

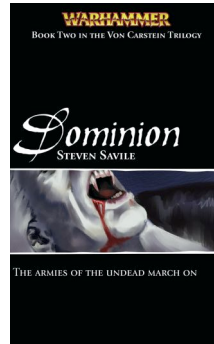
DOMINION

The second novel in the Von Carstein trilogy

By Steven Savile

The immortal Vampire Counts have ravaged the Old World for many hundreds of years and their undead scourge has left its mark on many generations. Heroes have risen to combat this seemingly unstoppable tide and following the death of vampire lord Vlad von Carstein, the vampires are thrown into disarray. Struggling to rebuild their forces, the insane Konrad von Carstein comes to the fore and his bloodthirsty reign of terror will leave a swathe of destruction across the world...

Steven Savile brings the bloodshed to life in the second novel of this series, which features the rise and fall of Konrad von Carstein.



About the Author

British author Steven Savile is an expert in cult fiction, having written a wide variety of sf, (including Star Wars and Jurassic Park) fantasy and horror stories, as well as a slew of editorial work on anthologies in the UK and USA. He won the L. Ron Hubbard Writers of the Future award in 2002, was runner-up in the British Fantasy Award in 2000 and has been nominated three times for the Bram Stoker award. He currently lives in Stockholm, Sweden.

ALSO BY STEVEN SAVILE

INHERITANCE

The first novel in the Von Carstein trilogy

The following is an excerpt from *Dominion* by Steven Savile. Published by the Black Library. Games Workshop, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

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KALLAD STORMWARDEN HAD been in Altdorf for three soul-destroying weeks. This wasn't his home. He missed the mountains. The cold stone of the buildings was soulless stuff. He dreamed at nights of the stone halls of Karak Sadra.

He was here because of the vampires of Grunberg. As long as the vampires lived, his own life had but a single purpose: retribution.

The path of vengeance had led to Altdorf before it had cracked and broken, and finally died out.

The war of the Vampire Count had taken a heavy toll. Cities live, and like people, cities die. The pulse of Altdorf had weakened and become erratic, the life choked out of the place. It was a shadow of its former glorious self, although the inhabitants did their damndest to carry on their everyday lives as if nothing had happened. The dwarf found it fascinating and tragic at the same time. Denial it seemed was the primary characteristic of the human condition.

Not for the first time, he wondered how they could do it. There was no miracle to it though; it was a case of necessity. They had to foster denial, or they would drown in self-pity and be as dead as if the Vampire Count had sucked them dry. That would have been the biggest tragedy of all: for the survivors to give up living because of the high price of victory. Their stubborn determination was a way of honouring those who had paid the ultimate price for their freedom.

In truth, there was little difference between this and the way Kallad lived his life. The memory of Grunberg and those who had fallen there overshadowed each day he lived. Days and weeks, and months could pass, it didn't matter, the passage of time had lost its meaning to the dwarf.

If anything, the Altdorfers losing themselves in the mundane tasks of rebuilding their lives was healthier than the grudge he nursed. They at least

were looking to the future, not living in the past where the anger only festered.

‘When they’re dead,’ he promised himself, ‘and honour’s served, then we start living again, right lad?’

Beside him, Sammy Krauss, the butcher’s boy, sat whittling at a curiously shaped stick with his bone-handled knife. Sammy was simpleminded. They had been almost constant companions since his arrival in the city. The boy, it seemed, had taken a shine to him. Kallad didn’t mind. He enjoyed the company. It had been too long since he’d enjoyed the simple pleasure of conversation. Given the city’s recent history, it wasn’t hard to imagine why the boy had attached himself to the dwarf. It wasn’t for his rapier wit and philosophical insight: the finely crafted gromril discs beneath the chain links of mail and his double-headed axe, Ruinthorn, were far more reassuring. Kallad was a fighter. With his parents dead, that was what the boy truly needed.

‘Do you really remember where all them dents come from?’ Sammy asked, marvelling at the idea that each dent told a story.

‘Aye,’ Kallad said with a reassuring grin. ‘This one here,’ he tapped one of the layered discs covering his left side, above his fourth rib, ‘was a spear thrust from a skaven. It was a long time ago. I wasn’t much older than you. Do you know what skaven are, lad?’

Sammy shook his head, wide-eyed with wonder, ‘No. I never heard of him.’

