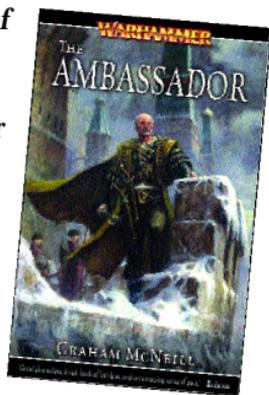


The AMBASSADOR

A Warhammer novel by Graham McNeill

IN THE ICY Northern Wastes, a mighty army of darkness prepares to sweep south and lay waste to the civilised lands of the Empire. In this dangerous time, retired Imperial general Kaspar von Velten is sent to Kislev as ambassador to the court of Tsarina Katarin. Unused to the power struggles and politics at court, Kaspar is forced to use all the skills and resources at his command in order to survive in this cold and hostile land. As winter draws in, can Kaspar re-forge the fragile alliance between the Empire and Kislev and prepare its troops for war before the hordes of Chaos are unleashed on the land?



HAILING FROM SCOTLAND, Graham McNeill narrowly escaped a career in surveying to join Games Workshop's Warhammer 40,000 development team. As well as three previous novels, he has also written a host of short stories for *Inferno!*

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from THE AMBASSADOR

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 is 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 a 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.'

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 costal 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 on 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 moustache, 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 buying 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 Andreas 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.

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, it 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 every 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 drapes 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 Drostya

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.

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 begin assessing what needed to be done to make it more presentable. With the exception of Valdhaas, who stood guard outside, the Knights 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.

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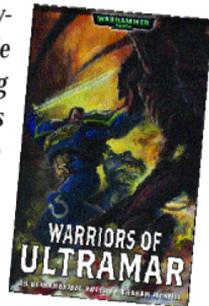
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