

**WARHAMMER**

BOOK TWO IN THE VON CARSTEIN TRILOGY

# *Dominion*

STEVEN SAVILE



THE ARMIES OF THE UNDEAD MARCH ON

**WARHAMMER**

BOOK TWO IN THE VON CARSTEIN TRILOGY

# *Dominion*

STEVEN SAVILE



THE ARMIES OF THE UNDEAD MARCH ON

## Table of Contents

[Cover](#)  
[Title Page](#)  
[Warhammer](#)  
[Map](#)  
[Prologue](#)  
[Chapter One](#)  
[Chapter Two](#)  
[Chapter Three](#)  
[Chapter Four](#)  
[Chapter Five](#)  
[Chapter Six](#)  
[Chapter Seven](#)  
[Chapter Eight](#)  
[Chapter Nine](#)  
[Chapter Ten](#)  
[Chapter Eleven](#)  
[Chapter Twelve](#)  
[Chapter Thirteen](#)  
[Chapter Fourteen](#)  
[Chapter Fifteen](#)  
[Chapter Sixteen](#)  
[Chapter Seventeen](#)  
[Chapter Eighteen](#)  
[Chapter Nineteen](#)  
[Chapter Twenty](#)  
[Chapter Twenty-One](#)  
[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)  
[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About The Author](#)

[Legal](#)

[eBook license](#)

A WARHAMMER NOVEL



# DOMINION

Steven Savile



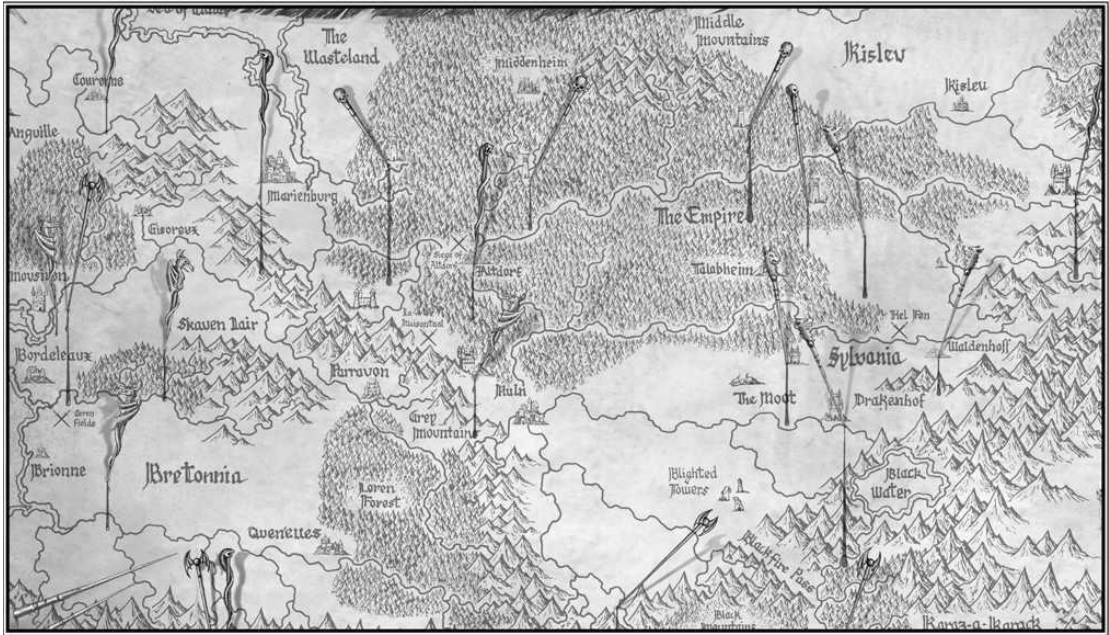
BLACK LIBRARY



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.



# Prologue

## The Eye of the Hurricane

It was desperate.

Kallad Stormwarden knew the tide of the battle had turned. Still, the young dwarf prince stood side by side with his father, matching the gruff dwarf blow for blow as Kellus's axe hewed through the swarm of dead storming the walls of Grunberg Keep. The dwarfs of Karak Sadra had chosen to make their last stand against the Vampire Count together with the manlings.

The walkway was slick with rain.

Kallad slammed the edge of his great axe, Ruinthorn, into the grinning face of a woman with worms where her eyes ought to have been. The blade split her skull cleanly in two. Still the woman came on, clawing desperately at his face. He staggered back a step beneath the ferocity of her attack, wrenching the axe head free. Grunting, he delivered a second, killer blow. The dead woman staggered and fell lifelessly from the wall.

He knuckled the rain from his eyes.

