



A WARHAMMER SS

WITCH WORK

Mathias Thulmann - 00c

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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 air was rank with the smell of decay and death, a morbid atmosphere that crawled within the murk like a pestilent fog, staining the rays of moonlight filtering through the thatch roof so that they became leprous and sickly. The interior of the hovel was small by any standard, yet into this space had been crammed enough weird paraphernalia to fill a space ten times as big. Bundles of dried roots and withered weeds drooped from the few wooden poles that supported the roof, their noxious stench contributing in no small part to the foul air. A set of crude timber shelves supported a disordered collection of clay jars and pots, a strange glyph scratched in charcoal upon each to denote whatever unclean and hideous material might be found within. The rotten carcasses of dozens of birds swung from leather cords affixed to the roof beams, ranging from songbirds to water fowl and the uglier birds found upon battlefields and graveyards—yet all alike in one way. For not one of the birds was complete, each one was missing some part—a clawed foot there, a wing here—all vital ingredients in the practices of the hovel's lone inhabitant.

She was bent and wizened, crushed low by the weight of years pressing upon her shoulders. A shabby brown shawl was wrapped about her crooked back; vile grey rags that might once have been a gown billowed about her skeletal limbs. Scraggly wisps of white hair crawled like worms from her head, the blotched skin so thin from time's ravages as to scarcely conceal the bone beneath. Her face was a morass of wrinkles, like the crinkling surface of an autumnal leaf. A sharp nose stabbed out from her face, looming like a hawk's bill above her gash of a mouth. From the sunken pits of her face, two little eyes twinkled with a cold, murderous mirth.

The old woman stared down towards the fire smouldering at her feet. A chill seemed to billow up from those embers, the dread clutch of magic and sorcery, the loathsome touch of powers unclean and unholy. The frigid caress of the supernatural was enough to make even the bravest soldier falter, but the old woman was so accustomed to invoking such forces that she no longer acknowledged the horror of such things. Her toothless mouth cracked open into a ghastly smile as she watched her magic take shape. The eerie fire had changed colour, deepening into a bloody crimson, lighting the interior of the hut as though it were engulfed in flame. Within the fire, tiny figures began to appear: tiled roofs and plaster walls, narrow streets and winding alleys. The old woman could see the tall steeples of cathedrals and temples, the mammoth towers of castles and forts. But her ambitions this night were not devoted to such lofty places. Her business was with a different section of this place. She focused her will and the image began to boil, disintegrating into a crimson fog before reforming into a more concentrated view of the city.

Chanta Favna let a dry hiss of laughter trickle past her lips as the sight manifested itself before her. The merchant district of Wurtbad was one of the most secure places within the river city, surrounded by thick walls thirty feet high and topped with iron spikes. Patrols of city watch and private militia regularly walked the streets, guarding against any would-be thieves who had managed to get over the walls, ensuring that no stranger tarried within the district unless that man had proper business there. For two hundred years, the merchants had been mostly safe from the crime that stalked the rest of Wurtbad, safe from the thieves and murderers who plied their trade in the dead of night. They thought themselves protected from such things within their fortress-like district.

The old witch sneered. Men were so quick to become complacent, to deceive themselves into thinking themselves safe. Her withered hands reached toward the fire, clutching a small wooden doll. The hag smiled as she glanced down at the minnikin. This night the fat, indolent wealthy of Wurtbad would again learn to fear the approach of night, to shudder beneath their bedclothes as they waited out the long hours and prayed to their gods for a hasty dawn.

A new figure appeared within the scene unfolding in the flames. Chanta Favna watched as it tottered over the wall, slipping like a gangly shadow between the iron spikes.

“That’s my darling boy!” the witch cackled. “Over wall and under moon, shade within the night of doom!”

There would be a red sky this night in old Wurtbad, a night of screams and blood and terror. The witch’s pulse quickened as she considered the carnage that would soon unfold somewhere within the city. There would be havoc enough to satisfy her for a time, more than enough to remind her patron that his payment had best be as timely and generous as he had promised.

The two riders made their way slowly through the cramped, muddy streets of Wurtbad. The crowd of craftsmen, merchants, beggars and peasant farmers parted grudgingly before their steeds, waiting until the last moment to allow the animals to pass. Half-timber structures loomed to either side of the street, gaudily painted signs swinging from iron chains announcing the goods and services that might be procured within the tall, thin buildings; announcements made more often than not with crude illustrations of shoes and swine rather than written Reikspiel.

“Good to be back in civilisation, eh Mathias?” one of the riders laughed, his gaze rising to an iron balcony fronting the upper storey of a building some distance down the narrow street and the buxom brunette leaning against it, a much more lively and vivid manner of announcing the establishment’s trade. The rider was a short, broad-shouldered man, his body beginning to show the first signs of a paunch as his belly stretched the padded leather tunic that protected his torso. A scraggly growth of beard spread across his unpleasant face, and the disdainful sneer that seemed to perpetually curl the man’s lip.

