



A WARHAMMER SS

A CHOICE OF HATREDS

Mathias Thulmann - 00a

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(An Undead Scan v1.5)

This is a dark age, a bloody age, an age of daemons and of sorcery. It is an age of battle and death, and of the world's ending. Amidst all of the fire, flame and fury it is a time, too, of mighty heroes, of bold deeds and great courage.

At the heart of the Old World sprawls the Empire, the largest and most powerful of the human realms. Known for its engineers, sorcerers, traders and soldiers, it is a land of great mountains, mighty rivers, dark forests and vast cities. And from his throne in Altdorf reigns the Emperor Karl Franz, sacred descendant of the founder of these lands, Sigmar, and wielder of his magical warhammer.

But these are far from civilised times. Across the length and breadth of the Old World, from the knightly palaces of Bretonnia to ice-bound Kislev in the far north, come rumblings of war. In the towering Worlds Edge Mountains, the orc tribes are gathering for another assault. Bandits and renegades harry the wild southern lands of the Border Princes. There are rumours of rat-things, the skaven, emerging from the sewers and swamps across the land. And from the northern wildernesses there is the ever-present threat of Chaos, of daemons and beastmen corrupted by the foul powers of the Dark Gods. As the time of battle draws ever near, the Empire needs heroes like never before.

On the outskirts of the small town of Kleinsdorf, a group of raucous men gathered in a fallow field. Before them stood an inverted anvil upon which a burly man garbed in a heavy blacksmith's apron set a second anvil. The man's bearded face split into a booming laugh as one of his comrades lit a hemp fuse that slithered between the anvils to reach a small charge of gunpowder. A hushed silence fell upon the men as the smouldering flame slowly burned its way to the explosive. Suddenly a tremendous boom echoed across the barren fields and the uppermost anvil was thrown into the sky to crash into the ground several yards away. A great cheer erupted from the group and the blacksmith set off at a lumbering jog to retrieve the heavy iron projectile, even as one of his friends prepared another charge.

"It looks like we have chanced into a bit of a celebration, eh, Mathias?" commented a stout, bearded rider on the road overlooking the anvil-firing party.

The man wore a battered and ill-mended pair of leather breeches; an equally battered jerkin of studded leather struggled to contain the man's slight paunch. Greasy, swine-like eyes peered from either side of a splayed nose while an unkempt beard clothed his forward-jutting jaw. From a scabbard at his side a broadsword swayed with each step of his horse.

"We come here seeking rest, friend Streng, not to indulge your penchant for debauchery," replied the second rider. A tall, grim figure, the second man was his companion's senior by at least a decade. Where Streng's attire was shabby and worn, this man's was opulent. Immaculate shiny leather boots rose to the man's knees and his back was enveloped by a heavy black cape lined with the finest ermine. Fine calfskin gauntlets garbed slender-fingered hands while a tunic of red satin embroidered with gold clothed his arms and chest. The wide rounded brim of his leather hat cast a shadow upon the rider's features. Hanging from a dragonskin belt with an enormous silver buckle were a pair of holstered pistols and a slender-bladed longsword.

"You are the one who has taken so many fine vows to Sigmar," Streng said with a voice that was not quite a sneer. "I recall taking no such vows."

Mathias turned to look at his companion and his face emerged from the shadow cast by the brim of his hat. The older man's visage was gaunt, dominated by a narrow, dagger-like nose and the thin moustache that rested between it and the man's slender lips. A grey arrow of beard stabbed out from the man's chin. His eyes were of similar flinty hue but burnt with a strange intensity, a determination and zeal that were at odds with the glacial hue.

"You make no vows to Sigmar, yet you take the Temple's gold easily enough," Mathias locked eyes with his comrade. Some of the glib disrespect in Streng's manner dissipated as he met that gaze.

"I've not seen many monks with so fine a habit as yours," Streng said, turning his eyes from his companion.

"It is sometimes wise to remind people that Sigmar rewards service in this life as well as the hereafter." Mathias looked away from his henchman and stared at the town before them.

A small settlement of some thousand persons, the simple wooden structures were close together, the streets narrow and crooked. Everywhere there was laughter and singing, music from mandolin and fife. A celebratory throng choked the streets, dancing with recklessness born more of joy than drink, at least in this early hour of the festival. Yet, none were so reckless as not to make way for Mathias as he manoeuvred his steed into the narrow streets, nor to make the sign of Sigmar's Hammer with the witch hunter's passing.

"I shall take room at the inn. You find a stable for the horses," Mathias said as he and Streng rode through the crowd.

"And then?" asked Streng, a lustful gleam in his eyes and a lecherous grin splitting his face.

“I care not what manner of sin you find fit to soil your soul with,” snarled the witch hunter. “Just see that you are in condition to ride at cock’s crow.”

As they talked, the pair did not observe the stealthy figure who watched their exchange from behind a hay-laden wagon. They did not see the same figure emerge from its hiding place with their passing, nor the venomous glare it sent after them.

Gustav sipped at the small glass of Tilean wine, listening to the sounds of merriment beyond the walls of his inn. A greedy glint came to the innkeeper’s eyes as he thought of the vacant rooms above his head and the drunken men who would fill them before the night was through. The Festival of Wilhelmstag brought many travellers to Kleinsdorf, travellers who would find themselves too drunk or too fatigued to quit the town once the festivities reached their end. Few would be lucid enough to haggle over the “competitive” fee Gustav charged his annual Wilhelmstag guests.