There was no blood and the dead didn't scream. Their silence was more frightening than any of the many horrors on the field of combat. They surged forwards mercilessly as axes crunched into brittle bones, splintering shoulders and cracking skulls. They lurched and lumbered on as arrows thudded into chest cavities, piercing taut skin and powdering it like vellum, and still they came on relentlessly as heads rolled and limbs were severed.

'Grimna!' Kallad bellowed, kicking the woman's head from the wall. His rallying cry echoed down the line as the dead shuffled forwards. Grimna. Courage. It was all they had in the face of death. It was all they needed. Grimna gave them strength while the stubbornness of the mountain gave them courage. With strength and courage, and their white-haired king beside them, they could withstand anything.

There was an air of greatness about Kellus Ironhand. More than merely prowess or skill, the dwarf embodied the sheer iron will of his people. He was the mountain, indefatigable, unconquerable, and giant.

And yet there was a chill worming its way deeper into Kallad Stormwarden's heart.

Only in death did moans escape their broken teeth, but these weren't real sounds. They weren't battlefield sounds. They were sussurant whispers. They weren't human. They weren't alive. They belonged to the gathering storm and they were terrifying in their wrongness.



It didn't matter how hard the defenders fought, how many they killed, they were trapped in a losing battle. The ranks of the undead army were endless, their bloodlust unquenchable.

Bodies surfaced in the moat, rising slowly to the surface, their flesh bloated and their faces stripped away by the leeches that fed on them.

Kallad stared at the tide of corpses as one by one they began to twitch and jerk like loose-limbed puppets, brought violently to life. The first few clawed their way up the side of the dirt embankment. More followed behind them: a seemingly endless swell of death surfacing from beneath the black water.

The futility of fighting hit him hard. It was pointless. Death only swelled the ranks of the enemy. The sons of Karak Sadra would be dining in the Hall of the Ancestors by sunrise.

Kallad slapped the blade of Ruinthorn against his boot and brought it to bear on a one-armed corpse as it lumbered into range. The bottom half of its jaw hung slackly where the skin and muscle had rotted away. Kallad took the miserable wretch's head clean off with a single vicious swing. The fighting was harsh. Despite their greater prowess, the dwarfs were tiring. Defeat was inevitable.

Behind Kallad, someone yelled a warning, and a cauldron of blazing naphtha arced high over the wall, crashing into the ranks of the dead. The fire bit and burned bright as dead flesh seared, tufts of hair shrivelled and bones charred. The pouring rain only intensified the burning, the naphtha reacting violently to the water.

The stench was sickening as the corpses burned.

Kellus brought his axe round in a vicious arc, the rune of Grimna slicing into a dead man's gut. The blow cracked the man's ribcage open. His entrails spilled out like slick loops of grey rope, unravelling in his hands even as he struggled to hold them in. The dead man didn't bleed. His head came up, a look of bewilderment frozen on his features as Kellus put the thing out of its misery.

Kallad moved to stand beside his father.

'There's no better place to die,' he said in all seriousness.

'Aye there is lad, in a bed with a score of grand bairns running around and yapping, and your woman looking down at you lovingly. This here's second best. Not that I'm complaining, mind.'

Three shambling corpses came at them at once, almost dragging Kellus down in their hunger to feast on his brains. Kallad barged one off the walkway and split another stem to sternum with a savage blow from Ruinthorn. He grinned as his father dispatched the third creature. The grin died on his face as down below one of his kin fell to the reaching hands of the dead and was dragged down into the mud of the field where they set about stripping flesh from bone with savage hunger. The dwarf's screams died a moment before he did.

His death spurred the defenders on, firing their blood with a surge of stubborn strength, until the desperation itself became suffocating and closed around their hearts like some black iron fist, squeezing the hope out of them. On the field below, another dwarf fell to the dead. Kallad watched, frozen, as the creatures ripped and tore at his comrade's throat, the fiends choking on his blood in their urgency to slake their vile thirst.

Kallad hawked and spat, wrapping his hands around the thick shaft of Ruinthorn

and planting the axe-head between his feet. The last prince of Karak Sadra felt fear then, with the understanding that his wouldn't be a clean death. Whatever honour he won on the walls of Grunberg Keep would be stripped from his bones by von Carstein's vermin. There would be no glory in it.

The rain intensified, matting Kallad's hair flat to his scalp and running between the chinks in his armour and down his back. No one said it was going to be like this. None of the storytellers talked about the reality of dying in combat. They spun tales of honour and heroism, not mud and rain, and the sheer bloody fear of it.

He turned to his father, looking to draw courage from the old king, but Kellus was shivering against the rain and had the deadened look of defeat in his old eyes. There was no comfort to be drawn from him. The mountain was crumbling. It was a humbling experience, to stand at the foot of the mountain and witness the rock crack and fall, nothing more than scree where once the mountain had stood tall and proud. In that one look Kallad saw the death of a legend at its most mundane.

