



**A WARHAMMER SS**

# **MEAT WAGON**

**Mathias Thulmann - 00b**

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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.*

The door of the coaching inn was flung open with a loud bang, causing the denizens of the place to look up with varying degrees of alarm and surprise. The figure framed momentarily in the doorway was a brutish one, a head below average height but nearly twice as broad as most men. A leather hat with a wide brim was scrunched about his head, covering the blonde fuzz that clung to his skull. The brute's face was full and meaty, a bulbous nose crushed in some long-ago brawl looming above an expansive mouth filled with black teeth. In one gloved fist, the man held a coiled whip; the other gripped the edge of the door.

"Coach be leavin' soon," the harsh voice of the wagoner grunted. "Suggest you lot get yerselves organised." With no further word, the hulking drover turned, stomping back out the door and slamming it closed as he left.

"Wretched villain," muttered one of the seated patrons of the inn's bar-room. He was a middle-aged man, his body on the downward spiral towards obesity. His raiment was rich, more of his fingers burdened with bejeweled rings than without. "Why I should suffer such disrespect from that creature..."

"Because, like the rest of us, you want to be in Nuln, and you want to be there quickly," responded the man seated at the table just to the left of the complaining merchant. He was a tall, young, thin man, his striped breeches and double-breasted tunic as refined as the clothes of the merchant, though more restrained in their opulence. The bearded man with the long, gaunt face flipped over two of the small bone cards set upon the table, smiling as he saw the faces of the cards revealed.

"And why are you in such a hurry, might I ask, Feldherrn?" the fat-faced merchant grumbled. "Surely there are pockets you have not yet picked in Stirland?"

Feldherrn didn't look up, continuing to turn over cards arrayed on the table before him, matching them into pairs and sets. "I don't hold a knife to anyone's throat. If a man loses the contents of his purse in my company, it is by his own carelessness. But I am sure that taking the silver of those drunkards who crawl into the bottles of vodka you caravan down from Kislev is a much more noble vocation, Steinmetz." The gambler looked back at the merchant, then turned his gaze to the person seated beside the fat man. Steinmetz's sullen glower at the gambler's words turned into an open scowl as he noted the direction of his antagonist's gaze.

The woman seated beside Steinmetz was pretty, young and frail in build. Her skin displayed the pallor of the north country, the hue of Ostland and the Kislev frontier where the rays of the sun were weak and the hours of night were long. A flush of red coloured her face as the young girl noted the gambler's attention. She smiled slightly, but the smile was quickly banished as Steinmetz gripped her forearm, his chubby fingers pinching her skin.

"Ravna," the merchant called, his tone sharp. A towering, broad-shouldered man rose from a stool set against the back wall of the room. Unlike the other occupants of the room, this man wore armour, steel back and breast plates encasing his torso and similar ones upon his legs and upper arms. The bodyguard marched toward Steinmetz, one callused hand resting easily on the pommel of the longsword sheathed at his side. Without rising from his own seat, Steinmetz pulled the girl to her feet as Ravna came near. "Escort Lydia to the coach," Steinmetz ordered. "We are to be leaving soon." With a dismissive flick of his hand, the merchant turned his smirking face back toward Feldherrn. The gambler gave Steinmetz a look that suggested indigestion.

"Indeed, we should all be boarding that travelling termite circus," rumbled the deep voice of the person seated at the table beside that of Feldherrn. The speaker was a dwarf, just under five feet in height, but broader of shoulder than most full grown men. A long, flowing black beard engulfed his face, only a bulbous nose and a pair of stony grey eyes emerging from the mass of hair. The dwarf tipped the clay stein he had been drinking from, draining the remaining two-thirds of the tankard in

a single swallow. With a belch of satisfaction, the dwarf slammed the stein down and returned the rounded steel cap of his helmet to his head.

“Revolting,” complained a voice both rich and husky. It belonged to a woman seated alone, nearer the door. Tall, her features even, too devoid of warmth and softness to properly be termed beautiful, the woman wore a travelling dress of rich green fabric, her gloves and boots trimmed with white ermine. Like the departed bodyguard, she wore a slender bladed sword at her side, but unlike the weapon of Ravna, the woman’s sword bore a gilded hilt and there were gems set into the pommel. The woman stared at the dwarf for a moment, then wrinkled her nose in distaste, putting such effort into the grimace that it set her chestnut-hued tresses bouncing about her face.

“I must agree with you, Baroness von Raeder,” Steinmetz’s thick tones rolled from the fat man’s mouth. “Quite a disagreeable sight. To travel in the company of such crude creatures is more of a trial even than that loutish coachman. Why we must tolerate their kind in our lands...” The merchant cast a snide, condescending look at the dwarf. “They should all crawl back into their burrows in the mountains and stop pretending that they are men.” The dwarf glared back, clenching his fists until the knuckles began to whiten.

“Hardly an enlightened statement,” Feldherrn commented, still intent upon his cards. “When we get to Nuln you might have a look at the walls, or perhaps the sewers. They have stood for centuries, and are as sturdy today as when they were first laid down by Fergrim’s ancestors,” The gambler looked up as he finished his speech. Fergrim Ironsharp nodded his head slightly in the gambler’s direction.

“The walls and sewers are built,” Steinmetz grumbled. “We don’t need their kind anymore.”

“I understood that Herr Ironsharp was to be an instructor at the engineering school?” the Baroness von Raeder commented.

“That is so,” Fergrim said, turning to face the Baroness. “By invitation of your master engineers.” The dwarf smiled at the noblewoman. “I apologise if I offended you, my lady.” The dwarf bowed at the waist and clicked his heels together in the fashion of young officers of the Reiksguard presenting themselves in social situations. The Baroness smiled back at the dwarf engineer. Fergrim jabbed a finger over his shoulder to indicate Steinmetz. “Don’t mind him. He doesn’t like my people because we prefer good wholesome beer that puts meat on a person, not the poisonous bear-piss he brings down from the north.” Bowing again, and with a last malicious look at the merchant, Fergrim left the room. Steinmetz mumbled several colourful oaths about the dwarf’s tastes under his breath.

“We should be going as well,” Feldherrn declared, rising from his chair and gathering up his cards. “Our coachmen look to be just the sort of villains who would leave us behind.” The gambler walked towards the door. As he walked near the noblewoman, he extended his arm. “Shall we repair to your carriage, Baroness?” Her hand lightly resting on Feldherrn’s arm, the noblewoman allowed the adventurer to escort her to the waiting coach.

Steinmetz grumbled a few more coloured expressions as they left, waiting a full minute before rising to his own feet and making his own way outside.

The coach stood just before the small roadside inn. It was a large, oak pannelled carriage with two massive stallions hitched to the yoke at its fore. Dark leather curtains enclosed the carriage itself, providing some insulation from the elements for the passengers within. The roof of the coach was laden down by the packs and luggage of the travellers, lashed into place by heavy ropes. A small iron seat had been folded out at the rear of the coach, a similarly tiny ladder allowing Fergrim to ascend to his position behind the carriage. The dwarf cast an appraising eye at several wooden boxes lashed atop the coach, each box bearing a single dwarf rune burned onto its surface, his keen gaze looking for any hint that they had been disturbed. The other passengers were seated within the carriage itself, awaiting the arrival of the merchant, Steinmetz.

At the fore of the weathered, yet serviceable coach, a thin, spindly man sat upon the fur-lined bench within the driver’s box.

The man's features were somehow unpleasant, the cast of his face suggesting a furtive and calculating nature. Greasy locks of long dark hair streamed from beneath his feathered hat, disappearing into the collar of his heavy longcoat. The man's skin was dirty, his thin moustaches displaying traces of bread crumbs and dried soup, his clothing grey with dust and flakes of mud. Yet despite his squalid bearing, three shiny earrings, each a wide hoop of gold, tugged at the lobe of his left ear.