‘Rats as tall as you. Vicious things, they are.’

Sammy thought for a moment. ‘But rats are small, even big ones.’

‘Not all rats, Sammy, some can walk and talk.’

‘You mean like them from fairy tales?’

Kallad grinned, ‘That’s the ones. Ugly little bleeders, giant rats that walk like men. They’re tainted creatures, for sure. Well, there were four of them ganged up on me. One didn’t stand a chance, and two, well it still wouldn’t have been a fair fight. Cursed by Chaos or not, the devils weren’t stupid. They knew they’d need to take me by surprise to stand even half a chance. Cunning little beasts they are. Vermin. Would have had me for sure but for the armour. See lad, that’s why I remember each dent and ding in these old plates, because without them, well, who’s to say I’d even be here today?’

‘You mean them dents kept you alive?’ The awe in Sammy’s voice was unmistakable.

Kallad smiled and patted the dented gromril disc. ‘That’s exactly what I mean, lad. This metal is tough, tougher than almost anything except gromril.’

‘Blimey. You mean if’n the Vampire Count’d had your armour he might still be alive?’ Sammy shuddered visibly at the thought.

‘Ah, no lad, even my armour couldn’t have kept that monster alive. It was his time to die, see. A lot of good people gave their lives to make sure his evil ended here. That makes this city special, lad. This is the place the Vampire Count fell.’

‘I saw it, you know. I saw the priest fighting ’im on the wall. I wasn’t supposed to. Ma had made us all go down to the cellars, but it was frightening down there so I snuck back upstairs and hid in my room. I could see the wall from my window. It was scary because of all the fires and the explosions, but it wasn’t scary like the cellar, because it wasn’t dark. I don’t like the dark, see. Ma says I’m a big boy and I shoulda grown up out of it by now, but I ain’t.’

‘There’s nothing wrong with being afraid of the dark, lad. All our fears come from there. Did you know that? Everything we’re frightened of comes to life in the dark, see. That’s why we use torches and light fires, to drive the dark back, because deep down it still frightens us. That’s why in the backwaters so many revere the sun and the moon. The sun drives away the night. It brings renewal, rebirth. It gives us hope. So don’t you worry about what your Ma says, we’re all a little bit afraid of the dark, it’s good for us.’

‘Well I’m a big bit afraid.’ Sammy said, grinning lopsidedly.

‘I’ll let you in on a secret... me too.’ Kallad said.

‘It was a different kind of scary watching through the window. People who come into Pa’s shop fell off the wall and didn’t get up again. Strangers too. I kept looking at ’em, waiting for them to get up again, but they didn’t. And the bad men were throwing things over the wall and making fires and explosions, and I didn’t think it was ever going to end.’

‘You shouldn’t have had to see something like that, lad. No one should. But you know what?’

‘What?’

‘It’s over now and life, well life is going on as normal, isn’t it? People still come into your Pa’s shop for meat, don’t they?’

‘Well yes, but we ain’t got much meat to sell ’em.’

‘Not yet, but you will have. Life goes on. Look around you. Everyone is putting their life back together bit by bit.’

‘Not everyone,’ Sammy Krauss said solemnly. ‘Not the priest, he died. Not the soldiers.’

And that was the truth of it. Those left behind struggled to hold the pieces of their fractured lives together, trying to fill the spaces left by their

loved ones who had fallen protecting the once great city. How could he explain that to a boy like Sammy? He couldn't, so he didn't try.

'Come on, lad, time to go for a wander.'

Kallad hauled himself up. He didn't know where he was going to go, but he couldn't just sit on the steps waiting for the answers to come and find him. If he wanted to find the monster that slaughtered Grunberg, he would have to walk in the shadow of the vampire, retracing the fiend's every bloody step.

'Show me where the priest's buried, would you lad? I'd like to pay my respects, one fighter to another.'

Sammy nodded and jumped to his feet, eager to be of use. 'He's in the cathedral. It ain't far. I know the way.'

'I'm sure you do, lad, that's why I asked.'

'I could be your guide, an' if I'm really good at it, maybe I could be your squire, you know?'

'Ah but I'm not a knight, Sammy. I don't need a squire.' The youngster looked crestfallen. 'But you know, you could be my friend, that's a much more important job.'

'I can do that!'