Kallad looked out across the fields where countless hundreds of the dead shuffled and milled aimlessly among the piles of bones, waiting to be manipulated into the fray, and beyond them the black tents of Vlad von Carstein and his pet necromancers. They were the true power behind the dead, the puppet masters. The corpses were nothing more than dead meat. The necromancers were the monsters in every sense of the word. They had abandoned every last trace of humanity and given themselves to the dark magic willingly.

Kallad watched as five more fiends clawed their way up the wall of the keep to the walkway. Would these be the ones who sent him to the Hall of Ancestors?

'They need you down there,' Kellus said, breaking the spell of the creeping dead. 'Get the women and children out of this place. The keep's fallen and with it the city. I'll have no one dying who can be saved. No arguments, lad. Take them through the mountain into the deep mines. I'm counting on you.'

Kallad didn't move. He couldn't abandon his father on the wall; it was as good as murdering him.

'Go!' King Kellus commanded, bringing his own axe around in a savage arc and backhanding its head into the face of the first zombie. The blow brought the creature to its knees. Kellus planted a boot on its chest and wrenched the axe free. The creature slumped sideways and fell from the walkway.

Still Kallad didn't move, even as Kellus risked his balance to slam a fist into his breastplate, staggering him back two steps.

'I am still your king, boy, not just your father. They need you more than I do. I'll not have their deaths on my honour!'

'You can't win... not on your own.'

'And I've got no intention of doing so, lad. I'll be supping ale with your grandfather come sunrise, trading stories of valour with your grandfather's father and boasting about my boy saving hundreds of lives even though he knew to do so would be damning this old dwarf. Now go lad, get the manlings out of here. There's more than one kind of sacrifice. Make me proud, lad, and remember there's honour in death. I'll see you on the other side.' With that, the old dwarf turned his back on Kallad and hurled himself into the thick of the fight with vengeful fury, his first blow splitting a leering skull, the second severing a gangrenous arm as King Kellus, King of Karak

Sadra, made his last glorious stand on the walls of Grunberg Keep.

More dead emerged from the moat. It was a nightmarish scene: the creatures moving remorselessly up the embankment, brackish water clinging to their skin. Cauldrons of naphtha ignited on the dark water, blue tinged flames racing across the surface and wreathing the corpses. And still they were silent, even as they charred to ash and bone.

The slick black bodies of hundreds of rats eddied across the blazing water, the rodents racing the bite of flame to dry land.

Kallad turned reluctantly and stomped along the stone walkway. He barrelled down the ramp, slick with rain, and skidded to a halt as the screams of women and children tore the night.

Heart racing, Kallad looked around frantically for the source of the screams. It took him a moment to see past the fighting, but when he did, he found what he was looking for: a petrified woman staggering out of the temple of Sigmar. She clutched a young baby in her arms and cast panicked glances back over her shoulder.

A moment later, the bones of one of Grunberg's long dead emerged from the temple. Dust and cobwebs clung to the bones. It took Kallad a moment to grasp the truth of the situation: their own dead were coming up from the dirt and the cold crypts, and were turning on them. Across the city, the dead were stirring. In cemeteries and tombs loved ones were returning from beyond the veil of death. The effect on those left behind would be devastating. To lose their loved ones once was hard enough, but to be forced to burn or behead them to save your own life... few could live through that kind of horror untouched.

It made sense, now that he could see the pattern of the enemy's logic. The necromancers were content to waste their peons in a useless assault on the walls. It didn't matter. They had all the dead they needed *inside* the city already.

The impossibility of the situation sank in, but instead of giving in to it, Kallad cried, 'To me!' and brandished Ruinthorn above his head.

He would make his father's sacrifice worthwhile, and then, when the women and children of Grunberg were safe, he would avenge the King of Karak Sadra.

The terrified woman saw Kallad and ran towards him, her skirts dragging as she struggled through the mud. The baby's shrieks were muffled as she pressed the poor child's face into her breasts. Kallad stepped between the woman and the skeleton hunter, and slammed a fist into the skull. The sounds of metal on bone and the subsequent crunch of bones breaking were sickening. The blow shattered the hinge on the right side of the fiend's head, making its jaw hang slackly, broken teeth like tombstones. Kallad thundered a second punch into the skeleton's head, his gauntlet caving in the entire left side of the monstrosity's skull. It didn't slow the skeleton so much as a step.

The twin moons, Mannslieb and Morrslieb, hung low in the sky and the combatants were gripped in a curious time between times, neither the true darkness of night nor the first blush of daylight owning the sky. The fusion of the moons' anaemic light cast fitful shadows across the nightmarish scene.

'Are there more in there?' Kallad demanded.

The woman nodded, eyes wide with terror.

