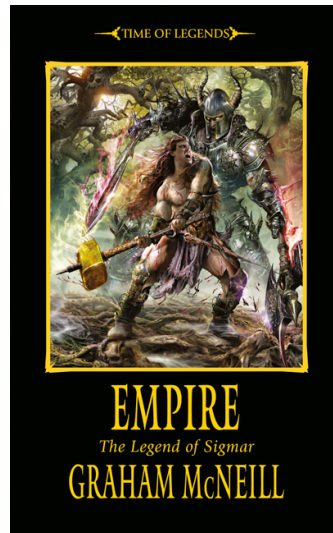


EMPIRE

A Time of Legends novel

by Graham McNeill

Having driven back the orc invaders, Sigmar unites the tribes of men and founds the Empire. The fledgling empire grows, but its prosperity is not assured. The lands are still wild and untamed, and many enemies lurk in the forests and the mountains. When a Chaos invasion sweeps down from Norsca, the ensuing conflict tests the abilities of Sigmar and his chieftains to the utmost.



About the Author

Hailing from Scotland, Graham McNeill narrowly escaped a career in Surveying to join Games Workshop, where he worked for six years as a games developer. As well as fourteen novels, Graham has written a host of sf and fantasy short stories. He lives in Nottingham, UK.

•TIME OF LEGENDS•

HELDENHAMMER

Graham McNeill

MALEKITH

Gav Thorpe

NAGASH THE SORCEROR

Mike Lee

The following is an excerpt from *Empire* by Graham McNeill, Published by the Black Library. Games Workshop, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

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Sigmar led the kings from Warrior Hill into Reikdorf. Word of their coming had spread, and the city's populace came out to greet them. Hundreds of people lined the streets, carrying torches to dispel the darkness, and cheering as the procession of kings passed. Warriors spilled from the longhouse, banging their swords on their shields as they came. Endal Pipers ran to the front of the procession and led the way to the Oathstone, their lilting music speaking to the heart and filling the blood with fire.

He saw Wolfgart and Pendrag in the crowd of warriors, and smiled at their joy. To have come so far and achieved so much was incredible, but Sigmar knew he could not have done it without his friends. What he and

his sword-brothers symbolised was the empire in microcosm; individually men were strong, but together they were mighty.

The kings of the land marched alongside Sigmar with their heads held high and their weapons resting on their shoulders. Tribesmen from all across the empire yelled and whooped to see their kings so honoured.

Banners waved in the air in a dazzling array of rearing stallions, mailed fists, golden chariots and snarling wolves. Oaths and promises of fealty in a dozen different dialects were shouted as every warrior gathered offered his sword to the king of the Unberogen. As Sigmar watched their faces, ecstatic in the reflected glow of firelight, he felt the weight of their expectations settle upon his shoulders.

To have won this land was only the first part of his journey.

Now he had to keep it safe.

The procession wound its way through the cobbled streets of the city, past great halls, stone dwellings and

timber-framed stables. Children in colourful tunics ran wild, playing with barking dogs, their innocent laughter a welcome counterpoint to the martial shouts of warriors. The procession emerged into the open square on the river's northern bank, where the sacred stone carried from the east in ages past by the first warriors of the Unberogen was set in the earth. This had been the centre of the original settlement of Reikdorf, back when it had been little more than a collection of wattle and daub huts huddled by the side of the river. The settlement had grown immeasurably since those long ago days, but its heart was ever this place.

The pipers peeled away, taking up positions beside Beorthyn's forge. Sigmar smiled. The irascible old smith had been dead for ten years, yet the forge still bore his name.

Perhaps a thousand people filled the square, pressed against the buildings at the square's perimeter. Torches were planted in a circle around the Oathstone, and a huge

figure stood within the ring of firelight beside a vast cauldron of black iron.

Clad in wolfskin and glittering mail that shimmered with hoarfrost, the figure's breath gusted from his mouth as though it were the darkest winter night instead of the last days of summer. He carried a staff of polished oak, hung with long fangs and topped with a wide axe blade that glittered like ice. His face was obscured by a wolf-skull mask, and a thick pelt of white wolfskin hung from his shoulders.

Taller and broader than any warrior Sigmar had ever seen, this was Ar-Ulric, the high priest of the god of battles and winter, a warrior who wandered the wilds with the snow and wind. Generations might pass without any sign of Ar-Ulric, for he had little to do with the affairs of mortals. Ulric was a god who expected his followers to fend for themselves. At his side were two enormous wolves, one with midnight-black fur, the other of purest white. Their fur stood erect, as though frozen, and their eyes were like smouldering coals.