The sinister little coachman cast a sullen gaze at the door of the inn, then looked down from his seat to where the massive frame of his brutish partner stood beside the still open door of the carriage.

"How long does that swine think to keep us waiting?" the coachman's thin, weasely voice croaked, the words tinged by just the slightest hint of an accent. The coachman kept his voice low, so that the already embarked passengers would not hear his complaints.

"That prig be thinkin' ta be fashnably late," the hulking wagoner grinned up at his partner, his paw clenching about the length of whip clasped in his hand.

"It is a real pleasure to have someone of his like among our custom, eh, Herr Ocker?" the coachman hissed, a sly light in his eye.

"Indeed it be, Herr Bersh," the burly Ocker replied, smiling broadly as Steinmetz strolled casually from the inn, making it a point to display the lack of haste in his stride. "Indeed it be."

The coach was less than an hour out from the inn when there suddenly appeared a figure standing in the road ahead. Bresh and Ocker slowed the coach down, trying to take in the cut of the man who seemed to be waiting for them. The road wardens did not patrol this particular path too frequently and it would not be the first time they would have found themselves forced to drive off a highwayman. But as they drew closer, and more details became apparent, the wagoners found themselves wishing it was a mere brigand awaiting them.

The lone man was dressed opulently: a scarlet shirt trimmed with gold thread, a long black cape trimmed with ermine. A tall, conical hat with a broad round rim rested atop his sharp-featured face. About his waist a dragonskin belt supported a pair of holstered pistols and a sheathed longsword. The man's face was thin, a slender moustache beneath his dagger-like nose, a slight tuft of grey beard upon his chin. The grey eyes of the man were focused intently upon the coachmen, silently commanding them to stop.

"Witch hunter!" swore Bresh, almost under his breath.

"Ride 'im down," suggested Ocker in a low hiss. But even as the man made the suggestion, a second man appeared on the road. Unlike the witch hunter, he was dressed shabbily, his worn leather armour struggling to contain his powerful build. The other man was mounted, leading a second horse. But it was not these details that attracted Ocker's attention. It was the loaded crossbow in the second man's hands and the murderous twinkle in his eyes that suggested he would dearly love an excuse to use the weapon.

The coach slowed to a stop as Bresh reined in the horses. A muffled protest as to the stop rose from the carriage but the coachman ignored the complaint.

"How can we help you, templar?" Bresh called down in what he hoped was his most affable voice.

The witch hunter's cool eyes washed over the coachman for a moment. "I have need of passage," his sharp voice said. "My horse has thrown a shoe." Bresh and Ocker looked over to note the second animal being led by the mounted crossbowman. "It is fortunate that you happened along." The witch hunter strode towards the side of the coach.

"I would normally be most happy to aid a noble servant of mighty Sigmar..." Bresh began to say. In midsentence, the witch hunter opened the door of the carriage and began to climb in.

"I am very happy to hear it," the witch hunter observed. "It would be a much better realm if everyone observed their duties to Sigmar so well." So saying, the man disappeared into the coach.

Ocker began to climb from the box to protest in a more forcible fashion, but a second glance at the witch hunter's mounted companion convinced him to reconsider.

"You can continue now," the witch hunter said, then withdrew his head back into the carriage. Bresh grumbled and flicked the reins, commanding the horses to gallop forward. The witch hunter's companion fell in behind the coach, still leading the other animal.

"Well, that fixes things," snarled Bresh in a low voice.

"Khaine take me if'n it do," swore Ocker. "That fat pig got more on 'im then we seen sin' Mittherbst! An that dwarf is alwayz fuss'n bout that cargo uv 'is." The Ostlander twisted his face into a greedy smile. "I figger that'll turn morn' a few groats."

"But the witch hunter..." protested Bresh.

"Yer friends 'll deal wiv 'im," Ocker stated. "Like dey alwayz done before."

Within the carriage, the witch hunter took a seat, forcing Baroness von Raeder to shift her position closer toward the gambler Feldherrn. The templar removed his hat and smiled thinly at his fellow passengers.

"My name is Mathias Thulmann," he said. "Ordained witch hunter in the service of the most high Temple of Sigmar." The introduction did little to warm the cool atmosphere within the carriage. Thulmann's next words made the carriage positively icy. "We have a long ride ahead of us. Perhaps we might pass the time by getting to know each other. Now tell me: who are you, where do you come from and what are you doing?"

It was late in the day when the coach emerged from the embrace of the ominous sprawl of the forest. Ahead of the travellers lay a small hollow of rolling land. Once there might have been lush fields and pastures claiming the open ground, but now it was given over to wild grass and squat thorny bushes. Here and there the remains of a stone wall or a lone chimney jutted up from the grass, the only forlorn evidence that this place had once known the hand of man.

As the coach made its way along a narrow, barely visible path that wound its way through the rolling heights and deep depressions in the hollow, a dark cluster of buildings slowly became visible. For a space, the settlement would disappear from view as the wagon's path took it into some low indentation in the valley floor or it rounded some small hillock. But always it became visible once more, visible but indistinct, like a mirage flickering across the horizon. Within the carriage each passenger quietly wondered what breed of men would mark out such a lonely and isolated a spot for their habitation.

Then the coach rounded one final hill and, as if some conjurer had suddenly torn away one last obscuring veil, the town loomed before them. A mass of roofs were visible, rising above a clustered mass of buildings, strewn about like litter. The roofs were in ill repair, timbers sticking through long rotten thatching like broken bones thrust through skin. The empty bell tower of a shrine rose above all else, all the more wretched for its diminished sanctity.

A timber gate stood before the cluster of buildings, the doors open, their panels sagging in their crude iron frames, warped by the forces of wind and rain. A small rectangle of wood dangled from a rusting chain, barely discernible letters burnt into the sign.

"Mureiste? What manner of name is that?" wondered the Baroness as she read the faded letters.

"Sounds like some foreign doggerel," snorted Steinmetz, grimacing as though from a foul odour.

"It is Sylvanian," stated the witch hunter, his voice low, filled with suspicion.

"Sylvanian?" gasped Lydia, her eyes going wide with sudden alarm, a delicate hand clutching at her throat. Her skin paled to an even more marble-like hue as the innumerable nightmare tales of horror originating from the blighted former province wormed their way at once to the forefront of her mind. Beside her, the bloated fingers of Steinmetz fumbled to form a crude mark of Sigmar.

"But why in the name of Ranald would we be anywhere near Sylvania?" asked Feldherrn, his own face becoming suspicious.

“Indeed,” observed Thulmann. “It is a curious road that leads to Nuln in the south-west by taking its travellers north-east.”

The coach continued on into the town. The buildings, seen close up, were indeed as dilapidated as they seemed from afar. Many of the mudbrick hovels had all but collapsed, great holes pitting their walls, thatch roofs fallen in, doors lying amid weeds and brambles. The wooden structures leaned like drunken men, looking as if they might topple onto their sides at any instant. And yet, as ramshackle as they were, to the witch hunter’s keen gaze, alarming incongruities presented themselves. Some of the buildings bore marks of crude unskilled repair, dried mud pushed into holes, fresh grass and branches thrown upon a thatched roof. Decayed and forsaken the town of Mureiste might be, but there were signs that it was not abandoned.

The coach came to a stop in what once must have been the town square of Mureiste. At its centre, the remains of a once heroic statue stood upon a weed choked stone pillar. The dreary facades of shops and a two-storied guild-hall considered the decayed champion with dark, gaping windows. One side of the square was dominated by a temple, the bronze hammer icon drooping from its steeple proclaiming it as having once been devoted to Sigmar. Alone among the rotting structures of Mureiste, the temple was constructed from stone, great granite blocks that must have been transported at great expense through forest and hollow.

Bresh shared a knowing look with Ocker, then slid back the small wooden window at the rear of the driver’s box to speak to the passengers within the carriage.