Kallad stepped into the temple of Sigmar expecting to find more refugees from the

fighting. Instead, he was greeted by the sight of shuffling skeletons in various states of decay and decomposition trying to negotiate the rows of pews between the door down to the crypt and the battle raging outside. He backed up quickly and slammed the door. There was no means of securing it. Why would there be? Kallad thought bitterly. It was never meant to be a prison.

‘More *manlings*, woman, not monsters!’ he said, bracing himself against the door.

‘In the great hall,’ she said. The overwhelming relief of her rescue had already begun to mutate into violent tremors as the reality of her situation sank in. There was no salvation.

Kallad grunted.

‘Good. What’s your name, lass?’

‘Gretchen.’

‘All right, Gretchen. Fetch one of the naphtha burners and a torch.’

‘But... but...’ she stammered, understanding exactly what he intended. Her wild-eyed stare betrayed the truth: the thought of razing Sigmar’s house to the ground was more horrifying than any of the creatures trapped inside.

‘Go!’

A moment later, the dead threw themselves at the door, fists of bone splintering and shattering beneath the sheer ferocity of the assault. The huge doors buckled and bowed. It took every ounce of Kallad’s strength to hold the dead back.

‘Go!’ he rasped, slamming his shoulder up against the wood as fingers crept through the crack in the door that the dead had managed to force open. The door slammed closed on the fingers, crushing the bone to a coarse powder.

Without another word, the woman fled in the direction of the naphtha burners.

Kallad manoeuvred himself around until he braced the huge door with his back, and dug his heels in stubbornly. He could see his father on the wall. The white-haired king matched the enemy blow for savage blow. With his axe shining silver in the moonlight, Kellus might have been immortal, an incarnation of Grimna himself. He fought with an economy of movement, his axe hewing through the corpses with lethal precision. Kellus’s sacrifice was buying Kallad precious minutes to lead the women and children of Grunberg to safety. He would not fail. He owed the old dwarf that much.

The dead hammered on the temple door, demanding to be set free.

Gretchen returned with three men, dragging between them a huge black iron cauldron of naphtha. There was a grim stoicism to their actions as the four of them set about dousing the timber frame of the temple in the flammable liquid while Kallad held back the dead. A fourth man set a blazing torch to the temple wall and stepped back as the naphtha ignited in a cold blue flame.

The fires tore around the temple’s façade, searing into the timber frame. Amid the screams and the clash of steel on bone, the conflagration caught and the holy temple went up in smoke and flames. It took less than a minute for the building to be consumed by fire. The heat from the blaze drove Kallad back from the door, allowing the dead to spill out of the temple.

The abominations were met with hatchet, axe and spear as the handful of defenders drove them back mercilessly into the flames. It was nothing short of slaughter. Kallad couldn’t allow himself the luxury of even a moment’s relief – the battle was far from

won. His brow was smeared with soot, and his breathing came in ragged gasps, as the heat of the blaze seared into his lungs. Yet, in his heart, he understood that the worst of it was only just beginning.

Kallad grabbed the woman. He yelled over the crackle and hiss of the flames, 'We have to get everyone out of here! The city is falling!'

Gretchen nodded dumbly and stumbled away towards the great hall. The flames spread from the temple, licking up the length of the keep's stone walls, and arcing across the rooftops to ignite the barracks and beyond that the stables. The rain was nowhere near heavy enough to douse the flames. In moments, the straw roof of the stables was ablaze and the timber walls were caving in beneath the blistering heat. The panicked horses bolted, kicking down the stable doors and charging recklessly into the muddy street. The stench of blood coupled with the burning flesh of the dead terrified the animals. Even the quietest of them shied and kicked out at those seeking to calm them.

The dead came through the flames, pouring over the walls in vast numbers, lurching forwards, ablaze as they stumbled to their knees and reached up, clawing the flames from their skin even as the fires consumed their flesh.

Still they came on.

The dead surrounded them on all sides.

The horses kicked out in panic.

The conflagration spread, eating through the timber framed buildings as if the walls were made of nothing more substantial than straw.

Kallad dragged Gretchen towards the central tower of the keep, forcing his way through the horses and the grooms trying to bring the frightened beasts under control. The flames chased along the rooftops. No matter how valiant the defenders' efforts, in a few hours Grunberg would cease to be. The fire they had lit would see to that. The dead wouldn't destroy Grunberg; the living had managed that all by themselves. All that remained was a desperate race to beat the fire.

No direct path to the great hall lay open, although one row of ramshackle buildings appeared to be acting as a kind of temporary firewall. Kallad ran towards the row of houses, racing the flames to the doors at the centre. The hovels of the poor quarter buckled and caved in beneath the heat, and caught like tinder. Kallad was driven towards the three doors in the centre of the street; the intensity of the blaze forced him to skirt the heart of the fire. Only minutes before, the crackling pile of wood before him had been a bakery.

