, Pavel and Bremen climbed aboard. He returned to his coach-box and cracked his whip, expertly guiding the carriage back towards Geroyev Square.

The driver managed the trotting horses with a practiced ease, the thread-thin reins held tightly in his hands, and Kaspar had to admit that the carriage was a fine method of travel indeed. The harness, made from a few strips of leather, was scarcely visible, and gave a wonderful look of elegance to the steed, which seemed to run without any restraint beneath the great arched piece of wood above the carriage's collar. Had she still lived, Madeline would have loved to travel like this and for a wistful moment he pictured her riding alongside him through this night.

The carriage streaked across the centre of the square, and their speed slowed as the ground became steeper. The carriage carried them smoothly along the *Urskoy Prospekt*, the great triumphal road, that took its name from the monastery at its beginning, the Reliquary of St. Alexei Urskoy. This massive stone edifice was a sanctuary consecrated to the heroes of Kislev, and the burial-place of the Ice Queen's father, the great Tzar, Rarii Bokha himself.

All the way along, the thoroughfare presented a most animated scene. On either side of the road, more humble vehicles plied for hire, drawn by thick-set cart-ponies and driven by rough-coated peasants who had flocked from the surrounding steppe to escape the advancing armies of the northmen.

The ground grew less steep and before them, upon the crest of the *Gora Geroyev*, stood the palace of the Ice Queen. Kaspar had seen the palace several times in the past week and had been overwhelmed by its majesty, but at night, lit from below by vast, Cathayan lanterns, its beauty was spellbinding.

'It's magnificent,' whispered Kaspar as the driver expertly guided the carriage through the wrought iron gates of the palace grounds, passing between rows of armoured knights with helms crafted in the shape of snarling bears. The sheer scale of the royal palace became even more apparent as they neared, its defences every bit as formidable as the city walls themselves.

Scores of sleds and carriages filed along before them, discharging their fur-wrapped charges at the black wooden gates of the palace and swiftly moving on to make room for others following them. Knights on white horses stood motionless at the entrance, watching as the empty carriages slipped back through the gates and formed a line on the square, their coachmen gathering about huge fires burning in braziers provided for the occasion.

Their driver once again climbed down from his coach-box and silently opened the carriage door. Kaspar and Bremen stepped down, lost in admiration at the palace architect's skill. Pavel pressed a few brass kopecks into the driver's outstretched palm and stood alongside the two men from the Empire, following their gaze around the intricately carved columns and pediment that formed the entrance to the Winter Palace.

'You both look like you have never seen palace before. Let us get inside before we are mistaken for ignorant peasants,' said Pavel, striding towards the palace.

Kaspar and Bremen hurriedly caught up with Pavel, the wooden doors swinging open as they approached, and they stepped through into the palace of the Tzarina of Kislev. No sooner were they inside the marble-floored vestibule than the doors closed behind them.

The vast hall was packed with people, brightly chatting young women and bawdily laughing men.

The great majority of the men were soldiers, young moustachioed officers of every corps, haggard faces grim testimony to the fierce battles being fought in the northern oblast against the hordes of Kurgan warriors. They wore bright surcoats and fur-edged dolmans, their armour obviously hastily repaired, and all carried feathered helmets surmounted by a silver bear with spread paws. Scattered here and there were the commanders of regiments of lancers and horse archers with red breastplates and green tunics, as well as hand gunners wrapped in their long tunics and bristling with silver cartridge cases.

Passing quietly to and fro among the crowd were the Tzarina's liveried pages and maids of honour, dressed in long, ice-blue coats, divesting the guests of their heavy pelisses and carrying silver trays laden with flutes of sparkling Bretonnian wine. Pavel reached out and stopped one of the tray carrying servants, procuring a trio of glasses.

Kaspar accepted one from Pavel and sipped the wine, enjoying the refreshing crispness of the beverage.

'It's like something from a child's fairy tale,' said Kaspar in wonderment.

'This?' scoffed Pavel, with a grin. 'This nothing. Wait until you see Gallery of Heroes, my friend.'

Kaspar smiled, and despite his reservations, found himself caught up in the ebullient mood that appeared to infuse the assembled guests of the Tzarina as they made their way slowly towards a gracefully curved marble staircase.

The procession ascended the long, flower garlanded staircase, lace trains sweeping past the porphyry pillars, gems and diamonds gleaming in the light of gently spinning lanterns wreathed in silk. Many-coloured uniforms passed through the vestibule, the click of sabres and spurs loud on the floor. Slowly the guests ascended between ranks of Kislevite knights chosen from among the most handsome men of the Palace Guard, grand-looking giants, who stood expressionless in their burnished armour of bronze.

A mammoth painting of the Tzarina's father on the back of a monstrous white-furred bear dominated the wall at the head of the stairs and beneath it, Kaspar saw the elegantly dressed form of Pjotr Losov. He wore a long, crimson robe, decorated with swirls of yellow leather and hung with silver tassels.

The Tzarina's advisor spotted him and raised his hand in welcome.

'Be wary of that one,' warned Pavel as they reached the top of the stairs. 'He is snake and not to be trusted.'

Before Kaspar could question Pavel further, Losov swept towards them and shook Kaspar's hand. He smiled and said, 'Welcome to the Winter Palace, Ambassador von Velten. It is good to see you once again.'

'I am honoured to be invited, Herr Losov. The palace is magnificent, I have never seen its like before. Truly it is a marvel.'

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