Gustav again sipped at his wine, silently toasting Wilhelm Hoess and the minotaur lord which had been kind enough to let itself and its horde of Chaos spawn be slaughtered in the streets of Kleinsdorf two centuries past. Even now, the innkeeper could see the gilded skull of the monster atop a pole in the centre of the square outside, torchlight from the celebratory throng below it dancing across the golden surface. Gustav hoped that the minotaur was enjoying the view, for tomorrow the skull would return to a chest in the town hall, there to reside until next Wilhelmstag.

The opening of the inn’s front door roused the innkeeper from his thoughts. Gustav smiled.

The first sheep comes to be fleeced, he thought as he scuttled away from the window. But the smile died when Gustav’s eyes observed the countenance of his new guest. The high black hat, flowing cape and expensive weapons combined with the stern visage of the man’s face told Gustav what this man was even before he saw the burning gleam in those cold grey eyes.

“I am sorry, my lord, but I am afraid that I have no rooms that are free.” Gustav winced as the witch hunter’s eyes stared into his own. “The... the festival. It brings many guests. If you had only come on another night...” the innkeeper stammered.

“Your common room is also filled?” the witch hunter interrupted.

“Why no,” Gustav said, a nervous tic causing his left eye to twitch uncontrollably.

“Then you may move one of your guests to the common room,” the witch hunter declared. Gustav nodded his agreement even as he inwardly cursed the man. The common room was a long hall at the side of the inn lined with pallets of straw. Even drunkards would be unwilling to pay much for such lodgings.

“You may show me my room,” the witch hunter said, his firm hand grasping Gustav’s shoulder and pushing the innkeeper ahead of himself. “I trust that you have something appropriate for a devoted servant of Sigmar?”

“Yes, my lord,” Gustav said, altering his course away from the closet-like chamber he had thought to give the witch hunter. He led the way up a flight of stairs to one of the larger rooms. The witch hunter peered into the chamber while the innkeeper held the door open.

“No, I think not,” the witch hunter declared. The bearded face moved closer toward Gustav’s own and one of the gloved fingers touched the twitching muscle beside the innkeeper’s eye.

“Interesting,” Mathias said, not quite under his breath. The innkeeper’s eyes grew wide with fright, seeming to see the word “mutation” forming in the witch hunter’s mind.

“A nervous twitch, nothing more,” Gustav muttered, knowing that even so slight a physical defect had put men to the stake in many backwater towns. “I have a much nicer room, if you would follow me.” Gustav turned, leading the witch hunter to a second flight of stairs.

“Yes, this will do,” Mathias stated when Gustav led him into a large and well-furnished room at the very top of the inn. Gustav smiled and nodded his head nervously.

"It is my honour to serve a noble Templar of Sigmar," the innkeeper said as he walked to the large oak wardrobe that dominated one corner of the room. Gustav opened the wardrobe and removed his own nightshirt and cap from it.

"I will dine here," Mathias declared, settling into a large chair and removing his weapon-laden belt. "A goose and some wine, I think." The witch hunter stroked his moustache with his thumb and forefinger.

"I will see to it," the innkeeper said, knowing better than to challenge his most-unwanted guest. Gustav paused a few steps away from the witch hunter. Mathias reached into a pocket in the lining of his tunic and tossed a few coins into the man's hands. Gustav stared stupidly at them for several seconds.

"I did not come for the festival," explained Mathias, "so I should not have to pay festival prices." The witch hunter suddenly cocked his head and stared intently at Gustav's twitching eye.

"I shall see about your supper," Gustav whimpered as he hurried from the room.

The streets of Kleinsdorf were alive with rejoicing. Everywhere there was dancing and singing. But all the laughter and joy in the world could not touch the figure that writhed its way through the crowd. The dark, shabby cloak of the man, meant to keep him inconspicuous, was at odds with the bright fabrics and flowers of the revellers and made him stand out all the more. Dozens of times Reinhardt von Lichtberg had been forced to ward away garishly clad townspeople who thought to exorcise this wraith of melancholy in their midst with dance and drink. Reinhardt spat into the dust. A black-hearted murderer had descended upon this place and all these idiots could do was dance and laugh. Well, if things turned out as Reinhardt planned, he too would have cause to dance and laugh. Before they stretched his neck from a gallows.

Hands clasped Reinhardt's shoulders and spun the young man around. So lost in thoughts of revenge was he that he did not even begin to react before warm, moist lips closed about his own. The woman detached herself and stared up into the young man's face.

"I don't believe that I know you," Reinhardt said as his eyes considered the golden-haired, well-built woman smiling impishly at him and the taste of ale that covered his lips.

"You could," the woman smiled. "The Festival of Wilhelmstag is a time for finding new people."

Reinhardt shook his head. "I am looking for no one new." Reinhardt found himself thinking again of Mina and how she had died. And how her murderer would die.

"You have not seen a witch hunter, by any chance?" Reinhardt asked. The woman's smile turned into a full-lipped pout.

"I've met his surrogate," the girl swore. "Over at the beer hall, drinking like an orc and carrying on like a Tilean sailor. Mind you, no decent woman had better get near him." The impish smile returned and the woman pulled scandalously at the torn fringe of her bodice. "See what the brute did to me."

Reinhardt grabbed the woman's arms in a vice-like grip.

"Did he say where Mathias Thulmann, the witch hunter, is?" Reinhardt snarled. The coyness left the woman's face as the drunken haze was replaced by something approaching fear.

"The inn, he was taking a room at the inn." The girl retreated into the safety of the crowd as Reinhardt released her. The nobleman did not even notice her go, his mind already processing the information she had given him. His right hand slid beneath the shabby cloak and closed around the hilt of his sword.

"Soon, Mina," Reinhardt whispered, "soon your murderer will discover what suffering is."