Kallad swallowed a huge lungful of searing air and, taking the middle door, plunged through the collapsing shell of an apothecary's as demijohns of peculiarities cracked and exploded. Gretchen followed behind him, the child silent in her arms.

The lintel over the back door had collapsed under the strain, filling the way out with rubble. Kallad stared hard at the obstacle, hefted Ruinthorn and slammed it into the centre of the debris. Behind them, a ceiling joist groaned. Kallad slammed the axe-head into the guts of the debris again and worked it free. Above them, the groaning joist cracked sharply, the heat pulling it apart. A moment later, the ceiling collapsed, effectively trapping them inside the burning building. Cursing, Kallad redoubled his efforts to hack a path through the debris blocking the back door. He had no time to think. In the minutes it took to chop through the barricade, thick black smoke

suffocated the cramped passage. Over and over, he slammed Ruinthorn's keen edge into the clutter of debris, and as chinks of moonlight and fire began to wriggle through, he kicked at the criss-cross of wooden beams. The smoke stung his eyes.

'Cover the child's mouth, woman, and stay low. Lie on your belly. The best air's down by the floor.' The thickening pall of smoke made it impossible to tell if she'd done as she was told.

He backed up two steps and hurled himself at the wooden barrier, breaking through. His momentum carried him sprawling out into the street.

Coughing and retching, Gretchen crawled out of the burning building as the gable collapsed and the roof came down. She cradled the child close to her breast, soothing it as she struggled to swallow a lungful of fresh air. The flames crackled and popped all around them. Inside the apothecary's, a series of small but violent detonations exploded as the cabinets stuffed full of chemicals and curiosities swelled and shattered in the intense heat.

Kallad struggled to his feet. He had been right, the row of buildings acted as a kind of firebreak, holding the flames back from this quarter of the walled city. The respite they offered wouldn't last. All he could do was pray to Grimna that it would last long enough for him to get the women and children out of the great hall.

He ran across the courtyard to the huge iron-banded doors of the keep and beat on them with the butt of his axe until they cracked open an inch and the frightened eyes of a young boy peeked through.

'Come on, lad. We're getting you out of here. Open up.'

A smile spread across the boy's face. It was obvious that he thought the fighting was over. Then, behind Kallad and Gretchen, he saw the fire destroying the shambles of his city. He let go of the heavy door. It swung open on itself, leaving him standing in the doorway, a length of wood in his trembling hand: a toy sword. The lad couldn't have been more than nine or ten summers old, but he had the courage to put himself between the women of Grunberg and the dead. That kind of courage made the dwarf proud to fight beside the manlings; courage could be found in the most unlikely of places.

Kallad clapped the lad on the shoulder, 'Let's fetch the women and children, shall we, lad?'

They followed the boy down a lavish passage, the walls decorated with huge tapestries and impractical weaponry. The hallway opened onto an antechamber where frightened women and children huddled, pressing themselves into the shadows and dark recesses. Kallad wanted to promise them all that they were saved, that everything was going to be all right, but it wasn't. Their city was in ruins. Their husbands and brothers were dead or dying, conquered by the dead. Everything was far from all right.

Instead of lies, he offered them the bitter truth, 'Grunberg's falling. There's nothing anyone can do to save it. The city's ablaze. The dead are swarming over the walls. Your loved ones are out there dying to give you the chance of life. You owe it to them to take that chance.'

'If they are dying, why are you here? You should be out there with them.'

'Aye, I should, but I'm not. I'm here, trying to make their deaths mean something.'

'We can fight alongside our men,' another woman said, standing up.

'Aye, and die alongside them.'

‘Let the bastards come, they’ll not find us easy to kill.’

One woman reached up, dragging a huge two-handed sword from the wall display. She could barely raise the tip. Another pulled down an ornate breastplate while a third took gauntlets and a flail. In their hands, these weapons of death looked faintly ridiculous, but the look in their eyes and the set of the jaws was far from comical.

‘You can’t hope to—’

‘You’ve said that already, we can’t hope. Our lives are destroyed, our homes, our families. Give us the choice at least. Let us decide if we are to run like rats from a sinking ship or stand up and be judged by Morr, side by side with our men. Give us that, at least.’

Kallad shook his head. A little girl stood crying beside the woman demanding the right to die. Behind her, a boy barely old enough to walk buried his face in his mother’s skirts.

‘No,’ he said bluntly, ‘and no arguments, this isn’t a game. Grunberg burns. If we stand here arguing like idiots we’ll all be dead in minutes. Look at that girl. Are you prepared to say when she should die? Are you? For all that your men are laying down their lives knowing that in doing so they are saving yours?’ Kallad shook his head. ‘No. No you’re not. We’re going to leave here and travel into the mountains. There are caverns that lead into the deep mines and stretch as far away as Axebite Pass. The dead won’t follow us there.’