'Excellent, now let's go pay our respects shall we, my friend?'

Grinning, Sammy led the way through the narrow warren of streets. Women washed their sheets and beat the dust from heavy rugs with paddles, young children clinging to their ankles. Washing was hung up to dry on lines that strung buildings together.

The boy loved to smile. It was one of the things the dwarf liked most about the lad.

Altdorf was a city rediscovering its own identity. The moneylenders and pawnbrokers were out on street corners, promising shillings now in return for a few extra pfennigs later. They made Kallad sick, profiting from the hardship of ordinary decent people. It was immoral. It went against the idea of people pulling together in times of trouble. Across the old square, queues of hungry people lined up, soup bowls in hand for handouts from the church. Poverty was a new thing to a lot of these people, but the look of quiet desperation in so many eyes proved that even the proudest man could grow accustomed to taking handouts when it was the difference between going hungry or not.

In the long line, Kallad saw a woman weeping in despair, no bravery left in her eyes, only sadness. He didn't want to think what great loss had brought her to this sad fate. The city had drowned in the hate of the Vampire Count. It was amazing that any of them had the fight to face

another day without food, alone, reminded of what they had lost, in the happiness of strangers who could still do the simplest of things like beat the dust out of their rugs with their children clinging to their legs. It was people like her who hurt the most, people for whom there was no escape, even in the most mundane acts of every day living.

The militia patrolled the streets in gangs of six and eight, their presence enough to keep order in the more run down districts of the city.

Few spared the unlikely pair a second glance as Kallad and Sammy skirted the fringe of Reiksport. The smell of brine stung Kallad's nostrils. Large stretches of water weren't something he ever wanted to become accustomed to. It was unnatural. It was hard to imagine that people actually enjoyed having the world constantly tilting and rolling beneath them. He shook his head. It had its uses, he couldn't deny that, but given a choice, he'd always keep a few mountains between himself and the sea. The ships were in, bringing with them much needed produce, but even with the influx of food the city was still slowly starving to death. It would be years before things returned to normal. Von Carstein's undead army was a scourge on the landscape. They left sickness and blight in their wake. Calves and lambs were stillborn, cheeses curdled, and grain stores rotted. The dead were more deadly to the land than a plague. The superstitious blamed the dead; the more practically minded cursed and blamed the living for their failings, while knowing that apportioning blame was a pointless activity. It wouldn't feed anyone.

Kallad and Sammy stood on the dockside, watching the Marshall of the Waters guide the unloading of a huge six rigger. His crew wrestled with ropes and guidelines as they hauled crates out of the ship's hold, climbing nimbly up and down the ropes, hanging from the yardarm and dangling perilously in the rigging. They moved like a colony of ants, busy with purpose and yet completely independent of one another. It was fascinating to see. Indeed, Kallad and Sammy were not alone in their interest. People gathered around, curious as to what the ships were bringing in, desperate to discover that it was, indeed, food.

One of the sailors tossed a small orange ball the size of his clenched fist to the marshall, who looked at it quizzically.

'What am I supposed to do with this?'

'Eat it, what do you think?'

The marshall shrugged, sank his teeth into the orange fruit and spat a mouthful of rind and bits of pulp out. 'It's disgusting!' The marshall wiped his mouth, spitting and rubbing at his tongue to try and get rid of the taste. 'How can you eat something like this? I think I'd rather starve.'

‘Not like that. You peel the skin off and eat the fruit. It’s good,’ the sailor explained, miming the act of stripping the orange’s thick skin. The marshall looked uncertain. Seeing Sammy and Kallad loitering on the dockside, he tossed the orange to Sammy underarm. The lad skipped forwards and caught it.

‘What do you say?’ Kallad asked.

‘Thank you, sir!’ Sammy shouted. His fingers were already wet with the juice of the fruit as he dug them into the soft flesh.

The sailor laughed and saluted Sammy, ‘Take all the skin off, lad, and then tear it into segments. It’s like nothing you ever tasted before.’

‘I won’t argue with that,’ the Marshall of the Waters said with a wry smile, ‘but then so’s dung, and happy as flies are to eat the stuff, well it ain’t necessarily a delicacy if you know what I mean.’

Sammy moaned with pleasure as he crammed the segments of orange into his mouth, sucking the juice off his fingers. ‘Good,’ he said around a mouthful of food. ‘It’s good.’