“Just a short rest stop,” the coachman assured his passengers. “This is the last fresh water for some distance. We shall see to the horses, then we’ll be on our way again.”

His reassuring smile faded as he saw the barrel of Thulmann’s pistol rise from the compartment and point at his face.

“If either of you scoundrels makes a move to drop from that box,” Thulmann’s voice hissed, “you will have the distinctly unpleasant experience of having your brains blown out of the back of your skull.”

Bresh froze under the witch hunter’s threat, the only motion in his entire frame limited to a pleading sidewise glance at his partner. Ocker slowly pulled the wide-mouthed musket from its place at the side of the bench, well beyond the limited vision of those within the carriage.

“I shouldn’t do that,” snarled a harsh voice from beside the coach. Ocker’s hand froze against the frame of the firearm. He looked over at the mounted ruffian who had accompanied the witch hunter. A heavy crossbow was held in Streng’s hands, the bolt aimed at the Ostlander’s midsection. “Breathe in a fashion I dislike and I’ll split your belly.”

From his position at the back of the coach, Fergrim Ironsharp stood upon the metal seat, trying to peer over the top of the carriage to see what was unfolding before him. The dwarf craned his neck one way then another trying to see past the barrier of boxes and crates. Then he whipped his neck around, staring at the decayed buildings around the coach. His sharp eyes, excelling at piercing the dark like all of his tunnel dwelling kind, discerned motion within the blackened doorway of an old tanner’s shop. Fergrim noticed more motion in the dark recess of an alley, seeing two indistinct figures lurking within the mouth of the shadowy lane. The dwarf licked his suddenly dry mouth. There was something disturbing about those shapes, something unnatural.

“I don’t think we’re alone,” Fergrim declared, but his words did not reach down into the compartment below. The dwarf continued to watch as the shadowy figures began to multiply. Again he muttered an unheard warning.

Suddenly, from the darkness of a dozen doorways, from the shadows filling alley and lane, horrible shapes loped into the fading light. Each was lean, pale skin stretched tight over lanky limbs and wasted bellies, tattered mockeries of garments draped about loins or cast over shoulders. Long claws tipped each of the creatures’ hands, talons more suited to a vulture than anything resembling a man. The faces of each were drawn, the heads bald, long noses perched above wide, fanged mouths.



Beady red eyes glared from the pits of each face, burning with an overwhelming hunger. With a low moan-like howl, the loathsome throng began to sprint toward the coach.

“Hashut’s bald beard!” screamed Fergrim, ripping his throwing axe from his belt, knuckles whitening over the haft of the blade. This time the dwarf’s shout could not fail to be heard and the leather curtains were pushed aside, the occupants of the coach screaming their own cries of horror as they saw the fiendish host emptying from the ruinous streets of Mureiste.

At the front of the coach, Streng looked away from Ocker, the witch hunter’s henchman staring in disbelief as the twisted inhabitants of Mureiste howled and wailed in unholy hunger. A slight movement from the driver’s box brought Streng whipping around and he fired the bolt from his crossbow just as Ocker was levelling the musket towards him and drawing back the hammer. The bolt smashed into the villain’s belly and the Ostlander gave vent to a loud scream of agony. He fell from the driver’s box, landing partially underneath the coach. As Ocker’s body hit the ground, the musket still held in his hands was discharged by the violent impact with the ground.

The thunderous boom of the firearm caused the stallions to spring into a terrified gallop. The animals sprinted forward, pulling the carriage after them. The rear wheels of the coach passed over the legs of Ocker, and a fresh scream rang from the wagoner’s lungs as the bones were pulverised under the tremendous weight. At the rear of the coach, Fergrim was jostled, nearly falling from his seat. The axe fell from the dwarf’s hands as his stubby fingers assumed a death-grip on the frame of the roof. Fergrim risked a look over his shoulder, blanching as he saw the first twisted creatures reaching towards him, their claws pawing at the empty air in a desperate effort to rend his flesh.

The speed of the terrified horses soon outdistanced the creatures that had converged upon the rear of the coach. But other twisted monstrosities gathered in the path of the carriage. Atop the driver’s box, Bresh was vainly attempting to get some measure of control over his animals. The stallions plowed into the first of the degenerate things, crushing three of them beneath their hooves. Another of the monsters sprang at the wagon, clinging to the panels like a great spider. The beast’s twisted face peered in through the window, drool dangling from its jaws. Lydia screamed as the hideous thing’s eyes focused upon her.

The Baroness was not so distressed, leaning back in her seat and smashing her boot into the grinning monstrosity’s face. The malformed thing howled anew as the violence of the woman’s kick caused it to lose its grip on the coach and its body was crushed under the wheels.

Bresh was trying to steer the coach away, out of the blighted village. Everything had gone wrong this time, they should never have come here. He should never have let Ocker talk him into bringing the coach here after they had picked up the witch hunter. As he turned the wagon still once more, he saw yet another lane choked with thin, hungry shapes. Bresh cursed once more, slipping into the seldom used words of his native tongue. They should never have come here before dark. He cursed Ocker once more, and as if summoned up by his words, the coachman saw a pile of bones and blood lying upon the ground, a pile of bones and blood wearing the Ostlander’s face. The denizens of Mureiste were indeed hungry this night.

“Make for the temple,” a harsh voice snarled through the window at the back of the box. “If you don’t, we’re all dead!” Bresh swore once again, then directed the horses toward the looming stone structure. The stallions were breathing hard now, bleeding from dozens of cuts, filthy black wounds caused by the claws of the deformed monsters. Bresh knew that they would not last much longer. Cracking the whip mercilessly, he drove the failing animals onward, toward the shrine. The animals almost made it.

One of the lead horses failed a dozen yards from the temple, dropping instantly as its heart was stilled by the poison working through its veins. The momentum of the coach and the sudden violent stop caused it to crash onto its side, snapping the yoke, freeing the remaining stallion to drag its dead comrade a few dozen paces before it too staggered and fell. As the coach crashed, a tiny figure was thrown upwards, rocketing ahead of the wagon and crashing into the short flight of steps that led to the rickety wooden doors. The wagon itself continued onward, plowing across the ground, its

momentum pushing it forward. Bresh, with an almost inhuman agility, had leaped atop the carriage as it turned over, clutching to the now topmost side, riding the destroyed coach like a child upon a sled.

Fergrim Ironsharp rolled onto his back, groaning loudly, trying to force the sparks to stop dancing before his eyes. As his vision cleared, the dwarf muttered another curse, watching as the mammoth shape of the coach slid towards him. He braced himself for the crushing impact, throwing his arms before his face. After a moment, he peered through his arms. A great cloud of dust was billowing all about him, and in the centre of the dust cloud, he could see the shape of the coach, ground to a halt so near to him, that the dwarf could reach out and touch the splintered remains of the driver's box.

Atop the coach, Bresh began to laugh, overwhelmed to have survived the ordeal. The coachman lifted himself, began to slide down to the ground, when a hand closed about his ankle, causing his descent to turn into a fall. The coachman groaned, grasping at his twisted foot. As he turned his eyes upward, he saw the door of the carriage open and the dishevelled form of the witch hunter pull himself from the wreckage. His pistol was gone, but a longsword was gripped purposefully in his hands. Thulmann glared down at the injured Bresh, murder in his eyes.

"Hurry up, Mathias!" shouted a voice from the doorway of the temple. Streng stood at the top of the steps, his crossbow gripped in his hands. "They've nearly finished fighting over the horses. They'll be on us next!"

Mathias Thulmann dropped to the ground, landing beside Bresh. "I have half a mind to leave you for the ghouls," his harsh tones hissed. The witch hunter gripped the front of the coachman's tunic, pulling him painfully to his feet. "But there is a rope waiting for you," Thulmann snarled. "Scum such as you is for hanging." The witch hunter pushed Bresh ahead of him, following after the coachman's hobbling steps.