The pipers ceased their music, and the warriors filling the city fell silent as Sigmar entered the circle of torches. His fellow kings took up positions around the circle as Sigmar stood before the enormous cauldron. Dark water filled it, and ice had formed on the surface.

The wolves slowly padded forward and began circling Sigmar. Their fangs were bared and thick ropes of saliva drooled from their jaws. Ar-Ulric remained unmoving as the wolves growled and sniffed him. Sigmar felt the cold of their gaze upon him, knowing he was being judged by a power greater than that of mere beasts.

Cold waves radiated from the wolves, and their icy touch entered Sigmar's bones. Endless winter swept through his flesh in a moment, as though his blood had turned instantly to ice. A vision of vast, unending tundra, eternally roamed by packs of slaving wolves, flashed into his mind. Sigmar glanced at his fellow kings gathered at the ring of torches. None appeared to be feeling the dreadful cold. The breath of Ulric touched only him.

The wolves completed their inspection, and the vision faded from Sigmar's thoughts as they returned to their master's side. Their orange eyes never left Sigmar, and he knew their gaze would always be upon him, no matter where the paths of fate led him.

Apparently satisfied with his wolves' judgement, Ar-Ulric came around the cauldron to stand before him.

Like the wolves, the high priest carried the chill of unending winter, and Sigmar saw that the blade of his axe was indeed formed from a jagged shard of ice.

Sigmar knelt before the priest of the wolf god, but kept his head held high. He honoured Ar-Ulric, but he would not show fear before him.

The mighty priest towered over him, a primal presence that spoke of devotion beyond measure and a life of battle in realms beyond mortal ken. Where Sigmar had served Ulric faithfully in battle, Ar-Ulric was the very embodiment of Ulric. This warrior's power was enormous, and for him to emerge from the icy wilderness was a great honour.

‘You seek Ulric’s blessing,’ said Ar-Ulric, his voice hoarse, like a blast of winter wind and just as cold. ‘By what right do you think you are worthy of the lord of winter’s favour?’

‘By right of battle,’ said Sigmar, fighting to stop his teeth from chattering in the cold. ‘By my blood and sacrifice I have united my people. By such right, I claim dominion over the land, from the mountains to the seas, and all who dwell there.’

‘A good answer, King Sigmar,’ replied Ar-Ulric. ‘Ulric knows your name and watches you with interest. How is it that Ulric should care for the fate of a mortal such as you?’

‘I passed through the Flame of Ulric and was not burned,’ said Sigmar.

‘And you think that is enough?’

Sigmar shrugged.

‘I know not,’ he said, ‘but I have fought every battle with Ulric’s name on my lips. I could have done no more.’

Ar-Ulric reached down and took hold of Sigmar's head. The priest's fingers were sheathed in wolf claws, and Sigmar could smell the blood on them. 'I see into your heart, King Sigmar. Your lust for immortal glory sits alongside your devotion to Ulric. You seek to rival his mighty deeds and carve your name in the pages of history.'

Defiance flared in Sigmar's heart.

'Is that wrong?' he asked. 'To desire my name to live beyond my time in this world? Lesser men may be forgotten, but the name of Sigmar will echo into the future. With Ulric's blessing, I will forge the land into an empire that will endure until the end of all things.'

Ar-Ulric laughed, the sound as brittle as ice and as cold as the grave. 'Seek not immortality through war, for it will only bring you pain and death. Go from here, sire sons and daughters, and let them carry your name onwards. Seek not to match the gods in infamy.'

'No,' said Sigmar. 'My course is set. The life of hearth and home is not for me. I was not made for such things.'

‘In that you are correct,’ said Ar-Ulric. ‘There will be no soft bed to pass away the last breath of your dotage, not for you. A life of battle awaits you, Sigmar, and this pleases Ulric.’

‘Then you will bless my coronation?’

‘That remains to be seen,’ said Ar-Ulric. ‘Stand and call forth your sword-brothers.’

Sigmar forced himself to his feet, his limbs cold and muscles cramped. He turned towards the ring of firelight and scanned the crowd for his sword-brothers. At last, he saw them just beyond the ring of firelight.

‘Wolfgart! Pendrag!’ he shouted. ‘Come forth and stand with me.’

The kings parted to allow the two warriors through their ranks. Both were dressed in long tunics of red, with wide leather belts from which hung daggers and wolf-tail talismans. Pendrag’s attire was clean, where Wolfgart’s was crumpled and stained with grease and beer spills.

Both looked pleased to be asked to come forth, but

Sigmar could see their unease at being in the presence of the hulking priest of Ulric.

‘Damn, but I wish I was drunk,’ hissed Wolfgart, his gaze never leaving the burning eyes and bared fangs of Ar-Ulric’s wolves.

‘You already are, remember?’ said Pendrag.

‘Drunker then.’