‘Told you!’ the sailor called down.

‘I’ll take your word for it, sonny,’ the marshall said dubiously. ‘Give me a nice sweet cake of oatmeal dripping with honey and a nice warm bitter ale, and I’m a happy man.’

‘It’s really good.’ Sammy repeated, cramming two wedges of orange into his already full mouth.

Kallad nodded his thanks to the sailor and the marshall. It was good to see the ships back in the Reiksport. Even a couple of weeks without them had turned the dockside into a ghost town. Little by little, the ships promised a return to some semblance of normality. The people needed it. A few exotic fruits wouldn’t do much in practical terms, but they would do wonders for morale. The captain of that ship was a canny man, Kallad realised, for understanding the value of a few luxuries over necessities that would run out soon enough.

Sammy Krauss, for instance, would remember his first orange all his life. It was hard to imagine that something as simple as a piece of fruit had made today an extraordinary day for the boy, but it had. That extraordinary day would keep him alive ten times as long as a bowl of grain would. It was all about hope.

Of course, the ships would bring more than produce with them, they would bring sailors, and sailors brought coin and a healthy dose of lust that the local establishments were more than happy to cater for. After a long time at sea, a sailor and his coins were easily parted, and there were places aplenty around the Reiksport that catered for every conceivable desire a

sailor on shore leave could need satiating. It was a mutually parasitic relationship – the sailors came with their pent-up frustration, needing girls, drink and games of chance to throw their hard-earned money away on, and the city needed the sailors with their drunken lusts every bit as much.

Sammy smacked his lips and licked his fingers all the way to the Sigmarite cathedral. The gates to the grounds were closed. Something about that disturbed Kallad more than the food queues and the moneylenders. The door of Sigmar was always open, or at least it was supposed to be. He hammered on the wrought iron railings until an acolyte came to answer the clanging.

‘The world has changed for the worse, it seems,’ Kallad said. ‘When the House of Sigmar takes to locking itself up like a prison come nightfall it is a sorry state of affairs.’

‘Indeed,’ the young acolyte said smoothly, ‘the world has changed, master dwarf. That is its nature. To stand still is to stagnate. To stagnate is to die. Change is the only way to survive. So, how can we be of service to you?’

‘We have come to pay our respects to the priest that fell saving this city.’

The young man nodded thoughtfully. ‘As an ambassador of the dwarf folk you are more than welcome to post a vigil at Grand Theogonist Wilhelm III’s graveside. It would be our honour. It might be best, however, if your companion waits elsewhere. There can be little of interest for the boy at an old man’s tomb.’

‘Aye, but then it might be best if the lad can say his thanks to the man as well. After all, it was for boys like Sammy that your priest gave his life, wasn’t it?’

‘Indeed,’ the young acolyte agreed, with a slight nod. ‘You are both welcome to hold vigil. Will there be anything you need?’

‘Shouldn’t think so, lad.’

‘Then please, follow me.’ The acolyte opened the gate and led them through a neatly tended rose garden to a secluded grove on the far side of the cathedral, where the shadows of a weeping willow touched the simple stone of the holy man’s grave. A second, smaller gate led through the wall to the street. The dwarf and the boy stood beneath the trailing willow branches. The grave was nothing more than a simple headstone that had already begun to seed over with lichen where the shadows of the willow lingered. A white rose bush grew beside the headstone, the thorns scraping against the words of the prayer carved into the stone.

The acolyte withdrew a step, but didn’t leave them.

Kallad whispered a quiet prayer to Grimna before he knelt beside the Grand Theonist's grave and pressed a small metallic disc into the dirt. The disc was carved with a protective rune of blessing meant to ward off the evil spirits. It was a relic from his home, Karak Sadra. How apt that name was now: Sorrow's Stone. His father, Kellus, had crafted the rune himself in the days before the march from the stronghold beneath Axebite Pass to Grunberg, and had given it to Kallad. The token had kept him alive during the slaughter of that city. Perhaps it would offer some protection to the priest's spirit in death.

'What's that?' Sammy asked, curious.

'My father gave it to me. It's a charm meant to protect the wearer from evil.'

The young acolyte nodded his approval at the offering. 'A suitable token,' he said quietly, making the sign of Sigmar across his heart.