Behind them, other figures were slowly, painfully, emerging from the wreckage. First the Baroness, lifted from below by powerful hands. The woman perched atop the coach for a moment, then slid down to the ground, a glance at the nearness of the ghouls lending haste to her feet. Even as the next occupant of the carriage pulled himself through the door, the noblewoman was already sprinting into the temple, skirts lifted about her knees.

By some miracle of fate, none of the occupants of the carriage appeared to have sustained more than bruises. In short order, the other passengers were free of the wreck, the bulky merchant Steinmetz coming last of all, pulled from the compartment by his burly bodyguard, Ravna. The fat-faced vodka seller froze as he saw the lean, hungry figures rising from their dinner of horseflesh. Faces crimson with gore turned in his direction. For a moment, man and ghoul stared at one another in silence. Then the moment passed. The ghoul's gory mouth dropped open, a howl escaping its wasted frame. As though it were a call to arms, the sound brought dozens of the creatures to their feet. Soon a mob of the emaciated fiends was sprinting toward the overturned coach.

"Sigmar's holy hammer," Steinmetz stammered as his bowels emptied. Ravna tugged at his employer's arm, trying to get him to move. But the obese man was frozen to the spot, eyes fixed on the quickly advancing horde. Finally, the bodyguard pushed Steinmetz from the top of the wreck. The bulky merchant struck the ground with his shoulder, grunting with pain. He looked about him, as if the impact had snapped him back to reality. A girlish wail rose from his lungs and, with a speed which seemed impossible for a man of his decadent build, he ran for the open doors of the temple.

Ravna was right behind the fat man, leaping down from his perch even as the obese man struck earth. The mercenary saw Fergrim sitting at the base of the steps, the dwarf still trying to shake some sense back into his skull after his flight from the back of the coach. Ravna cast a beefy arm about Fergrim's waist, lifting the heavy dwarf from the ground. The bodyguard cast a glance over his shoulder, eyes going wide with horror as he saw a gaunt shape scrabbling over the coach.

“A poor place to gather your thoughts, master engineer,” the mercenary commented, leaping across the steps two at a time in his haste to reach the sanctuary of the temple. A pair of ghouls raced after him, snarling and snapping like feral dogs. As Ravna and his heavy burden reached the top of the steps, one of the ghouls let out a cry of pain, spinning about and crashing back down the stairs, a crossbow bolt lodged in its ribs. The other ghoul clawed at the bodyguard with its talons, ropes of gory drool dangling from its jaws. The claws scraped across Ravna’s backplate, scratching the metal but failing to harm the man within. The ghoul was not so fortunate, as a thin sword blade pierced its side. Ravna raced past Feldherrn as the gambler freed his blade from the dying ghoul. Feldherrn cast a single look at the dozen or so other monsters racing toward the steps and hurried after the mercenary.

The wooden doors slammed shut behind Feldherrn, almost in the very face of the foremost of the ghouls. Streng and Baroness von Raeder put their full weight into the effort of holding the doors shut. Feldherrn quickly sheathed his own sword and pounced upon the heavy bronze-bound doors just as they began to inch inward. Ravna set Fergrim down on one of the pews that littered the ramshackle chamber of worship. The dwarf snorted as he was set down. The mercenary looked over at the pale figure of Lydia.

“See if you can do anything for him,” Ravna snapped at the girl, racing toward the doors to help hold them against the hungry mob of cannibals outside. He did not spare a second glance at Steinmetz, cowering behind an old podium, muttering a long overdue prayer for absolution of his many moral failings.

The doors threatened to open once again as the weight and frenzy of the ghouls nearly overcame the strength of the four people desperately trying to keep the barrier closed.

“You know, I once escaped from the Reiksfang prison,” Feldherrn said, his voice loud to be heard over the clamour of the ghouls. “Suddenly having my head separated from my shoulders by Judge Vaulkberg’s ogre doesn’t seem such a bad way to go.”

Streng adjusted his feet to lend more strength to his upper body even as he chuckled at the gambler’s gallows humour. As the professional torturer cast his eyes toward the gambler, he saw a figure in scarlet and black walking toward them from the inner reaches of the hall.

“Lend a hand, Mathias,” the henchman grunted. For reply, the witch hunter drew his remaining pistol. Thulmann advanced upon the embattled doorway. Sighting a hole in the wood, he stuck the barrel of the pistol to it, pulling the trigger. A loud howl of pain sounded from beyond the door and the pressure against the portal faded away almost at once. The witch hunter favoured the four people holding the door with a smile and calmly holstered the smoking weapon.

“That should keep them back for a little while, but I suggest you break up a few of these pews and reinforce that door. When the sun fully sets, I think we can expect them to try again,” Thulmann turned about, his black cape swirling about him. “Sigmar will understand the need. You’ll find some nails in the cleric’s cell. There is also a window behind the altar and a side door next to the storeroom. I suggest you barricade those as well before our friends outside remember them.” The witch hunter began to stalk away.

“And just what are you going to be doing?” demanded the Baroness.

“Interrogating my prisoner,” Thulmann replied without turning around.

Bresh was tied hand and foot, lying upon the floor of the old priest’s cell at the back of the temple. Thulmann had taken the leather thongs from the saddlebags of Streng’s horse, both the henchman’s and the witch hunter’s animals having been brought into the temple along with the thuggish hireling.

The coachman was struggling against his bonds, trying to worm his wrists free when he heard the dreaded stomp of the witch hunter’s boots. Bresh looked up from the floor, flinching slightly as he saw Thulmann’s scowling face.

“Not one of your better days, I imagine,” the witch hunter sneered. He made an elaborate show of removing a number of steel needles from a pouch on his belt, then leaned down toward the

terrified man. Thulmann favoured the villain with a cruel smile. "Have you ever heard the old proverb that evil will always reveal itself?" Bresh was sweating now, the salty liquid causing dirt to slip from his face. "It is only by chance that we happened upon your nasty little racket. My friend and I were trying to find a petty noble whose misdeeds warranted the attention of the Temple. We thought we might be able to pick up his trail again if we followed the stage route he used to escape Carlsbruck."

Thulmann leaned forward, stabbing one of the needles into the coachman's hand. Bresh snarled in pain, a litany of curses slipping from his lips. The witch hunter nodded his head as the foreign vulgarities continued to stream from the rogue's mouth.

"I thought so," Thulmann mused. "You had a certain look about you beneath that grime. I thought at first you might be a Sylvanian under all that filth. Thank you for correcting me." The witch hunter began to replace the needles into their pouch. "I was wondering how you two cut-throats managed your vile scheme. The good citizens of Mureiste make a meal of your passengers, and you two divvy up their valuables. That is the arrangement, is it not, swine?" Thulmann smashed the toe of his boot into the trussed thief's side.

"You'll never leave this place alive!" swore Bresh, spitting at Thulmann. The witch hunter wiped the spittle from the front of his scarlet and gold shirt, then kicked his captive again.

"You were nervous about me being along for the ride," Thulmann continued. "You rushed things. We were supposed to arrive later, after the sun had set, after your other partner was around to keep the ghouls under control."

"The Master will kill you, witchfinder!"

Thulmann smiled back at Bresh. "We'll see about that. This was a temple of Sigmar, and unless someone had a chance to desanctify it, it is still holy ground. That gives me an edge over your 'master', Strigany."

Bresh rolled onto his back, sneering at his captor. "Your Sigmar won't help you! The Master will drain your body and toss the husk to the ghouls!"

Thulmann turned on his heel, striding back into the chamber of worship. "Keep a happy thought, Strigany. It will make hanging you all the more satisfying."