A low snarl from the black wolf silenced them both.

‘My sword-brothers, Wolfgart and Pendrag,’ Sigmar told Ar-Ulric. ‘They have fought at my side since we were youngsters, and are bonded to me in blood.’

Ar-Ulric’s wolf-skull mask turned towards them, and Sigmar heard sharp intakes of breath as the full force of his frigid gaze swept over them.

The priest nodded and waved Sigmar’s sword-brothers forward.

‘Disrobe him,’ he said, ‘until he is as he came into this world.’

Sigmar handed Ghal-maraz to Wolfgart, and, piece by piece, his sword-brothers removed his clothing until he

stood naked before the cauldron. His body was lean and muscled, with a host of pale, ridged scars snaking their way over his arms and across his chest and shoulders.

‘This is the Cauldron of Woe,’ said Ar-Ulric. ‘It has been used for centuries to determine the worth of those who seek Ulric’s blessing.’

‘The Cauldron of Woe?’ asked Wolfgart. ‘Why’s it called that?’

‘Because those found unworthy do not survive its judgement,’ said Ar-Ulric.

‘You had to ask,’ snapped Pendrag, and Wolfgart shrugged.

‘How does it judge my worth?’ asked Sigmar, fearing he already knew the answer.

‘You must immerse yourself in its waters and if you emerge alive, you will have proved your worth.’

‘That doesn’t sound so hard,’ said Wolfgart. ‘It looks cold, sure enough, but that’s all.’

‘Do you want to try it?’ asked Sigmar, already imagining the freezing temperature of the icy water in the cauldron.

‘Oh no,’ said Wolfgart, putting up his hands. ‘This is your day after all.’

Sigmar gripped the cauldron’s edge, feeling the intense cold of the water through the iron. The ice on the surface was solid, but there would be no help in breaking it. He took a deep breath and hammered his fist upon the ice. Pain and cold flared up his arm, but the ice remained firm. Again, he slammed his fist down, and this time a spider-web of cracks appeared.

His hand was a mass of pain, but again and again Sigmar punched the ice until it broke apart beneath his assault. His chest heaved with painful breaths and his fist was covered in blood. Sweat was freezing on his brow, but before he could think of how cold the water was going to be, he hauled himself up and over the lip of the cauldron, and plunged in.

The cold hit Sigmar like a hammer-blow, and the breath was driven from him. He tried to cry out in pain, feeling his heart batter against his chest, but freezing water filled

his mouth. Bright light, like the dying sun of winter, flashed before his eyes.

Sigmar sank into the darkness of the cauldron.

□□*

The darkness beneath the surface of the water was absolute, unending and unyielding. Cold seared his limbs, the sensation akin to being burned. Strange that such icy water should feel like that. Sigmar sank deeper and deeper, far further than the cauldron's size should allow. His body tumbled in its icy depths, lost in the endless night of winter.

His lungs were afire as he tried to hold his breath, and his heart's protesting beat sounded like the pounding of orc war drums in his head. Images flashed before him in the darkness, scenes from his life replayed before him as they were said to do before the eyes of a drowning man. Sigmar watched himself lead the charge at the Battle of Astofen, feeling the savage joy of breaking the greenskin horde, and the numbing sorrow of Trinovantes's death.

He saw the fight against the forest beasts, the slaying of Skaranorak, the battle against the Thuringians and the wars he had fought against the Norsii. A rippling face drifted into view, cruelly handsome with lustrous dark hair and eyes of seductive malice.

Hate swelled in his breast as he recognised Gerreon, the betrayer who had slain his own sister and Sigmar's great love, the wondrous Ravenna. In the wake of his treachery, Gerreon had fled the lands of men, and none knew what had become of him, though Sigmar had always known there was blood yet to be shed between them.

Gerreon's face vanished, and Sigmar saw a great tower of pearl in a mountain valley, long hidden from the sight of men. Atop this tower, he saw a crown of ancient power, and the loathsome creature upon whose skeletal brow it sat. This too drifted from sight, and was replaced with a vision of a towering pinnacle of rock set amid a sprawling, endless forest. A city was built upon this rock, a mighty city of pale stone, and above its towers

and spires was a shimmering vision of a snarling white wolf.

Sigmar recognised the Fauschlag Rock, but not as he knew it. This city was old and time-worn, groaning at the seams with centuries of growth. Mighty causeways pierced the forest canopy, immense creations of stone that defied the eye with their enormous proportions.

They soared towards the summit of the rock, and a host of warriors garbed in strange, slashed tunics held them against attack.

An army of cruelly malformed horrors, each a hideous meld of man and beast, fought to destroy the city on the rock, but the courage of its defenders was unbreakable. Warriors in bloodstained armour of brazen iron gathered around the city in vast numbers, and the forest burned with sacrificial pyres to their Dark Gods.