'There are ninety-seven windows in this side of the cathedral,' Sammy said suddenly. 'I counted them. Ninety-seven and only one has someone in it.' The non-sequiter threw Kallad, but he followed the direction in which the boy's hand pointed. A pale face stared down from one of the highest windows. The boy was right: every other window was empty. Curious, Kallad moved to get a better look at the high window where the sun didn't reflect off the glass. The watcher didn't shrink back from the window, despite the fact that he was obviously aware he had been seen. Instead, he matched the dwarf's scrutiny with a detached study of his own.

Kallad turned to the acolyte. 'Who's that?'

The young priest looked up at the face in the window. 'That's the thief,' he said with obvious distaste.

'The thief?'

'Felix Mann, a thoroughly dislikeable man, if you ask me.'

'Aye? An' yet he finds himself inside the cathedral of Sigmar when the gates are locked? I have to say I find that a mite interesting, considering how difficult it is for a normal person to come pay his respects to your god.'

'His presence is... tolerated,' the young acolyte said, grudgingly.

'You could be tempted to wonder if your man is a guest or a prisoner,' the dwarf said.

The young priest didn't have an answer to that, at least not one he could give in words. His eyes shifted involuntarily towards the headstone. People with something to hide tended to give their secrets away with the stupidest of tells. The thief wasn't a prisoner, at least not in the traditional sense, even if the four walls of the cathedral had become his dungeon. There was only

one reasonable explanation for why the priests had offered the protection of the temple to a thief: he had friends.

‘The edicts of our god require us to tend to the weak and needy, and to protect those that cannot protect themselves. The thief would be dead without us. He cannot so much as fend for himself. He wouldn’t last a week on the streets.’

Kallad didn’t buy into the priest’s rationalisation. It was too convenient by far. Plenty of other people were starving and barely living at a subsistence level, with no homes after the siege, no husbands, and no hope of life ever really returning to normal. Broth lines and prayers for broken souls were not the same as offering Felix Mann sanctuary.

‘Neither would a thousand others. They aren’t surviving, so what makes Mann special?’

‘The thief’s curse,’ the acolyte said. Seeing the dwarf didn’t understand he elaborated, ‘No hands.’

That aspect at least made sense: it was a vindictive punishment for petty crimes. Admittedly, it was barbaric and taking both hands was almost unheard of, but what didn’t make sense was why the Sigmarites had taken an interest in the thief, instead of just turning him over to the almoners or leaving him to beg? It wasn’t as if the city didn’t have its share of cripples and beggars, panhandling in the streets for scraps of food and the odd coin that might come their way. There were beggars on every street corner, each with a tale more wretched than the last. That the priests of Sigmar had singled this one out meant that he was marked in some way. He had done something to deserve their charity beyond simply being crippled.

‘That’s not what makes him special, priest, you and I both know it. Why not turn him over to the almoners?’

‘He ah well his affliction... shall we say that some feel he was maimed in the service of the church, and as such we carry the weight of guilt, which is, of course, preposterous.’

‘A thief losing his hands in the service of Sigmar? Are you being serious?’

‘Not at all,’ the priest assured him.

As if sensing that he was the topic of conversation, the man finally moved away from the window.

A few minutes later, the huge iron banded doors flew open and Felix Mann staggered out of the temple gasping and out of breath from running through the vast cathedral. He was not in a good way. His face had begun to collapse in on itself, his cheeks and eyes waxy sunken hollows, his nose sharp and angular. He was gaunt beyond the point of malnutrition. The

waste of a man was shocking to see. What remained were the remnants of Felix Mann. He was less than human.

The thief staggered forwards on shaky legs and debased himself at Kallad's feet, the bandaged stumps of his wrists up in front of his face. Kallad had to imagine the ghosts of hands clenched, begging.

'Just put me out of my damned misery, dwarf! Do it! Crush my skull. Cut my head off my shoulders. Slice my throat, open my gizzards, just do something to finish it, please. I... I don't want to live like this anymore. I don't want to be a prisoner, a freak fed and watered and forced to give thanks for being a cripple to a god who hasn't done a damned thing for me except see to it that I wound up like this. Have pity on me, dwarf. Finish what the vampire started. Do that for me. Do that!'