Thulmann returned to the main room of the temple. Most of the pews, he found, had been broken apart. He watched for a moment as the dwarf, apparently recovered from his concussion, carted a huge armful of wood towards the front door where the Baroness von Raeder and the gambler Feldherrn were nailing planks in place, reinforcing the portal against a second attack. He could hear more banging coming from the side door within the small storeroom located behind the cleric's cell. Behind him, he could see Streng forcing the remains of a bench against the iron frame of the single window behind the altar. The witch hunter called out to his minion. Streng hastily finished nailing the wood into place and leapt down from the altar which he had been using as a bench.

"I'd prefer a dozen of Morr's Black Guard and maybe a cannon or two," the warrior said, "but with a little luck, we might be able to keep them out."

"I'm afraid that your luck has run out," the witch hunter responded. Then his eyes caught the bloated shape of Steinmetz seated on an undamaged pew near the column where the horses had been tethered.

"Our merchant friend doesn't help?" Thulmann asked, eyebrows arching.

"I would have forced the issue, but his bodyguard said it was just as well," Streng answered. "He said that he'd not trust a nail driven by that pampered trash. He took the fancy girl to help him secure the storeroom door." Suddenly the import of something the witch hunter had said sank in. Streng gripped his employer's arm. "Why do you say our luck is done?"

Thulmann fixed his gaze on his henchman. "Because unless I am much mistaken, in a few moments we are going to be entertaining a vampire."

Outside the old temple, the ghouls crowded about the old market square. Hungry eyes stared at the building, drool dribbling from gaping mouths. Several of the twisted deformed men stared at the fast fading sun, their eyes gleaming with expectation. On the steps of the temple, a few ghoul corpses lay where they had fallen. They too would become provender for the hideous denizens of the town, but only after they had been left for a time, after the rot had been allowed to sink into their tainted flesh.

It had been a strange break in the routine when the wagon had arrived early, causing the denizens of Murieste no end of confusion. They had watched and waited. But when it appeared that something was wrong, that perhaps the coach would leave, even the most restrained of their number had panicked and surged forward to claim their portion of the meat. Now, with the travellers trapped within the old shrine, the monsters had settled down to await the night. The intruders might have their loud magic which had exploded the face of one who had been at the front of the pack, but the people of Murieste were not without their own sorcerous resources.

As the long shadows engulfed the town, filling each lane and alleyway, darkness truly fell upon Murieste. The sound of leathern wings beating upon the thin night winds descended from above to thrill the eager ears of the ghouls. The monsters looked skyward with an almost religious fervour, pawing at the earth with their claws and uttering a sound that was not the howl of a jackal nor the chanting of a monk, but something kindred to both.

A shape detached itself from the night, hovering and soaring above the malformed mob. A black shadow swept across the square, circling it twice before coming to land at the base of the old hero's statue. It was a massive, monstrous bat, gigantic fangs jutting from its hideous face like the incisors of a sabre-toothed lion of far away Norsca.

As the creature settled to earth, it wrapped its leathery wings about itself, like a rich burgomaster burrowing into his cloak to keep warm. The talons of the bat slowly grew into muscular legs as it came to stand before the statue. The change that had begun with the legs continued up the animal's body, fur retreating back into pale, lifeless skin, sleek pinions collapsing into powerful arms bulging with muscle and sinew. The face of the bat slowly twisted and rearranged itself into a leering, diabolic countenance. A great gash of a mouth sporting sharp, over-sized teeth dominated a hairless, deformed head. The eyes of the monster, like two scabby pools of blackened blood, stared at the ghoulish throng, fixing the miserable creatures with a pitiless gaze.

At an unspoken word of command, one of the ghouls scuttled forward, cringing before the vampire. The undead beast towered over the comparatively frail cannibal, and reached downward with a clawed hand. The sword-sized talons of the vampire curled about the ghoul's chin, forcing the wretch to meet that merciless stare. The vampire locked its eyes upon those of the ghoul, letting its vision linger, draining the ghoul's memories of the arrival of the coach and all that had transpired after.

The vampire hissed in wrath, pulling its hand away from the ghoul's chin and swiping at the creature's head with its other claw in what looked to be a single impossibly swift motion. The head of the ghoul flew across the square, bouncing from the side of the old guild-hall. The vampire pulled the headless corpse to it, fixing its massive jaw over the spurting stump of the corpse-eater's neck. The vampire sucked the vile-tasting liquid noisily and greedily. It did not pay any notice to the yelps and howls of the ghouls cringing all about the vampire, their pleas for forgiveness and reaffirmations of their devotion.

The vampire let the drained cadaver fall, licking the blood that had coated its chin with a long lupine tongue. It was an abominable feeding, one the vampire was loathe to subject itself to, but it had reason to suspect it would need all the strength it could muster, even such strength as the thin, corrupt blood of a ghoul might bestow. It had seen with the eyes of the slain ghoul the passengers of the coach as they fled into the temple, and the cast of one of them troubled the undead coffin worm greatly. It could recall those long ago years when the great Vampire Counts waged their wars, and the terrible scouring of tomb and grave that had followed when the mortals were again able to hold dominion over Sylvania. It had been a long time since it had cause to fear the stakes of vampire

slayers. The corpse-thing cast a wrathful look at the temple. It had no desire to confront such a man in the house of its enemy.

It would just have to send the ghouls in to fetch him out. It was little different than sending hounds to flush a hare from a stand of thorn bushes. The dogs might be injured, but the game would fill the belly just the same.

Mathias Thulmann stood before the old altar, facing the motley collection of people who had escaped from the sinister plot of the coachmen. The witch hunter studied each of his companions, trying to weigh his impressions of them with what he had learned of them from the idle chatter during the ride to Murieste. They were not the sort of people he would have chosen to stand with. Of them all, he was confident only in Streng to stand his ground, only because the henchman knew how useless it would be to run. The dwarf was another dependable quantity, but he was still somewhat disoriented from his fall. Thulmann felt that the engineer could also be trusted not to break, but how effective a defence he would be able to muster was a question he was much more uncertain of.

Of the others, the witch hunter was more dubious. The Baroness von Raeder seemed a very strong-willed and confident woman, but there was something about her which he did not entirely trust. She seemed a bit too strong-willed, a bit too independent. Such tendencies had led to her being sent away by her husband, and Thulmann wondered where such tendencies might yet lead her.

Feldherrn was a professional gambler, little more than a common thief. Thulmann was not about to place any great store in the courage of a thief. The mercenary, Ravna, was much the same, a man who owed more loyalty to gold than anything else, his loyalty went to the man who promised him further payment, even such a man as Steinmetz, whom the mercenary clearly held in contempt. It was a hold on the man, but Thulmann knew that such a tie might easily be severed when the master of Murieste came for them. A man will risk his life for gold, but he won't give it.

Steinmetz himself was worthless. Thulmann had struck the merchant, trying to knock some courage into the man, but he still slobbered over himself in fear. The merchant's companion was slightly less hysterical, but she was obviously no fighter. In the coming conflict, neither of them could be relied upon to do anything except distract some of the ghouls should the creatures force their way in.

"I've told you all what we are likely to face," the witch hunter said. Streng had withdrawn several bulbs of garlic from one of the saddlebags and the girl, Lydia, had helped fashion them into makeshift necklaces. Sometimes garlic was useful in his work. The animal familiars of some witches were unnaturally repulsed by them, giving themselves away. Thulmann also knew that common folklore held that vampires detested it as well, and would be kept at bay by the fragrance. Coming from the mouth of a Templar of Sigmar, Thulmann hoped the others would accept the superstition and take heart from their imaginary protection.

"We must hold our ground until dawn, there is no other way out of this. This place is a temple of our mighty Lord Sigmar, bane of the undead,crippler of Black Nagash. The vampire will not dare enter here, for his powers will be weak. But he will send his slaves, and we must defy them. It is not merely our lives which are at risk, but our very souls." Thulmann doubted that last part. Even if the ghouls did present one of them to their master in anything resembling life, he knew they would strip to the bone whatever the Strigoi left. No chance of coming back from the grave when it is in the bellies of three score or so ghouls.