Gerhardt Knauf had never known terror such as he now felt. The wonderful thrill of fear that he enjoyed when engaging in his secret activities was gone. The presence of the witch hunter had

driven home the seriousness of discovery in a way that Knauf had never fully comprehended before. The shock and looks of disbelief he had visualised on his neighbours' faces when they realised that the merchant was more than he seemed had become the frenzied visages of a bloodthirsty mob. In his imagination, Knauf could even smell the kindling as it caught flame.

The calf-eyed merchant with his beetle-like brow downed the contents of the tankard resting on the bar before him in a single bolt. Knauf pressed a hand against his mouth, struggling to keep the beer from leaving his body as quickly as it had entered it. The merchant managed to force the bile back into his stomach and let his head sway towards the man sitting beside him.

"Mueller," croaked Knauf, his thin voice struggling to maintain a semblance of dignity, even as he struggled against fear and inebriation. The heavy set mercenary at his side looked away from the gob of wax he had been whittling into a lewd shape and regarded the merchant.

"You have done jobs for me before," Knauf continued.

"Aye," the mercenary cautiously replied, fingering his knife.

"And I have always paid you fairly and promptly," the merchant added, his head swaying from side to side like some bloated reptile.

"That is true enough," Mueller said, a smirk on his face. The truth of it was that Knauf was too timid to be miserly when it came to paying the men who protected his wagons. A cross look from Rail, or Gunther, or even from the scarecrow-like Hossbach, and the mercenaries would see an increase in their wages.

"Would you say that we are friends?" Knauf said, reaching for another ceramic tankard of beer. He swallowed only half the tankard's contents this time, spilling most of the remainder when he clumsily set the vessel back upon the table.

"Were you to pay me enough, I would even say that we were brothers," Mueller replied, struggling to contain the laughter building within his gut. But the condescending sarcasm in the mercenary's voice was lost on the half-drunken Knauf. The merchant caught hold of Mueller's arm and stared into his face with pleading eyes.

"Would you murder for me?" the merchant hissed. This time Mueller did laugh.

"By Ulric's fangs, Gerhardt!" the mercenary swore. "Who could you possibly hate enough to need killed?" Mueller laughed again and downed his own tankard of beer.

"The witch hunter," whispered Knauf, his head swaying from side to side to ensure that no one had overheard.

"Have you been reading things you shouldn't?" Mueller asked, only half-seriously. The look of fear in Knauf's eyes killed the joke forming on the mercenary's lips. Mueller rose from his chair and stared down at the merchant.

"Forty gold crowns," the mercenary declared, waving away the look of joy and hope crawling across Knauf's features. "And as far as the boys are concerned, you are paying us ten." Mueller turned away from the table and started to walk into the main room of the beer hall.

"Where are you going?" Knauf called after Mueller in a voice that sounded unusually shrill even for the merchant.

"To get Hossbach and the others," Mueller said. "Maybe I'll see if I can't learn something about our friend as well." The mercenary turned away. He only got a few steps before Knauf's drunken hands were scrabbling at the man's coat.

"How are you going to do that?" Knauf hissed up at him with alarm.

Mueller extracted himself from the merchant's grip. He pointed a finger to the far end of the beer hall where a bawdy song and shrieks of mock indignation marked the crowd gathered in morbid fascination around the man who had rode into Kleinsdorf with the witch hunter.

"How else? I'll speak with his lackey." Mueller shook his head as Knauf started to protest. "Leave this to me. Why don't you go home and get my gold ready?" The mercenary did not wait to

see if Knauf would follow his suggestion, but continued across the beer hall, liberating a metal stein from a buxom barmaid along the way.

“Sometimes they confess straight away,” Streng was saying as Mueller inconspicuously joined his audience. “That’s the worst of it. There’s nothing left to do but string them up, or burn them if they’ve been particularly bad.” Streng paused to smile at the woman sitting on his knee.

“So how do you go about finding a witch?” Mueller interrupted Streng’s carousing. The lout turned to Mueller and regarded him with an irritated sneer.

“I don’t. That’s the Templar’s job. Mathias finds them and then I make them confess. That way everything is above board and the Temple can burn the filthy things without anybody being upset.” Streng turned away from Mueller and returned his attention to his companion.

“So your master has come to Kleinsdorf looking for witches?” Mueller interrupted again.

Streng shook his head and glared at this man who insisted on intruding on his good time.

“Firstly, Mathias Thulmann is not my master. We’re partners, him and me, that’s what it is. Secondly, we are on our way to Stirland. Lots of witches down in Stirland.” Streng snorted derisively. “Do you honestly think we’d cross half the Empire to come here?” Streng laughed. “I wouldn’t cross a meadow to come to this rat nest,” he said, before adding, “present company excepted, of course,” to the locals gathered around him.

As Streng returned his attention to the giggling creature seated on his knee, Mueller extracted himself from the hangers-on and made his way toward the beer hall’s exit. The mercenary spied a familiar face in the crowd and waved the man over to him. A young, wiry man with a broken nose and a livid scar across his forearm walked over to Mueller. The mercenary took the flower-festooned hat from the man’s head and sent it sailing across the crowded room with a flick of his wrist.

“Go get Gunther and Hossbach,” Mueller snarled. “I found us some night work.” The angry look on the young man’s face disappeared at the mention of work. Rail set off at a brisk jog to find his fellow sellswords. Mueller looked at the crowd around Streng one last time before leaving the beer hall.

The mercenary had found out all that he needed to know. The witch hunter was only passing through Kleinsdorf; he would not be expecting any trouble. Like all the other jobs he had done for Gerhardt Knauf, this one would hardly be difficult enough to be called “work”.

