Called to Account

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PROLOGUE

Matthias's mouth was dry, but his hands were clammy. He'd always wanted it, of course. He had plotted it. His brother, Rudolf, had been clever, but weak. But now it was a reality he, well, he feared it. Part of him wished that Henry IV of France had lived and taken this, his birthright, Holy Roman Emperor. But he hadn't. The Treaty of Augsburg was fracturing. The peace and tolerance that both his father, Maximillian, and brother, Rudolph, had pursued, was failing. Protestantism was expanding beyond the agreed boundaries, like a cancer. He looked up from the parchment on his desk, into Melchior's eyes. They showed no emotion. Bishop Melchior Klesl had been chief advisor to his brother Rudolph. If he had found a better man himself, he wouldn't have taken Melchior as his advisor. But Melchior was a very astute man.

'Your Majesty, have you given any consideration to the problem of cereal prices?'

'Melchior, much as I should like to control the weather, it seems beyond my power. I shall continue to pray for good harvests, and encourage my bishops, although I'm sure they already do.'

'It was the question of subsidy, and building more grain silos, that I was thinking of, Your Majesty.'

'If the cities showed a little more respect, I should consider it. How could I commit investment when I am uncertain of their loyalty? Their stream of demands seems never ending.'

'Your Majesty, concerning the unrest in the cities, and Frankfurt in particular, I recommend that the councillors be required to swear an oath of allegiance. It would be best before your coronation, rather than after it.'

'Yes, Melchior, you are a wise counsellor. Make the arrangements.' As Melchior bowed and turned to leave, Matthias felt the sudden urge to make his own mark. 'Make it clear that if they don't so swear, then they will lose their rights and privileges.'

'Of course, Your Majesty.'



The chamber of the Frankfurt city council had three tiers of benches. They reserved the highest benches for the almost aristocratic city fathers. There were forty-three of them, their positions handed down through the families. In addition, and to show willingness to listen to other views, there were fifteen artisans, handpicked for their obedience. At this council meeting, there was an unusually large number of men in the public space. Their ringleader was well known to the mayor, Hans Friedrich. He baked the bread and, particularly the gingerbread, the mayor enjoyed so much.

'Very well, Herr Fettmilch, say your piece. But please keep it short. We have important business to conduct.'

'What are you doing about grain prices?'

'We have appealed to the emperor for subsidy and investment in grain silos. We shall have to wait and see what his decision is.'

'The people can't wait. The harvests have been so variable, and the current situation helps nobody. Farmers like Andreas Bauer, here, need to know what prices they are going to get. Don't you, Andreas?' There was a cheer from

Bauer in the row behind Fettmilch.

'Millers like Franz Müller here need to know what they're going to pay for grain.'

'That's right,' yelled the man beside Fettmilch.

'All the bakers, not just me, but Ernst Hartmann and Victor Krause here, and the others who couldn't come today, need to know flour prices. What are you doing about it?'

'As I've already said, we have appealed to the emperor for assistance.'

'Why can't the council do something? You're wealthy enough. You're all here on the council because your rich fathers were, and their fathers before them.'

'Herr Fettmilch, you won't get anywhere with such accusations. The governance of the city has been laid down in the charters for centuries. Now, is there anything else, or can we move on to more important matters?'

'Yes, there is something else. What about this oath of allegiance for the new emperor? What we want to know is what these rights and privileges are, that we're going to lose if we don't swear allegiance.'

'Well, they are all set out in the charters.'

'So read them to us. We have a right to know what they are,' Vincenz Fettmilch demanded, to appreciative murmurs from the surrounding mob. Victor Krause, a younger man with curly red hair, stood beside him and slapped him on the back.

'That's right. Read them to us!' Krause shouted.

'We will do no such thing,' Mayor Friedrich retorted. The councillors and artisans around him nodded.

'Is that because you're taxing us too much, and raking off a cut from the fees, you let the Jews extort from us, when we borrow the money to feed our children?' Fettmilch shouted above the chorus of approval from the mob. 'Expel the Jews!'

'The Jews were granted the right to live in the city by the Holy Roman Emperor. So it is not within our power to

expel them, even if we wanted to.'

'The emperor wanted their money, just like you do. You're all the same. Show us the charters!'

'We will not. You cast a vile slur on our integrity. Go back to your homes.'

'We won't, will we, brothers?' Fettmilch turned to the mob for approval. They cheered and waved their fists. 'We'll form a committee. We'll come here for every council meeting, and every trial, until you show us the charters. We demand to know our rights.' Councillor Gottburger whispered in Mayor Friedrich's ear. They both nodded.

'Very well, we will show you the charters. But if we do, then you become as responsible as we are for the governance of the city. If any city property is damaged, you will pay your share of the repair. You will answer to the emperor and the bishop, just as we have to. All of you will have to pay,' Mayor Friedrich said, pointing his finger along the rows of citizens who were suddenly quiet. 'No, I thought not. Now go to your homes.' The crowd dispersed. Vincenz Fettmilch pleaded with them to stay, but as the last one sidled out, he turned back to face the councillors.

'You haven't heard the last of this.' Then he turned and left, too.