Mathias Thulmann pointed a gloved hand at Fergrim Ironsharp and Ravna. "You two will guard the side door. They didn't attack from that quarter before, but they are better organised now, even if they do not think to exploit it, the vampire probably will." The dwarf and the bodyguard hastened to their positions, the latter armed with his sword, the dwarf making do with a wood-axe taken from Streng's saddlebags. The witch hunter considered the Baroness for a moment, then turned and pointed at the blocked window. "Keep a guard on the window. It is unlikely that they will try that way, but be on guard just the same. Any fingers try to pull at those boards, cut them off with your

daggers. Above all, cry out. Let us know.” The Baroness stalked past the witch hunter, dagger in her hand.

“I guess that leaves you and me to join your friend at the front door,” sighed Feldherrn.

Thulmann let his eyes pass over Steinmetz and Lydia, then stared at Feldherrn. “Still think Ranald’s luck is with you?” he asked.

“I never put much stock in luck,” Feldherrn replied, walking toward the portal. “A good gambler finds other ways to prosper.”

The witch hunter joined Streng and Feldherrn at the door. As he stood beside Streng, the man removed his eye from the small knothole Thulmann had fired his pistol through. The henchman was visibly upset, his face ashen. Streng gestured for him to have a look for himself.

Thulmann at once saw what had upset his man. Standing before the old statue was a towering monstrosity, a beast that resembled some ghastly daemon of the Blood God more than it did anything that might once have been numbered amongst men. As he watched, the vampire drew back one of its powerful arms, pointing at the temple with a finger that was tipped by a long black talon. The vampire said something, but the witch hunter did not need to understand the words to understand its meaning.

With a low howl, the ghouls mustered in the square leapt to their feet and scrambled toward the temple. “Get ready!” Thulmann yelled. “Here they come!”

The ghouls struck the temple doors as a frenzied mass of hungry meat. The heavy portal shook under the impact as if a battering ram had been brought against it. The defenders found themselves forced to put their shoulders against the doors as several of the boards were ripped from the frame by the concentrated force. The rabid howls and snarls of the creatures sounded from the other side of the door, claws digging splinters from the door, eyes peering in. The defenders found themselves hard pressed to keep the door from sagging inward, despite the reinforcement. Thulmann managed to fumble his reloaded pistol from its holster. The witch hunter pressed the weapon against the same knothole. He pressed the trigger and once again there was a howl of pain.

“At least they are consistent,” he commented, holstering the weapon and redoubling his efforts to hold the door.

Streng cursed aloud as a clawed hand wriggled its way through a weakness in the rotten wood. Splinters rained onto his hair as the ghoulish limb scrabbled about in the opening. Filthy black venom trickled from the ghoul’s claws. The henchman snarled, bringing his hunting knife against the pale flesh. The ghoul outside screamed as Streng sawed at its wrist. The hand twisted and turned in the hole, but try as it might, it could not be withdrawn. Streng kept at his grisly labour, finally cutting the extremity from the ghoul’s arm. The hand flopped to the floor and a piteous wailing could be heard as the maimed creature retreated. No sooner had the first been injured, than another clawed hand was groping through the opening.

“As you said, Mathias, at least they are consistent,” grinned Streng, reaching toward the second hand with his knife.

The sounds of the semi-human monsters battering at the doors of the temple sounded in Steinmetz’s ears like the booming of cannon. The merchant tried to curl his fat body into a ball, choking on sobs of fear. Terror raced through his body like a debilitating poison. At his side, Lydia placed a delicate hand on Steinmetz’s head, stroking his hair, trying to soothe him as she would a frightened babe. Somehow, the intense fear of her employer seemed to lessen her own and she spoke soft words of reassurance and hope into the sobbing man’s ears.

At first Steinmetz did not seem to hear Lydia, then a slight flicker of reason fought its way into his eyes. He uncurled himself, his fat hands crushing hers in a desperate, hungry grip. A feverish tremble set the merchant’s meaty features twitching. Lydia tried not to look alarmed as Steinmetz stared into her eyes.

“The coachman, Lydia,” Steinmetz hissed.

“Please, don’t excite yourself,” Lydia replied, trying to wrest her hands back from the merchant’s strong grasp. “The witch hunter will get us out of this.”

“The coachman brought us here, Lydia,” Steinmetz repeated in a low voice, ignoring her own reply. “He brought us here. He must know a way out!” Lydia freed her hands and drew away from the merchant in alarm. Steinmetz smiled at her sudden fright. “If we help him escape, he will help us escape!”

“No, Emil, you can’t do such a thing,” protested Lydia. Steinmetz rose to his feet, pulling his arm away from Lydia’s attempt to restrain him.

“I’ll pay him,” the merchant continued. “He will accept that. I’ll pay him to get us out of here. Just you and me.” Steinmetz faced the girl again, anger flaring in his face as he noted the look of shocked outrage on her features. “You won’t do it?” he snarled. The merchant’s meaty hand slapped Lydia’s face, knocking her onto her side with the force of the blow. “Then stay here and die! There are fancy girls enough in Nuln to warm my bed.”

Bresh was still lying upon the floor of the old priest’s cell, straining at his bonds when he heard the fat merchant enter. The coachman went rigid with alarm as he saw the obese man draw a dagger from his boot. Steinmetz stared at him for a moment, but Bresh could not decide what thoughts were squirming about behind those eyes. The merchant waddled forward and Bresh braced himself for the sharp stab of steel.

Instead, he found himself turned onto his side, felt the edge of the weapon slicing through his bonds. Words were dribbling from the merchant’s mouth, inane babble about paying the Strigany a king’s ransom to get him away from the blighted village, desperate pleas for the coachman to save him from the ghouls howling for his blood, promises to help Bresh escape from the witch hunter. He smiled to himself. There was no fool so gullible as a fool in fear of his life.

Bresh rose to his feet, rubbing at his wrists and knees to try and restore circulation. The Strigany looked up at his benefactor, his features shaping themselves into a mocking smile. He pointed at the knife in Steinmetz’s hand.

“Will you help me?” the merchant demanded, but it was but an echo of his former pomposity and arrogance that gave the words their sting.

“Of course,” Bresh smiled. “I am in your debt now.” He opened his hand, extending it toward Steinmetz. “The dagger, if you please?”

“Why do you want it?” the merchant asked, voice trembling with suspicion and fear.

“Unless you want to take care of the witch hunter yourself,” Bresh answered. “We shall have to kill him if we are going to get out of here.” The words had their desired effect and Bresh felt the reassuring weight of the weapon slide into his hand. He briefly entertained the thought of returning it to the merchant, opening the conniving tradesman’s belly with his own steel, but Bresh quickly dismissed the idea. It would be much more fun to watch the ghouls dispose of him.

Bresh crept warily back into the shrine. He could see the Baroness, standing atop the altar, her back to him, intent upon the window. She presented a tempting target, but she was not his primary concern. He could also hear the commotion at the storeroom door, where Steinmetz had informed him that Ravna and the dwarf were standing guard. It sounded as if a score of ghouls were trying to beat their way through the small door. He turned his eyes forward. The gambler, the witch hunter and the witch hunter’s man were holding the larger entryway. Their backs were to the main room as they strove to punish the many black-clawed hands that were clutching at them from numerous holes in the wooden doors.

The Strigany smiled. His master would be greatly pleased if he dealt with the witch hunter, perhaps even forgiving him for bringing the man here in the first place. Bresh knew his master’s vile moods and unpredictable temper and knew that anything he could do to strengthen his position would be a matter of life or something worse than death. Bresh tightened his grip upon the dagger and began to move stealthily toward the doors. Behind him, the fat figure of the merchant filled the



doorway of the cell, sweating with nervous excitement as he watched the assassin creep across the decrepit hall of worship.