A cheer went up from the crowd below as a small boy shimmied up the massive pole standing in the centre of the square and thrust a crown of flowers on the gilded skull at its top.

At the moment, Reinhardt von Lichtberg envied the boy his agility. The nobleman was gripping the outer wall of the inn, thirty feet above the square. To an observer, he might have looked like a great brown bat clinging to the wall of a cave. But there were no eyes trained upon Reinhardt, at least not at present. The few revellers who had lifted their heads skyward were watching the boy descend the pole with a good deal less bravado than he had ascended with. Still, the threat of discovery was far too real and Reinhardt was not yet ready to see the inside of a cell.

Slowly, carefully, Reinhardt worked his fingers from one precarious handhold to another. Only a few feet away he could see the window that was his goal. It had been easy to determine which room the murderer occupied; his was the only window from which light shone. Somehow it did not surprise Reinhardt that the witch hunter had taken a room on the inn’s top floor. One last trial, one final obstacle before vengeance could be served.

At last he reached the window and Reinhardt stared through the glass, seeing for the first time in six months the man who had destroyed his life. The murderer sat in a wooden chair, a small table set before him. He cut morsels from a large roasted goose, a wicker-shrouded bottle of wine sitting beside it.

Reinhardt watched for a moment as the monster ate, burning the hated image of the man into his memory. He hoped that the meal was a good one, for it would be the witch hunter’s last.

With an animal cry, Reinhardt crashed through the window, broken glass and splintered wood flying across the room. Landing on his feet, the sword at his side was in his hand in less than a heartbeat. To his credit, the witch hunter reacted swiftly, kicking the small table at Reinhardt an instant after he landed in the room while diving in the opposite direction to gain the pistols and longsword that lay upon the bed. But Reinhardt had the speed of youth and the martial training of one who might have been a captain in the Reiksguard on his side. More, he had purpose.

The witch hunter's claw-like hand closed around the grip of his pistol just as cold steel touched his throat. There was a brief pause as Thulmann regarded the blade poised at his neck before releasing his weapon and holding his hands up in surrender. Both arms raised above his head, Mathias Thulmann faced the man with a sword at his throat.

"I fear that you will not find much gold," Mathias said, his voice low and unafraid.

"You do not remember me, do you?" Reinhardt snarled. "Or are you going to pretend that your name is not Mathias Thulmann, Templar of Sigmar, witch hunter?"

"That is indeed my name, and my trade," replied Mathias, his voice unchanged.

"My name is Reinhardt von Lichtberg," spat the other, pressing the tip of his blade into Mathias' throat until a bead of crimson slid down the steel. "I am the man who is going to kill you."

"To avenge your lost love?" the witch hunter mused, a touch of pity seeming to enter his voice. "You should thank me for restoring her soul to the light of Sigmar."

"*Thank you?*" Reinhardt bellowed incredulously. The youth fought to keep himself from driving his sword through the witch hunter's flesh. "Thank you for imprisoning us, torturing us? Thank you for burning Mina at the stake? Thank you for destroying the only thing that made my life worth living?" Reinhardt clenched his fist against the wave of rage that pounded through his body. He shook his head from side to side.

"We were to be married," the nobleman stated. "I was to serve the Emperor in his Reiksguard and win glory and fame. Then I would return and she would be waiting for me to make her my wife." Reinhardt pulled a fat skinning knife from a sheath on his belt. "You took that from me. You took it all away." Reinhardt let the light play across the knife in his left hand as he rolled his wrist back and forth. The witch hunter continued to watch him, his eyes hooded, his face betraying no fear or even concern. Reinhardt noted the man's seeming indifference to his fate.

"You will scream," he swore. "Before I let you die, Sigmar himself will hear your screams."

The hand with the knife moved toward the witch hunter's body... And for the second time that evening, Mathias Thulmann had unexpected visitors.

The door burst inwards, bludgeoned from its hinges by the ogrelike man who followed the smashed portal into the room. Three other men were close behind the ape-like bruiser. All four of them wore a motley array of piecemeal armour, strips of chainmail fastened to leather tunics, bands of steel woven to a padded hauberk. The only aspect that seemed to link the four men was the look of confusion on their faces.

"The witch hunter was supposed to be alone," stated Rail, puzzled by the strange scene they had stumbled upon. Reinhardt turned his body toward the mercenaries, keeping his sword at Mathias' throat.

"Which one is he?" asked Rail, clearly not intending the question for either of the men already in the room.

"Why don't we just kill them both?" the scarecrow-thin figure of Hossbach said, stepping toward Reinhardt.

Like a lightning bolt, the skinning knife went flying across the room. Hossbach snarled as he dodged the projectile. The mercenary did not see the sword that flashed away from Thulmann's throat to slice across his armour and split his stomach across its centre. Hossbach toppled against the

man who had dealt him the fatal wound. His sword forgotten on the floor, the mercenary clutched at Reinhardt, grabbing for the man's sword arm. Reinhardt kicked the dying man away from him, sending him crashing into the foot of the bed, but Hossbach had delayed him long enough. The brutish fist of Gunther crashed into Reinhardt's face while his dagger sought to bury itself in the pit of Reinhardt's left arm. The nobleman managed to grab his attacker's wrist, slowing the deadly blade's strike. The blade pierced his skin but did not sink into his heart. His huge opponent let a feral smile form on his face as he put more strength into the struggle. Slowly, by the slightest of measures, the dagger continued its lethal passage.