In truth he had no idea if that was the case or not, but it didn’t matter, he only needed the women to believe him long enough to get them moving. Safety or the illusion of safety, at that moment it amounted to the same thing. ‘Now come on!’

His words galvanized them. They began to stand and gather their things together, tying cloth into bundles and stuffing the bundles with all that remained of their worldly goods. Kallad shook his head, ‘There’s no time for that! Come ON!’

The boy ran ahead, the toy sword slapping at his leg.

‘That stays here,’ Kallad said, dipping Ruinthorn’s head towards an ornate jewellery box that one woman clutched in her hands. ‘The only things leaving this place are living and breathing. Forget your pretty trinkets, they aren’t worth dying for. Understood?’

No one argued with him.

He counted heads as they filed out through the wide door: forty-nine women and almost double that number of children. Each one looked at the dwarf as if he was some kind of saviour, sent by Sigmar to deliver them to salvation. Gretchen stood beside him, the child cradled in her arms. She had eased the blanket down from over the child’s face, and Kallad saw at last the reason for the child’s silence. Its skin bore the bluish cast of death. Still, the woman smoothed its cheek as if hoping to give some of her warmth to her dead baby. Kallad couldn’t allow this one small tragedy to affect him – hundreds of people had died today. Hundreds. What was one baby against this senseless massacre? But he knew full well why the sight of the dead child was different. The child was innocent. It hadn’t chosen to fight the dead. It represented everything that they had given their lives to save. More than anything else, it showed what a failure their sacrifice had been.

Then, the baby started to move, its small hand wriggling free of the blankets. The child’s eyes roved blankly, still trapped in death, even as its body answered the call of

the Vampire Count.

Sickness welled in Kallad's gut. The child had to die.

He couldn't do it.

He didn't have a choice. The thing in Gretchen's arms wasn't her baby. It was a shell.

'Give me the baby,' he said, holding out his hands.

Gretchen shook her head, backing up a step as if she understood what he intended, even though she couldn't possibly know. Kallad could barely grasp the thoughts going through his head they were so utterly alien. 'Give me the baby,' he repeated.

She shook her head stubbornly.

'It isn't your child, not any more,' he said, as calmly as he could manage. He took a step closer and took the child from her. The child was a parasite, but despite the wrongness of it, the woman's instinct was still to nurture her baby.

'Go,' Kallad said, unable to look her in the eye. 'You don't need to see this.'

But she wouldn't leave him.

He couldn't do it, not here in the street, not with her watching.

He moved away from her, urging the refugees of Grunberg to follow. He held the child close, its face pressed into the chain links of his mail shirt. Glancing back down the street to the ruin of the stables, Kallad saw the dead gathering, the last of the moonlight bathing their rotten flesh in silver. They had breached the wall and were pouring over in greater and greater numbers. The fire blazed on all sides of them, but they showed neither sense of fear nor understanding of what the flames might do to their dead flesh. The last of the men were lining up in a ragged phalanx to charge the dead. Their spears and shields were pitiful against the ranks of the dead. Even the sun wouldn't rise in time to save them. Like their enemy, they were dead, only Morr had yet to claim their souls.

Kallad led the women and children away; he had no wish for them to see their men fall. The fires made it difficult to navigate the streets. Alleyways dead-ended in sheets of roaring flame. Passageways collapsed beneath the detritus of houses, their shells burned out.

'Look!' One of the women cried, pointing at part of the wall that had collapsed. The dead were clambering slowly over the debris, stumbling and falling, and climbing over the fallen.

'To the mountains!' Kallad shouted over the cries of panic.

Avoiding the pockets of burning heat became ever more difficult as the fire spread, the isolated pockets becoming unbroken walls of flame.

Kallad set off at a run towards the safety of the mountainside and the caverns that led down into the warren of deep mines, across the open ground of the green, and down a narrow alleyway that led to the entrance to the caves. The wriggling child didn't slow him. 'Come on!' he yelled, urging the women to move faster. There would be precious little time to get them all into the caves before the fire claimed the alleyway. 'Come on!' Some dragged their children, others cradled them. None looked back.

'Where do we go?' the young boy asked. He'd drawn his toy sword and looked ready to stab any shadow that moved in the firelight.

'Take the third fork in the central tunnel, lad. Follow it down. It goes deep beneath



the mountain. I'll find you. From there, we're going home.'

'This is my home.'

'We're going to my home, lad: Karak Sadra. You'll be safe there.'

The boy nodded grimly and disappeared into the darkness. Kallad counted them all into the caverns. As the last of them disappeared into the tunnels, he turned to look up at the city walls.