Neither man noticed the small figure that lifted herself from the bench of one of the pews. Lydia watched the Strigany emerge from the priest's cell, saw the dagger in his hand. She followed the course of his furtive steps, noting where they would eventually lead.

“Witch hunter! Behind you!”

Mathias Thulmann whipped about as Lydia's scream sounded above the howls and snarls of the ghouls. He saw the Strigany, barely a dozen paces away, the gleaming dagger clutched in his hand. Bresh had turned to see who had betrayed his intentions, losing the opportunity to fall upon the witch hunter's back in one final, swift, murderous rush.

The scrape of steel on leather rasped from Thulmann's side as he drew his longsword. The weapon gleamed in the feeble light filtering downward from the temple's rotting roof. Blessed by no less a personage than the Grand Theogonist of Sigmar himself, the sword was a weapon that could banish daemons and still the black hearts of sorcerers. Thulmann felt it was almost demeaning to force the elegant sword to soil itself with the blood of a mere thief and murderer. But once again, he felt that Sigmar would understand.

Thulmann found the Strigany ready for him, the dagger held outwards and to his side in the manner of a practised knife fighter. Thulmann would have doubted his chances against the man with all things being equal. However, the witch hunter bore no six-inch dagger, but three feet of Reikland steel. It was an advantage none of the Strigany's tricks could overcome.

Bresh managed to twist his midsection away from Thulmann's initial strike, but the witch hunter was too far away for the Strigany to follow through with his attack. Thulmann thrust at the villain's stomach and the Strigany darted to the right, trying to slash the witch hunter's arm before he could recover. But again, the longer reach thwarted the knife fighter's instincts.

“Finish him quickly! They're getting through!” roared Streng. The groan of the doors, the cracking sound of splintering wood grew in volume even as the snarls of the ghouls increased into a bestial cry of triumph. Bresh smiled, expecting the witch hunter to be distracted by the calamitous report. He dove inward for Thulmann's vitals.

The witch hunter stepped away as Bresh flopped to the floor. He had anticipated the villain to strike, and had met his charge, bringing the longsword stabbing through the Strigany's throat as the man leaped forward. Thulmann paused only long enough to kick the dagger from the dying man's reach before hurrying toward the doors.

The ghouls had indeed forced a wide gap between the doors and Streng and Feldherrn were hard pressed to keep them from opening further. The snarling face and wiry arm of one ghoul were thrust through the opening, their owner straining to undermine the efforts of his human prey to force the doors back. An entirely human look of surprise filled the ghoul's face as Thulmann thrust his sword through its eye. The doors slowly inched backward as Thulmann added his own weight to the efforts of Streng and Feldherrn.

Bresh coughed, a great bubble of blood bursting from the hole in his throat. But the Strigany smiled a weak and crimson smile. He could feel his master's rage; it burned within his mind. It did not concern Bresh overly that his vampiric master was so furious because it considered Bresh a piece of property that had been ruined. Only one thought warmed the dying man's soul as it quit his body.

Now the Master will come and everyone here will die!

It burst through the wooden barricade that filled the window behind the altar as if it were paper. The hulking shape fell upon Baroness von Raeder before she could even register the destruction of the barricade. A mammoth hand tipped with sword-claws ripped her in half, tossing her mangled body across the hall to crash into a support pillar.

The vampire roared, its screech sharp and piercing. The undead horror leapt from the altar, springing with panther like agility. The monster smashed to splinters one of the remaining pews as it landed. Blood-black eyes glared about the hall, smelling the hated stench of the living. The vampire hissed, sprinting across the shrine toward the nearest source of that stench. Steinmetz tried to scream, but the sound was ripped from his body as the vampire's claws tore into him, opening him from navel to collar bone, the bulb of garlic flying into the air as it was severed from the crude necklace. The merchant slumped against the wall, organs spilling from his burst ribcage and stomach.

Lydia screamed, the cry attracting the notice of the fiend. The Strigoi turned its head in her direction, but before it could move, a harsh, commanding voice shouted at it. The vampire hissed anew as it regarded its challenger.

"You are quite brave to enter Sigmar's house, filth," Mathias Thulmann snarled. The witch hunter stepped towards the undead monster, sword gleaming at his side. The vampire's eyes seemed to burn suddenly with an unholy light and there was no mistaking the rage that warped its already twisted features. "Show me how brave you are, coffin-worm!"

The Strigoi leapt forward. The single hop brought it within reach of the witch hunter, and its claw was already in motion even as it landed. Thulmann managed to dodge the blow by only the narrowest of measures, and the sword-sized talons tore into his cape before gouging the stone floor. And even as the vampire's first attack was avoided, its other hand sought to disembowel him with a crude swipe, blocked at the last instant by the witch hunter's sword. The undead talons smoked where the holy sword had nicked them and the Strigoi drew its bulk back to hiss at its adversary with renewed wrath.

Even as the duel between man and corpse-thing was being fought, the great double doors of the temple at last gave way to the frenzied ghoul mob struggling to get inside. Streng and Feldherrn gave ground before the snarling mass, their every attention given over to defending themselves from the venomous claws and snapping jaws of their adversaries. Behind the first wave of ghouls, dozens more fought amongst themselves to squirm through the doors, the thought of opening them wider eluding their frenzied, ravenous minds.

Thulmann did not wait for the vampire to recover its balance, but thrust at the undead beast, not with his sword, but with his off hand. The crystal flask gripped between his gloved fingers discharged its contents squarely into the vampire's face. The Strigoi howled in pain as the blessed water chewed at its rotten flesh, sizzling and steaming like bacon on a hot iron. The witch hunter darted forward, not allowing the vampire time to consider its injury. The longsword sliced into the vampire's shoulder. Once again, the Strigoi howled in pain, twisting its massive bulk about so as to tear the sword from its flesh even as one of its clawed hands cradled its smoking face. The vampire swiped at Thulmann with its other hand, but the blow was both slow and clumsy. The effect of standing within a holy place was beginning to tell on the corrupt monster, both its strength and speed diminishing rapidly to below mortal levels.

The Strigoi snarled at Thulmann and darted away from the witch hunter, leaping over the heads of startled ghouls, smashing its way through the half-open doors and racing into the night, a trail of putrid smoke drifting in its wake. The ghouls gave voice to a pitiable wail of despair as they saw the vampire flee and began a rout of dismal disorder. Streng and Feldherrn harried the escaping monsters, running several of the degenerate things through the back as they fled.

The witch hunter dropped to his knees, exhaling deeply, thanking Sigmar for the rout of the undead abomination and its followers. But he knew that there were more hours to pass before the dawn and that the vampire would be doubly determined to exterminate them now. Before, they had represented food. Now they represented a threat to the undying horror.

Thulmann took count of the toll the attack had taken. Steinmetz and Baroness von Raeder were dead. The loss of the merchant did not disturb him in the slightest, but the Baroness had represented

another pair of eyes and ears that could watch for danger, another blade that could fend off the hungry cannibals. A more telling injury had been dealt at the rear door of the temple. Hearing their vampiric master rampaging within, the ghouls had redoubled their efforts to gain entry, tearing great gashes into the wood. Ravna and Fergrim had kept the pack out, but one of the venom-laden claws had slashed the wrist of the mercenary. He seemed only slightly dizzy at the moment, and protested loudly that it was no more than a scratch, but the witch hunter knew only too well that the poison of a ghoul's claw was both fast and lethal. He would not last the night.

Mathias Thulmann stood before the remaining survivors. Streng had been set to watch the rear door, Feldherrn peering out of the wreckage that framed the main entrance. There was little hope of defending the doorway after the vampire's brutal exit and the destruction it had delivered upon the doors themselves. As yet, the ghouls had not returned to exploit the indefensible entryway, but Thulmann knew that they would.