'You are not a prisoner here. Far from it,' the acolyte said coldly. 'We have made you welcome, fed and cared for you. You could have been left to beg in the gutter like a common criminal. You are free to leave at any time. Remember that before you call us your gaolers.'

'I am not free. If I were there would not be men outside my door at night.'

'We would not have you harm yourself. Sadness over your, ahhh, affliction, might undo reason. We seek only to help you.'

Sammy had backed away behind Kallad, and the acolyte looked distinctly disappointed at the thief's ravings.

'Stand up, man.'

'Look at me. I'm a cripple.'

'Aye, but it ain't the end of the world. I ain't one for judging a man by his looks or his name, better to judge him by what he does. He can curl up an' die or he can get up an' start living again. So stand up.'

'Damn you,' Felix Mann said, but there was no strength in his curse. He spat in the priest's direction and then sagged and folded in on himself, beaten.

'I already am,' Kallad said calmly. 'I am Kallad Stormwarden, the last dwarf of Karak Sadra. The vampires destroyed my people.'

'Then you understand,' Mann said flatly.

'No, I don't. I took their beating and I stood up again. Now, I hunt them. I will not rest until every last vampire is purged from the face of the Empire.'

'Then you'll be joining your people wherever your dead go. You cannot win.'

'Don't grieve for me just yet.'

Felix Mann shook his head violently, 'You don't get it, do you? You're dead already, you just don't know it. I've seen the daemon you are stalking. He did this to me.' Felix held up the stumps where his hands had been severed. 'You can't beat it. It can hide in plain sight. It lives in the shadows. You can't fight it, because you can't see it.' His voice took on a hysterical quality, the words beginning to tumble into each other in their rush to be out of his mouth. 'You can't beat it. It isn't alive. It's immortal. It's got the ring. It can't die. It can't die, dwarf. It can't die. Do you understand that? You can hunt it, but you can't kill it. Cut off its head and it will come back. Cut out its heart and it will come back. Burn it and it will rise from the ashes. It will come back and it will keep coming back. Do you understand that? Do you?'

Mann's daemons were like no vampires Kallad had ever heard of, invisible, invincible, they sounded like something invented to scare children. However fanciful, the thief's hysteria had the ring of truth to it. Something had driven the thief to the point of madness. It wasn't hard to imagine that something being the same monster behind the unnecessary evil of the slaughter of Grunberg. That made Felix Mann's story the first real lead Kallad had found since coming to Altdorf, and by necessity that made Felix Mann the missing link that he had been searching so long to find. He just had to bring him back from the edge.

'Rubbish,' the acolyte sneered. 'You're fully of fanciful nonsense. Down to the trauma, no doubt. The Grand Theogonist himself laid down his life to save us from these daemons you rave on about. The threat is gone.'

He was one crucial step closer to finding the fiend that had butchered his people.

'I understand,' Kallad said, 'that the thing has frightened the life out of you, and I understand why the priests have taken pity on you. All I can say is, that way lies madness. This is no way to live.'

'Don't mock me, dwarf,' Mann said, the edge of reason creeping back into his voice. 'Kill me or be done with it and leave me to rot in peace would you?'

Kallad shook his head.

'That's not the way it's going to happen. If you want to live again, help me to kill the beast. If not, well maybe I should crack your skull and put you out of your misery.'

Felix Mann held up his ruined wrist stumps. 'What can I do?' and again, this time more a question than a statement of uselessness: 'What can I do?'

'I can help you, thief, if you are willing to help yourself. Given a forge to work in I can craft hands. Well not real hands. They'll be more like

gauntlets than real hands and they'll have to fasten to some kind of shoulder brace. They won't be pretty, and they won't move or have any kind of grip, but they'll be better than nothing. I'm no master smith, but I can make one like it's holding a cup and give the other a kind of hook attachment. They'll give you your life back. You'll be able to feed yourself and start living again. The rest is up to you.'

Silence hung between man and dwarf.

'Why?'

'Because you fought it and you lived.'

'Only because it let me.'

'That doesn't matter. You know it. I'll give you your hands back and in return I want you to talk. Tell me everything you can remember about the vampires. Everything. A good hunter knows his prey. There are less surprises and they die easier that way.'

'They just don't stay dead,' Felix Mann said, bleakly.

'This one will,' Kallad promised. 'Believe me, this one will.'

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