Suddenly the sound of thunder assailed Reinhardt's ears; a stench like rotten eggs filled his nose. One moment he had been staring into the triumphant face of his attacker. In the next instant the mercenary's head was a red ruin. The hand on the dagger slid away and the mercenary fell to the floor like a felled tree. Reinhardt saw one of the attackers run through the shattered doorway. The other lay with a gory wound on the side of his head at the feet of the only other man still standing in the room.

A plume of grey smoke rose from the barrel of the pistol Mathias Thulmann held in his right hand. The other pistol, its butt bloody from its impact against the mercenary's skull, was cocked and pointed at Reinhardt von Lichtberg's own head.

"It seems the last of these yapping curs has not seen fit to remain with us," Thulmann said. Although he now held the upper hand, the witch hunter still possessed the same air of cold indifference.

"Go ahead and kill me, butcher," Reinhardt swore, his heart afire with the injustice of it all. To come so close... "You will be doing me a service," he added.

"There are some things you should know before I decide if you should live or die," the witch hunter sat down on the bed, motioning Reinhardt to a position from which the pistol could cover him more easily.

"Have you not wondered what brought me to your father's estate?" Mathias asked. He saw the slight look of interest surface amidst Reinhardt's mask of hate. "I was summoned by Father Haefen." Reinhardt started at the mention of the wizened old priest of Sigmar who led his father's household in their devotions. It was impossible for him to believe that the kindly soft-spoken old man could have been responsible for bringing about Mina's death. The witch hunter continued to speak.

"The father reported that one of his parish was touched by Chaos," Thulmann paused, letting the distasteful word linger in the air. "A young woman who was with child, whose own mother bespoke the irregularities that were manifesting beneath her skin."

Stunned shock claimed Reinhardt. With child. His child.

"Upon my arrival, I examined the woman and discovered that her mother's fears had proven themselves," Thulmann shook his head sadly. "Her background was not of a suspicious nature, but the Darkness infects even the most virtuous. It was necessary to question her, to learn the source of her affliction. After several hours, she said your name."

"Hours of torture!" Reinhardt spat, face twisted into an animal snarl. "And then you took me so that your creature might 'question' me!"

"Yes!" affirmed Thulmann, fire in his voice. "As the father, the source of her corruption might lie within you, yourself! It was necessary to discover if there were others! Chaos is a contagion, where one is infected others soon fall ill!"

"Yet you released me," challenged Reinhardt, the shame he felt at his own survival further fuelling the impotent rage roaring through his veins.

"There was no corruption in you," the witch hunter said, almost softly. "Nor in the girl, not in her soul at least. It was days later that she confessed the crime that had been the cause of her corruption." The witch hunter stared into Reinhardt's blazing eyes.

"Do you know a Doktor Weichs?" he asked.

“Freiherr Weichs?” Reinhardt answered. “My father’s physician?”

“Also physician to his household. Your Mina confided a most private problem with Weichs. She was worried that her condition would prevent you from leaving the von Lichtberg estate, from joining the Reiksguard and seeking the honour and glory that were your due. Weichs gave her a potion of his own creation which he assured her would dissolve the life within her womb as harmlessly as it had formed.”

Mathias Thulmann shook his head again. “That devil’s brew Weichs created was what destroyed your Mina, for it contained warpstone.” The witch hunter paused again, studying Reinhardt. “I see that you are unfamiliar with the substance. It is the pure essence of Chaos, the black effluent of all the world’s evil. In the days before Magnus the Pious, it was thought to possess healing properties, but only a fool or a madman would have anything to do with the stuff in this more enlightened age. Instead of destroying the life in the girl’s belly, the warpstone changed it, corrupted woman and child. When I discovered this, I knew you were innocent and had you released.”

“And burned her!” Reinhardt swore.

The witch hunter did not answer the youth but instead kicked the figure lying at his feet.

“There is life in you yet,” Thulmann snarled, looking back at Reinhardt to remind his prisoner that his pistol was yet trained on him. “Account for yourself, pig! Who sends you to harm a duly-ordained servant of Sigmar?”

Mueller groaned as he rolled onto his side, staring at the witch hunter through a swollen eye. Carefully he put a hand to his split lip and wiped the trickle of blood from his mouth.

“Gerhardt... Knauf,” Mueller said between groans. “It was Gerhardt Knauf, the merchant. He was afraid you had come to Kleinsdorf seeking him.”

Mathias Thulmann let a grim smile part his lips. “I am looking for him now,” he stated. The witch hunter smashed the heel of his boot into the grovelling mercenary’s neck, crushing the man’s windpipe. Mueller uttered a half-gargle, half-gasp and writhed on the floor as he desperately tried to breathe. Thulmann turned away from the dying wretch.

“This Knauf has reasons to see me dead,” Thulmann told Reinhardt, as though the noble had not heard the exchange between witch hunter and mercenary. “Reasons which lie in the corruption of his mind and soul. If you would avenge your beloved, do so upon one deserving of your wrath, the same sort of filth that destroyed the girl long before I set foot in your father’s house.”

Reinhardt glared at the witch hunter. “I will kill you,” he said in a voice as cold as the grave. Mathias Thulmann sighed and removed a set of manacles from the belt lying on the bed.

“I cannot let you interfere with my holy duty,” the witch hunter said, pressing the barrel of the pistol against Reinhardt’s temple. Thulmann closed one of the steel bracelets around the youth’s wrist, locking it shut with a deft twist of an iron key. The other half of the manacles he closed around one of the bed posts, trapping the bracelet between the mattress and the wooden globe that topped the post.

“This should ensure that you do not interfere,” Mathias explained as he retrieved the rest of his weapons and stepped over the writhing Mueller.

“I will kill you, Mathias Thulmann,” Reinhardt repeated as the witch hunter left the room. As soon as the cloaked shape was gone, Reinhardt dropped to his knees and stretched his hand toward the ruined body of the mercenary who had almost killed him—and the small hatchet attached to the man’s belt.