The tide of beasts and warriors broke against the city's defences as a warrior clad in a suit of brilliant white armour sallied forth to break the charge of the hideous attackers. The warrior's face was obscured by the visor

of his winged helm, but Sigmar knew that whatever the identity of this warrior, his life was tied to that of the city. If he fell, the city would fall.

Before Sigmar could see more, the vision of battle faded as he sank deeper into the cold depths of the cauldron.

His strength was almost spent and his lungs cried out for air.

Was this how his dream of empire was to end? Was this how the greatest warrior in the lands of men was to die, frozen within the Cauldron of Woe and judged unworthy?

Anger lit a fire in Sigmar's heart, and fresh strength flooded his limbs. He swept his arms out with powerful strokes, determined not to die like this..

No sooner had he formed the thought than a shaft of light pierced the darkness, and Sigmar twisted in the water's icy embrace to seek its source. He saw a circle of brightness above him, and twisting spirals of red sank down through the water towards him.

Warmth and the promise of life were carried with the light, and he kicked upwards, swimming through the frozen water towards it. With each stroke, the light grew brighter, and the promise of life surged in his veins. Bursting for air, his head pounding with fiery agony, Sigmar swam through the descending trails of red liquid. He recognised it as blood, but knew not who or what had shed it.

The light shone like the new sun of spring, and with one last desperate heave, Sigmar broke the surface of the water.

Sigmar erupted from the cauldron, drawing in a huge, gulping breath. His vision swam, and he gripped the rim of the cauldron for support as he drew one tortured gasp after another. Cold water ran from his body in a torrent as he held himself upright, determined that he would stand tall before all who witnessed his icy rebirth. He felt the presence of warm bodies around him, and blinked water from his eyes. Standing around the

cauldron were Sigmar's fellow kings, each with bared arms that bled from deep cuts in their flesh. He looked down and saw the water was red with their blood. Ar-Ulric stood behind him. Sigmar swung his legs over the side of the cauldron, and stood naked before his people, holding himself upright with a supreme effort of will. The cold presence of Ar-Ulric moved closer, and a heavy wolfskin cloak was set upon Sigmar's shoulders. The pelt was warm and soft, and the aching cold of his immersion vanished in the time it took to fasten the leather thong at his neck.

'Kneel,' said Ar-Ulric, and Sigmar obeyed without hesitation.

The Oathstone was on the ground before him, and Sigmar placed his hand upon it. The stone was rough to the touch, red and streaked with gold veins unlike any other stone hewn from the rock of the mountains. It felt warm to the touch, and he heard a keening wail in his head, as though the stone itself was screaming. It was a

scream of joy, not of pain, and Sigmar smiled at this affirmation.

He looked up to see if anyone else could hear this scream of elation, but it was clear from the faces around him that the sound was for him and him alone.

Kurgan Ironbeard stepped from the circle of kings, a crown of wondrous design in his hands, a rune-inscribed circlet of gold and ivory set with precious stones. Sigmar lowered his head as the dwarf king handed the crown to Ar-Ulric. The mighty priest stood before him, but his freezing aura did not trouble Sigmar, the icy cold kept at bay by the magic of the wolfskin cloak.

Ar-Ulric raised the crown above his head for all to see.

The glow of the torches reflected from the ivory and jewels like starlight on silver, and Reikdorf held its breath. ‘The cauldron judges you worthy. You are reborn in the blood of kings.’

‘I was born in blood once before,’ replied Sigmar.

‘Serve Ulric well and your name will live on through the ages,’ said Ar-Ulric, setting the crown upon Sigmar’s soaking head.

It was a perfect fit, and as the crown settled on his brow the people of Reikdorf erupted in wild cheers, and the music of the pipers began anew. Drums beat and horns were blown as men and women of all the tribes roared their approval, dancing and singing, and beating swords on shields as the mood of jubilation spread throughout the city.

Kurgan Ironbeard leaned forward and said, ‘Wear this crown well, Sigmar, for it is the work of Alaric.’ The dwarf king winked. ‘He wanted to present it to you himself, but I am keeping him busy forging those swords I promised you.’

Sigmar smiled.

‘I will wear it with pride,’ he said.

‘Good lad,’ said Kurgan, as Wolfgart came forward, holding Ghal-maraz out to him.

Sigmar grasped the mighty warhammer, feeling the immense power the ancient craft of the mountain folk had wrought into its form. The hammer's grip fitted his hand as never before, and Sigmar knew that this moment would live in the hearts of men forever.

‘Arise, Sigmar Heldenhammer,’ cried Ar-Ulric,
‘Emperor of all the lands of men!’

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