Through the dancing flames, he saw the battle still raging. The dead had claimed huge parts of the city, but the manlings were fighting on to the bitter end. He scanned the battlements looking for his father. Then he saw him. Kellus was locked in a mortal struggle. From this distance, it was impossible to tell, but it looked as if his axe was gone. He shifted onto the back foot, the flames licking the stones around him, and was forced further back into the flames as the dead poured over the wall. The last vestiges of Grunberg's defences were breached. The white-haired King of Karak Sadra fought desperately, hurling the dead flesh of mindless zombies from the wall.

A cloaked figure sprang forwards, unbalancing the king. His cloak played around his body like wings in the wind. Kallad knew the beast for what it was, a vampire. Probably not the undead count himself, but one of von Carstein's gets, so close as to be almost identical, but nothing more than a pale imitation at the same time.

The vampire tossed its head back and howled at the moon, exhorting the dead to rise.

For a moment, it seemed to Kallad as if his father could see him through the black smoke and the raging flame. Every bone and every fibre of Kallad's being cried out to run to the old king's aid, but he had been charged with another duty. He had to see these women and children to safety, giving worth to the great king's sacrifice. He couldn't abandon them when he was their only hope. Down there in the deep, they would die as surely as they would have if he had left them in the great hall.

The creature dragged Kellus close in the parody of an embrace and for a moment, it appeared as if the two were kissing. The illusion was shattered as the vampire tossed the dead dwarf aside and leapt gracefully from the high wall.

Kallad turned his back, silent tears rolling down his impassive face.

The babe writhed in his arms. He laid the child on the floor, face down because he couldn't bear the accusation that he imagined he saw in its dead eyes. Sobbing, he took the axe and ended the child's unnatural life.

Smoke, flame and grief stung the dwarf's eyes as he knelt down over the corpse and pressed a coin into the child's mouth, an offering to Morr, the humans' god of death. 'This innocent has suffered enough hell for three lifetimes, Lord of the Dead. Have pity on those you claimed today.'

One day, he promised himself, rising. One day the beast responsible for all this useless suffering will know my name; that will be the day it dies!

## chapter one

### Kaiser, König, Edelman, Bürger, Bauer, Bettelmann

DRAKENHOF, SYLVANIA  
The cold heart of winter, 2055

Two of Konrad's Hamaya dragged the old man into the cell between them. Von Carstein didn't deign to turn. He made the man wait. It was a delicious sensation and he fully intended to savour the final moments before the kill. There was nothing in the world like bringing death where moments before there had been life. It was such a fleeting thing, life: so transient in nature, so fragile.

He smiled as he turned, although there was no humour in his eyes, and nodded.

The Hamaya served as the Vampire Count's personal bodyguard, his most trusted men, his right and left hands depending upon the darkness of the deed he desired done. They released their grip on the prisoner, kicking him as he sank to his knees so that he sprawled across the cold stones of the cell floor. There was no fight left in the old man. He barely had the strength to hold his head up. He had been beaten repeatedly and tortured to the extremes of what his heart would bear. It was so like the cowards to send an old man to do their dirty work.

'So, are you ready to talk, Herr Köln? Or must we continue with all this unsavoury nonsense? We both know the outcome so why subject yourself to the pain? You will tell me what I want to hear. Your kind always does. It's one of the many weaknesses of humanity. No threshold for pain.'

The old man lifted his head, meeting the vampire's gaze, 'I have nothing to say to you.'

Konrad sighed, 'Very well. Constantin, would you be so kind as to remind our guest of his manners?'

The Hamaya backhanded Köln across the face, splitting his already swollen lip. Blood ran into his beard.

'Thank you, Constantin. Now, Herr Köln, perhaps we can dispense with the charade? As much as I enjoy the tang of blood in the air, yours is sadly past its best. You are the much-vaunted Silver Fox of Bogenhafen, are you not? The *Silberfuchs*, I

believe they call you? I assume your paymaster is Ludwig von Holzkrug, although where the loyalties of a man like yourself lie is always up for debate. The Untermensch witch perhaps? Or maybe some other lesser schemer. The Empire is so full of petty politickers, one so much the same as any other that it is difficult to keep track of who is stabbing whom in the back at any given time. No matter. You are what you are and what you are is, without question, a spy.'

'Why don't you kill me and have done with it?'

'I could,' the vampire conceded. He circled the old man. It was the act of a predator. He moved slowly, savouring the helplessness of his prisoner. 'But that would hardly do you justice, Herr Köln. The... ah... notoriety of the *Silberfuchs* demands a certain... respect. Your head must be filled with such interesting truths it would be a crying shame to lose them. Act in haste, repent at leisure, no?'

'What would you have me tell you, vampire? That your people love you? That you are worshipped? Adored? You are not. Believe me. You are hated. Your *kingdom* is fit only for robber barons and fools. It is held together by fear. Fear of the Vampire Count, Vlad von Carstein.' The old man smiled. 'You are not loved. You are not even feared. None of that is of any consequence, of course, because, more than anything, you are not your sire. The only fear around you is the fear that drives you. Compared to Vlad you are a pale shadow.'