Gerhardt Knauf paced nervously across his bedchamber. It had been nearly an hour and still he had had no word from Mueller.

Not for the first time, the merchant cast his eyes toward the small door at the top of the stairs. The tiny room within was the domain of Knauf’s secret vice, the storehouse of all the forbidden and arcane knowledge Knauf had obtained over the years: the grimoire of a centuries-dead Bretonnian witch; the abhorred *Ninth Canticle of Tzeentch*, its mad author’s name lost to the ages; a book of

incantations designed to bring prosperity, or alternately ruin, by the infamous sorcerer Verlag Duhring. All the black secrets that had given Knauf his power made him better than the ignorant masses that surrounded him, who sneered at his eccentric ways. Before the black arts at his command, brutish men like Mueller were nothing; witch hunters were nothing.

Knauf took another drink from the bottle of wine he had removed from his cellar. The sound of someone pounding on the door of his villa caused the merchant to set his drink down. "Finally," he thought.

But the figure that greeted Knauf when he gazed down from his window was not that of Mueller. Instead he saw the scarlet and black garbed form of the mercenary's victim. With a horrified gasp, Knauf withdrew from the window.

"He has come for me," the merchant shuddered. Mueller and his men had failed and now there was no one to stand between Knauf and the determined witch hunter. Knauf shrieked as he heard a loud explosion from below and the splintering of wood as the door was kicked open. He had only moments in which to save himself from the witch hunter's justice, to avoid the flames that were the price of the knowledge he had sought.

A smile appeared on Knauf's face. The merchant raced for the garret room. If there was no one who would save him from the witch hunter, there was *something* that might:

* * *

Mathias Thulmann paused on the threshold of the merchant's villa and holstered the smoking pistol in his hand. One shot from the flintlock weapon had been enough to smash the lock on the door, one kick enough to force open the heavy oak portal. The witch hunter drew his second pistol, the one he had reloaded after the melee at the inn and scanned the darkened foyer. No sign of life greeted Thulmann's gaze and he stepped cautiously into the room, watching for the slightest movement in the darkness.

Suddenly the witch hunter's head snapped around, his eyes fixating upon the stairway leading from the foyer to the chambers above. He could sense the dark energies that were gathering somewhere in the rooms above him. Somewhere in this house, someone was calling upon the Ruinous Powers. Thulmann shifted the pistol to his other hand and drew the silvered blade of his sword, blessed by the Grand Theogonist himself, and grimly ascended the stairs.

Gerhardt Knauf could feel the eldritch energies gathering in the air around him as he read from the *Ninth Canticle of Tzeentch*. The power was almost a tangible quantity as it surged from the warlock and gathered at the centre of a ring of lighted candles. A nervous laugh interrupted the arcane litany streaming from Knauf's lips as he saw the first faint glimmer of light appear. Swiftly, the glow grew in size, keeping pace with the increasing speed of the words flying from Knauf's tongue. The crackling nimbus took on a pinkish hue and the first faint suggestion of a shape within the light was visible to him.

No, the warlock realised, there was not a shape within the light; rather, the light was assuming a shape. As the blasphemous litany continued, a broad torso coalesced from which two long, simian arms dangled, each ending in an enormous clawed hand. Two short, thick legs slowly grew away from the torso until they touched the wooden floor. Finally, a head sprouted from between the two arms, growing away from the body so that the head was between its shoulders rather than above them. A gargoyle face appeared, its fanged mouth stretching across the head in a hideous grin. Two swirling pools of orange light stared at the warlock.

The daemon uttered a loathsome sound like the wailing of an infant, a sound hideous in its suggestion of malevolent mirth.

Knauf shuddered and turned his eyes from the frightful thing he had summoned. In so doing, his gaze fell upon his feet and the colour drained away from his face as the horror of what he had done became known to him.

The first thing Knauf had learned, the most important rule he had found repeated again and again in the arcane books he had so long hoarded, was that a sorcerer must always protect himself from that which he would have do his bidding. In his haste to save himself from the witch hunter, to summon this creature of Tzeentch, Knauf had forgotten to draw about himself a protective circle, a barrier that no daemon may cross.

Knauf's mind desperately groped amongst its store of arcane knowledge seeking some enchantment, some spell that would save the warlock from his hideous mistake. Before him, the daemon uttered its loathsome laugh again. Knauf screamed as the pink abomination moved towards him with a curious scuttling motion.

Thoughts of sorcery forgotten, Knauf clenched his eyes and stretched his arm in front of his body, as though to ward away the monstrous horror even as the fiend advanced upon him. The daemon's grotesque hands closed about the warlock's extended arm, bringing new screams from Knauf as the icy touch seared through his veins. Slowly, the daemon raked a single claw down the length of the would-be wizard's arm, a deep wound that sank down to the very bone. Knauf's cries of agony rose still higher as the daemon's fingers probed the wound. Like a child with a piece of fruit, the horror began to peel the flesh from Knauf's arm, the warlock's howl of torment drowned out by the monster's increasing glee.

Mathias Thulmann reached the garret in time to witness the warlock's demise. No longer amused by the high-pitched wails escaping from Knauf's throat, the pink hands released the skeletal limb they clutched and seized the warlock's shoulders, pulling Knauf's body to the daemon's own. The daemon's giant maw gaped wide and with a formless undulating motion surged up and over Knauf's head and shoulders. The pseudo-corporeal substance of the daemon allowed a horrified Thulmann to see the warlock's features behind the ichorous pink jaws that engulfed it. He could see those still-screaming features twist and mutate as the flesh was quickly dissolved, patches of muscle appearing beneath skin before being stripped away to reveal the bone itself. The hardened witch hunter turned away from the appalling sight.