"Listen," the witch hunter spoke. "We have driven them away, but they will return, more determined than before. The undead thing that rules these wretches cannot afford to let us live to see the dawn. He must return to his crypt when the sun rises and fears that I will find his refuge while he is helpless. It is all or nothing for him, he will offer no quarter." Thulmann studied each face, noting the expressions of resignation and regret, but finding that fear had passed even from Lydia's pale face. Men who have accepted their own deaths have no place for fear in their hearts.

"When they come again, we must make our stand," the witch hunter continued, something of a preacher's manners slipping into his tones. "Here, in this house of Sigmar, we will show this filth how real men die and make them pay a price in misery these wretches will not soon forget."

A soft clapping punctuated Thulmann's brief speech. Fergrim Ironsharp hopped to his feet. "And you folk call dwarfs dour?" the engineer chuckled. "You will forgive me if I am not terribly excited by the proposition of dying to impress a human god, but I think that if I can get back to the coach, I may be able to fix things so we can get out of this graveyard."

"I don't think the vampire is going to be bribed with your gold," scoffed Feldherrn from the doorway. "Indeed, it was probably your 'valuable cargo' that made those murderers bring us here in the first place."

"Gold indeed!" grumbled the dwarf, turning to the gambler. "If I had a hoard of gold I'd have better uses for it than to take it on holiday to Nuln! I speak of explosives! Five hundred pounds of premium Ironsharp blasting powder!"

The revelation swept about the room like wildfire, exciting each survivor.

"You have an idea of how to exploit these explosives?" asked Thulmann, trying not to let any degree of unwarranted hope creep into his words.

"All I need to do is run a fuse to those boxes and the next time our friends come howling at the door, there won't be enough of them left to feed a crow," declared Fergrim, puffing himself up proudly. "Just give me somebody to watch my back, and we'll give that blood-worm a very unpleasant reception!"

It was quickly decided. Streng would remain on guard at the rear door while Feldherrn kept watch inside with Lydia in the event that the vampire again chose to enter through the window. Thulmann emerged from the doorway, his sharp eyes scanning the shadowy town square. The dwarf would have made a better sentry with his excellent night vision, but he had a very different role to play. Ravna, the ghoul venom pulsing through his body now, insisted on accompanying the dwarf. Thulmann noted with some dismay the slow, ungainly steps of the once powerful man.

Fergrim knelt beside the overturned coach, rummaging about amongst the luggage still lashed to the roof. He removed a length of black fuse, traces of gunpowder soaked into the thin line of rope, and then began knocking a hole in the uppermost crate.

Thulmann could hear the sound of many naked feet running in the darkness. He shouted a call of alarm to the dwarf. Fergrim snorted back that he was hurrying. The witch hunter cursed as the sickly grave-stench of the ghouls and their low groans of hunger emerged from the veil of darkness.

“They’re closing in, Fergrim,” he said.

The dwarf remained focused upon his task. From the corner of his mouth he swore at the man. “Perhaps you’d prefer if I made a mistake! We have just one chance at this.” Beside him, Ravna thrust the point of his sword into the ground. Fumbling at his belt, he removed a small tinderbox and a wooden taper. The need for haste had not been lost on the former bodyguard.

The piteous, feral wailing of the ghouls was rising in volume now. Thulmann sighted one of the creatures as it rounded the overturned coach. Aiming quickly, he sent the bullet from his pistol crashing into its skull.

“Grace of Sigmar, dwarf! Move!”

Fergrim finished fixing the fuse to the uppermost box, uncoiling the length of black cord. “You can’t rush a decent job!” the dwarf grumbled. Suddenly the coach shook. Fergrim turned his face upward.

The Strigoi sat perched atop the side of the coach like a crouching panther. The vampire snarled at Thulmann, flexing its claws, promising its enemy a lingering and gruesome death. The witch hunter had emerged from his burrow. Now the advantage was the vampire’s.

So intent was the monster on its enemy, that it paid no attention to the much closer prey. Fergrim stared at the undead horror right above his head and slashed at the fuse in his hands, cutting the line much shorter than he had been planning. Suddenly, a powerful grip closed about his belt and the dwarf found himself stumbling backwards falling on the bottom most steps. Even as he started to voice a colourful oath of outrage, the dwarf saw who had thrown him away from the coach, and what he was doing now. Fergrim leaped up the steps and dove onto his face amid the remains of the doorway.

The Strigoi continued to snarl and spit, waiting while more and more of its ghoul minions rounded the overturned coach. Several of the monsters noted the man crouching against the side of the obstacle, just beneath their master and began to close upon him. But even as they did, Ravna stabbed the lit taper into the hole Fergrim had knocked into the uppermost box of powder.

Mathias Thulmann ducked inside the doorway, letting the heavy stone wall of the temple shield him from the explosion. The sound was deafening, like the angry bellow of a wrathful daemon. The temple shook, tiles falling from its roof. Debris, wooden and organic, rushed through the doorway, propelled by a hot wind. As the boom dissipated the sound of painful screams and moans erupted, the stench of cooked meat permeated the air.

Thulmann stepped back through the door. Near his feet, a stout, short form wriggled itself free of the debris that had covered him like a shroud. The dwarf rolled onto his back, grumbling and bemoaning the loss of his valuable supply of powder. Thulmann regarded the devastated scene before the temple. The coach was blown apart, reduced to burning fragments scattered across the square. The firelight illuminated surviving ghouls fleeing back into the shadows, maimed and injured ones slowly crawling away. A score or more were thrown all about, burned, torn and quite dead. The witch hunter quietly saluted the sacrifice of Ravna and prayed that Sigmar would conduct the man’s soul to one of the more pleasant gardens within the realm of Morr.

Motion snapped the witch hunter from his thoughts. He could see a massive shape writhing at the base of the now toppled statue. He firmed his grip upon his sword and carefully made his way down the temple steps. He could hear the others behind him, filling the doorway, marvelling at the destruction the blast had caused, but the witch hunter did not turn his eyes from the wounded beast. Now hunter had become prey.

The vampire had been thrown backwards at great force by the explosion. Huge splinters of wood from the coach had been driven through its unclean flesh, piercing it through in a dozen places. The violence of the explosion had tossed the creature as though it were a rag doll, causing it to smash

into the eroded statue in the centre of the square. The forgotten hero had struck the ground ahead of the vampire, but had rolled backwards, crushing one of the monster's limbs beneath its weight. The vampire fought to free itself, but the maddening pain of its injuries had reduced its already disordered mind to an animal level. The misshapen fangs worried at the trapped arm, trying to sever it from the Strigoi's body. Suddenly, a familiar scent caused the vampire to snap its head about, pain and imprisonment forgotten.

Mathias Thulmann stared down at the hideous monster as it regarded him with rage-filled eyes of blood. "When you want to kill someone, do so. Don't talk about it next time." Thulmann laughed softly as the vampire hissed up at him. "I forgot. You don't get a next time."

Thulmann raised his sword above his head in both hands and with a downward thrust, impaled the Strigoi's heart, pinning the undead creature to the clean earth below. The vampire struggled for a moment, then its final breath oozed through its jaws in a dry gargle. Thulmann turned away from the dead monster. The blessed steel would serve as well as a stake until he could decapitate the corpse and dispose of its remains in purifying fire. But such work would wait for the dawn.

Mathias Thulmann turned his horse away from the flickering flames. He patted the steed's neck with a gloved hand and looked over at Streng. "Well, friend Streng, I do not think we will find our man here. If he did have the misfortune to come this way, he is beyond the reach of the Temple now." The two men began to walk their animals back toward the gates of Murieste. Behind them, three figures stood beside the pyre, each wearing an angry look. "What about us?" demanded Feldherrn.

Thulmann turned about in the saddle. He considered each of the people staring at him. Lydia stared back at him with accusing eyes, Fergrim Ironsharp was grumbling into his beard.

"Do what people without horses have done since the days of Most Holy Sigmar," the witch hunter advised as he turned back around and continued on his way.

"Walk."

## 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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