'Fascinating,' Konrad said. 'Is that what you intended to tell your paymaster? That the von Carstein threat is vanquished? That there is nothing left to fear?'

'I will tell him the truth: that the scum is rising to the surface, as it always does. That everywhere in Sylvania there is disorder, that the fetid stink of corruption clings to the swamps. I will say that the streets crumble while the parasites suck the lifeblood out of the people, that the peasants despise you for the blight that afflicts their farms, that you are loathed for the famine that cripples the livestock, and blamed for the exorbitant rents you demand from them in return for pox-ridden ground. I will tell him that if they fail to please you with tributes you let your cursed Hamaya feast on their carcasses. Oh, I could tell them that and so much more. I could tell them that your so-called court is infested with sharks that would feast on your royal blood. That Drakenhof is a cesspit of liars, thieves, murderers, spies, and worst of all backstabbing sycophants who whisper sweet nothings in your ear while plotting behind your back. That you are loathed by your own kind, and that you are a fool for believing that they love you.'

Konrad's own grin matched the old man's. 'You are indeed enlightened, Herr Köln. Obviously you are privy to the deepest, darkest secrets of my kind. Yes they would have me dead, it is the nature of the beast to seek out weakness and exploit it. They have not brought me down, as you can see. Drakenhof is mine by right of strength and blood. I am von Carstein. I do not merely call myself such, as others do.' He turned his attention to the two Hamaya who had stepped back from the old man and waited silently. 'Take Jerek, for instance, he understands his place. His loyalty is unquestioning. The blood of our father sings in his veins. He is pure, unlike Constantin, who has claimed the name by right of... what was it, Constantin?'

'Conquest,' the Hamaya supplied.

'Conquest, that's right. Conquest is another word for murder in our world. He earned the title von Carstein by killing another. Our kind survives by strength alone.'

Strength breeds loyalty. Like Jerek, his loyalty is pure, and yet you have the audacity to tell me that my truth isn't *the* truth? That my world does not work the way I believe? Should I be flattered or furious, Herr Köln?

'I say what I see. If you do not like what you hear, well, with respect, all you can do is kill me.'

'Not so, killing you is the very least that I can do. I could drag your soul kicking and screaming back from the comfort of Morr's underworld and consign you to the unlife of the living dead, for instance. I could slay you and raise your corpse to dance to my whims like a puppet, or I could leave you to rot. Don't underestimate the torments beyond death that I could inflict on you if I so choose. Now, tell me about the lands you left behind, spy. Tell me about your beloved Empire.'

The old man's head dropped. He lapsed into silence.

'Oh, do speak up while you still can, Herr Köln. The cat hasn't gotten your tongue yet.'

'I am no traitor.'

'But I think you will be before the sun rises on the new morning, if that is any consolation? I think you'll be delighted to spill your guts. Jerek and Constantin will no doubt be sick of the sound of your voice.'

Konrad stopped his pacing, drawing his sword, a blade of bone with a skeletal wyrm carved into its hilt, from its sheath. The blade's edge whickered as it slid free. Konrad rested it against Deitmar Köln's left ear.

The old man screamed as the vampire sliced his ear off with a single smooth stroke. Blood flowed freely through Köln's fingers as he clutched at the ragged hole in the side of his head. He didn't stop screaming as Konrad raised the severed ear to his lips and sucked the blood from it.

The vampire tossed the ruined ear aside.

'Now, where were we? Oh yes, you were telling me nothing I didn't already know, how those around me are untrustworthy. How I have surrounded myself with fools and traitors and those who are loyal now could be traitors tomorrow. How loyalty can be bought with fear. How fear can inspire treachery. You speak in vagaries meant to inspire paranoia. I am nobody's fool, Herr Köln. How does anyone know whom to trust or who to kill? Tell me that, *Silberfuchs*, and then, when you are through answering the unanswerable, tell me all about dear old Ludwig and the squabbles of the Empire. I yearn for a good story and it would be an honour to hear the Silver Fox of Bogenhafen's last lament.'

The old man slumped against the wall, his bloody hand pressed up against the side of his head. What remained of his life could be counted out in moments, and yet despite the sure and certain knowledge of his fate, he tapped some inner well of strength that allowed him dignity in death.

Konrad resumed his pacing, his slow, measured footsteps echoing hollowly on the stone floor. He didn't say a word, but a smile twitched at his lips as the old man suffered.

'Do we really have to take this to its logical conclusion, Herr Köln? I had hoped you would see sense before my patience finally wore thin. It seems I was wrong.' With that Konrad lashed out a second time with the bone sword, cutting deep into the hand Köln threw up before his face to ward off the blow. Bone cleaved bone, although