The daemon's insane gibbering brought Thulmann back to his senses. The witch hunter returned his gaze to the loathsome creature and the fool who had called it from the Realm of Chaos. Atop Gerhard Knauf's body a skull dripped the last of the warlock's blood and rivulets of meaty grease; the body beneath had been stripped to the breastbone. The whisper of a scream seemed to echo through the garret as the last shards of the warlock's soul fled into the night. The pink daemon rose from its gory repast and turned its fiery eyes upon the witch hunter.

Thulmann found himself powerless to act as the daemon slowly made its way across the garret room. The preternatural fiend moved in a capering, dance-like manner, its glowing body brilliant in the darkness, sounds of lunatic amusement emanating from its clenched, grinning jaws. The daemon stopped just out of reach of the witch hunter's sword, settling down on its haunches. It trained its fiery eyes on the scarlet-clad Templar, regarding him with an unholy mixture of hatred, humour, and hunger.

Thulmann forced himself to meet that inhuman gaze, to stare into the swirling fires that burned from the pink face, forced himself to match his own faith and determination against the daemon's ageless malevolence. Thulmann could feel the orange light seeping into his mind, clouding his thoughts and numbing his will.

With an oath, the witch hunter tore his eyes from those of the daemon. The horror snarled, no longer amused by the novelty of the witch hunter's defiance.

The daemon launched itself at Thulmann, its mouth still wet with the warlock's blood. Thulmann dodged to his left, the quick action sparing him the brunt of the daemon's assault, but still

resulting in the unearthly creature's claws scraping the witch hunter's ribs. Clenching his teeth against the painful wound and the daemon's icy touch, Thulmann lashed out at the beast as it recovered from its charge.

A grip of frozen iron closed around the wrist of Thulmann's sword arm even as the heavy butt of the witch hunter's pistol crashed against the leering head of the horror. The daemon glared into Mathias' face and uttered a sinister laugh. Again, the witch hunter dealt the monster a blow that would have smashed the skull of any mortal creature. As Thulmann brought his arm back to strike again at the grinning daemon, his nightmarish foe swatted the weapon from his hand, sending the pistol hurtling down the stairway.

The daemon's gibbering laughter grew; it leaned forward, its grinning jaws inches from Thulmann's hawk-like nose. The witch hunter pushed against the daemon's frigid shape with his free hand, desperately trying to keep the ethereal jaws at bay, at the same time frenziedly trying to free his sword arm. Thulmann's efforts attracted the daemon's attention and, as if noticing the weapon for the first time, it reached across Thulmann's body to remove the sword from his grasp. Luminous pink claws closed around the steel blade.

The smell of burnt metal assaulted Thulmann's nostrils as the keening wail of the daemon ripped at his ears. As the horror's hand had closed about the witch hunter's blade, the daemon's glowing flesh had started to burn, luminous sparks crackling and dancing from the seared paw. The daemon released its grip on Thulmann and scuttled away from the witch hunter, a new look in its fiery eyes. A look Thulmann recognised even in so inhuman a being: *fear*.

The daemon's left hand still gave off streams of purplish smoke, its very shape throbbing uncontrollably. The daemon looked at its injured paw then returned its attention to its adversary. The daemon could see the growing sense of hope, the first fledgling seed of triumph appearing in the very aura of the witch hunter. The sight incensed the daemon.

Thulmann slowly advanced upon the beast. The witch hunter had gained an advantage, he did not intend to lose it. But he did not reckon upon the creature's supernatural speed, or its feral rage. Before Thulmann had taken more than a few steps towards it, the daemon sprang from the floor as though it had been shot from a cannon. The monster crashed into Thulmann sending both man and fiend plummeting down the stairs.

Mathias Thulmann groggily tried to gain his feet, ears ringing from his violent descent. By some miracle he had managed to retain his sword. It was a fact that further infuriated his monstrous foe. The daemon scuttled toward the witch hunter. Thulmann struck at it, but the attack was a clumsy one, easily dodged by the luminous being. The horror responded by striking him in the chest with a powerful upswing of both its arms. The witch hunter was lifted off his feet, hurled backward by the tremendous force of the daemon's attack. Thulmann landed on the final flight of stairs, tumbling down them to lie broken and battered in the foyer.

At the foot of the stairs, the witch hunter struggled to rise, groping feebly for the sword that had landed beside him. He watched as the giggling pink daemon capered down the stairs, dancing in hideous parody of the revellers of Kleinsdorf. Mathias summoned his last reserves of strength as the daemon descended toward him. With a prayer to Sigmar, the witch hunter struck as the daemon leaped.

A shriek like the tearing of metal rang out as Thulmann's sword sank into the daemon. The blade impaled the horror, its body writhing in agony before bursting apart like a bubble rising from a fetid marsh. A squeal of venomous rage rose from the daemon, shattering the glass in the foyer's solitary window. Tiny sparks of bluish light flew from the point of the daemon's dissolution. Thulmann sank to his knees, thanking Sigmar for his deliverance.

Daemonic laughter broke into Thulmann's prayers. The taste of victory left the witch hunter as he saw the two daemons dance towards him from the darkness of the foyer. They were blue, goblin-sized parodies of the larger daemon Thulmann had vanquished, and they were glaring at him with looks of utter malevolence.

The foremost of the daemons opened its gigantic mouth, revealing the shark-like rows of serrated fangs. The blue horror laughed as it hopped and bounded across the foyer with frightening speed. Holding the sword before him, Thulmann prepared to meet the monster's attack.

Thulmann cried out as a torrent of pain wracked his body. Swift as the first daemon's movements had been, the other had been swifter still, circling the witch hunter as he prepared to meet its companion's attack. Unseen, the blue horror struck at the witch hunter's leg, sinking its fangs through the hard leather boot to worry the calf within. The intense pain made Thulmann drop his weapon, his only thought to seize the creature ravaging his leg.

The blue thing gave a hiccup of mock fright as Thulmann's hands closed around its scintillating form. The witch hunter tore the creature away from his boot and lifted the daemon over his head by its heels, thinking to dash its brains against the floor. In that instant he realised the trickery the beasts had employed. Scuttling across the floor, its over-sized hands dragging the sword by the hilt, was the other daemon. The monsters had taken away his only weapon.

The horror in Thulmann's hands twisted out of his grasp with a disgustingly boneless motion, raking its claws across his left hand as it fell to the floor. Giggling madly, the blue daemon danced away from the witch hunter's wrath, capering just beyond his reach until its companion returned from secreting his sword.

The two monsters circled Thulmann, striking at him from both sides at once, slashing his flesh with their claws before dancing away again. It was a slow, lingering death, like a pack of dogs tormenting a tethered horse because they do not know how to make a clean kill. Thulmann bled from dozens of wounds. Most were only superficial, but the pain caused by their infliction was intense. Every nerve in his body now writhed at the slightest touch from one of the daemons.

Thulmann's eyes fell upon an object lying upon the floor, its metal barrel reflecting the unearthly bodies of his tormentors. The pistol their unholy parent had taken away from him. If it had not discharged or otherwise been fouled by its violent descent, perhaps the witch hunter could find escape from his agony. Trembling with pain, Thulmann reached for the gun.

One of the daemons slashed the man's cheek as he stooped to retrieve the weapon. Dancing away, the creature laughed and brayed. It licked its fanged mouth and turned to rejoin its comrade in their amusement. It did not see the figure emerge from the darkness, nor the brilliant steel blade that reflected the light of its own glowing body.

The second monster sank its teeth into Thulmann's wrist. How dare the human think to spoil its fun? The blue fiend kicked the pistol away, turning to rake its claws through the shredded cloak that covered Thulmann's mangled back. The daemon leapt away in mid-stroke, turning to the source of the sight and sound that had alarmed it. In the darkness, the sparks and spirals of luminous smoke rising from the death of the other blue horror were almost blinding. The beast scrambled toward the being it sensed lurking in the shadows, eager to rend the flesh of this new adversary who had vanquished its other half. A rusted wooden hatchet sailed out of the darkness, smashing into the snarling daemon.

"The sword," gasped Thulmann, again reaching for his pistol. "Use the sword."

The remaining fiend rose swiftly, its fiery eyes blazing. The daemon lunged in the direction from which the attack had come. It was a fatal mistake. The small creature's hands closed upon the naked blade, sparking and sizzling just as its parent's had. As the blue horror recoiled from its unpleasant surprise, its attacker struck at its head with a sweep of the blade, finishing the daemon in an explosion of sparks and shrieks. Unlike the pink monster, no new horrors were born from the deaths of its lesser offspring.

"You are mine to kill, Thulmann," a cold voice from the shadows said. "I'll not lose my vengeance to anyone else, be they man or daemon!" The witch hunter laughed weakly.

"You shall find your task much simpler now, avenger. My wounds prevent me from mounting any manner of capable defence." A venomous note entered the witch hunter's voice. "But you would prefer butchery to a fair duel. That is your idea of honour?"

Reinhardt glared at him, tossing the witch hunter's sword to Thulmann. Thulmann shook his head as he gingerly sheathed the weapon with his injured hand.

"I could not hold that blade with these," Thulmann showed the enraged noble his bleeding palms and wrist, "much less combat an able swordsman."

Reinhardt glared at the witch hunter contemptuously. His gaze studied Thulmann before settling upon the holstered pistols on the witch hunter's belt.

"Are you fit enough to use one of those?" the youth snarled.

"Are you skilled enough to use one?" Mathias countered, slowly drawing one of the weapons and sliding it across the floor. Reinhardt stooped and retrieved the firearm.

"When you see hell, you will know," the youth responded. He waited as the witch hunter lifted himself from the floor and slowly drew the remaining gun. As soon as he felt the witch hunter was ready, the youth's hand pointed at Thulmann and his finger depressed the pistol's trigger. There was a sharp click as the hammer fell upon an already expired cap.

"Never accept a weapon from an enemy." Thulmann said his voice icy and emotionless. There was a loud explosion of noise as he fired the weapon he had retrieved from the base of the stairs and holstered while Reinhardt still fought the last daemon. Reinhardt was thrown to the floor as the bullet impacted against his shoulder. Thulmann limped toward the fallen noble. The witch hunter trained his eyes upon the man's wound.

"With a decent physician that will heal in a fortnight," the witch hunter said, turning away from his victim. "If we meet again, I may not be so restrained," Thulmann added as he made his way from the house.

Reinhardt von Lichtberg's shout followed the witch hunter into the street.

"I will find you, Mathias Thulmann! If I have to track you to the nethermost pits of the Wastes, you will not escape me! I will find you again, and I will kill you!"

And the people of Kleinsdorf continued to dance and laugh and sing as they celebrated the triumph of light over Chaos.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

C. L. Werner has written a number of Lovecraftian pastiches and pulp-style horror stories for assorted small press publications and *Inferno!* magazine. Currently living in the American southwest, he continues to write stories of mayhem and madness set in the Warhammer World.

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