The man’s companion was, by contrast, tall and lean, his hair and beard neatly trimmed. He wore a scarlet shirt trimmed with golden thread, fine calfskin gloves clothing his hands as he gripped the reins of his steed. A long black cape trimmed in ermine hung about his shoulders and a wide-brimmed hat of similarly sombre hue covered his head. The face behind the shadow cast by the hat was thin and hawkish, a sharp nose flanked by steely eyes, a slight moustache perching above a thin-lipped mouth. From the man’s belt swung a pair of massive pistols and a slender longsword sheathed in dragonskin. The buckle that fronted the rider’s belt announced his profession as surely as any of the gaudy signs that swung in the feeble breeze—the twin-tailed comet, holy symbol of Sigmar, patron god of the Empire—the sign of that god’s grimmest servants, the witch hunters.

“Foul your soul with whatever debauchery pleases you, Streng,” the witch hunter declared. “One day you will answer for all the filth you’ve degraded yourself with.”

“But I’ll die happy,” the other man retorted, a lewd smile on his harsh features.

The witch hunter did not bother to continue the conversation, knowing that his disapproval of Streng’s vices only made the man take even greater enjoyment from them. Mathias Thulmann had long ago learned that Streng would never rise from the gutter, he was the sort of man who would never be able to do more than live from one day to the next. The future was something that would sort itself out when it came, and the approval or disapproval of any god was a concept far too lofty for a mind like Streng’s to ever grasp.

Ironically, it was this quality that made him so capable an assistant for the witch hunter. Streng did not lend his mind to morbid imaginings, did not feed the germ of fear with figments of his own imagining. That was not to say that the man did not succumb to fear; confronted by some unholy daemon of the Ruinous Powers he would feel terror like any other mortal soul, but he was not one who could allow anticipation of such an encounter to unman him before the time of such a confrontation.

“I think we will do better to begin our inquiries with the stage lines, not the bordellos,” Thulmann commented as the two men rode past the establishment that had aroused his henchman’s interest. “From what we know of the character of our quarry, he wouldn’t be hanging about a bawdy house.”

“We need to chase a better class of heretic,” grumbled Streng, reluctantly removing his eyes from the shapely woman draped across the iron balcony.

Thulmann nodded in agreement.

“Freiherr Weichs is the most wretched creature we’ve hunted together,” he agreed. “He would befoul even that ghoulish warren we found in Murieste. The day that scum hangs, the very air will become less stagnant.” There was passion in the witch hunter’s voice, a fire in his tone. The heretic scientist and physician Doktor Freiherr Weichs had been the object of Thulmann’s attention for nearly a year. He and Streng had pursued the villain across half the Empire, following his trail from one city to the next. They had come close several times, but always the madman had remained just beyond their reach. Thulmann fairly bristled with frustration at his inability to bring Weichs to ground.

“Suit me fine if we catch that vermin this time,” Streng said, spitting a blob of phlegm into the gutter, narrowly missing the boots of a passing labourer. “Been some time since I was able to ply my own trade. After all these months, it’ll be a pleasure to make Herr Doktor Weichs sing! He’ll be admitting to the assassination of Emperor Manfred when I get through with him!”

Thulmann turned his stern gaze on his henchman, draining him of his bravado and sadistic cheer. “First we have to catch him,” Thulmann reminded his professional torturer.

The witch hunter and his companion emerged from the large stone-walled building that acted as the Wurtbad headquarters for the Altdorf-based Cartak coaching house. The Cartak coaching line was one of the largest in the Empire, operating in dozens of towns and cities. They were also known for their scrupulous attention to detail, always recording the names and destinations of their passengers in gigantic record books. But as Thulmann had examined their records, the forlorn hope that something would arouse his suspicion failed to manifest. It had not been entirely a fool’s hope, Weichs had been bold enough to use his own name on several occasions and lately had taken a perverse delight in using ciphers for aliases, tweaking the nose of his pursuers. Either the heretic had tired of his little game, or else there had been nothing for Thulmann to find in the Cartak records. The witch hunter had a feeling that the other four coaching houses operating out of Wurtbad would be no more helpful.

As Thulmann strode towards the street, he noticed a company of soldiers dressed in the green and yellow uniform of Stirland approaching. As they came closer, he could see that a golden griffon rampant had been embroidered upon their tunics, marking them as members of Wurtbad’s Ministry of Justice. Thulmann watched with mounting interest as it became obvious the soldiers were coming for him. He could hear Streng mutter a colourful curse under his breath. The witch hunter smiled. Under normal circumstances, his companion would have good reason to dread the approach of the city watch, but there had been no opportunity as of yet for Streng to work himself into one of his drunken fits, which raised the question as to what the soldiers did want.

“You are a Sigmarite templar, newly arrived in Wurtbad?” the foremost of the soldiers asked when he and the three men shadowing him were but a few paces away. The stern, almost overtly hostile look on the soldier’s face made it clear to Thulmann that the man already knew the answer to his question before he asked it.

“Mathias Thulmann,” the witch hunter introduced himself. “Ordained servant of our most holy lord Sigmar and templar knight of his sovereign temple.” Thulmann put a note of command and superiority in his tone. He’d had problems before with local law enforcers who felt that the presence of a witch hunter was some slight upon their own abilities to maintain order, their own competence in apprehending outlaws and criminals, as though the average watchman was trained to deal with warlocks and daemons. “Lately of Murieste,” he added with a touch of sardonic wit.

“Kurtus Knoch,” the soldier introduced himself. “Sergeant of Lord Chief Justice Markoff’s personal guard,” he added, putting just as much stress in his own position as Thulmann had when

announcing his own. "My master asks that you meet with him." The soldier's hard eyes bored into Thulmann's own. "Now, if it is not too inconvenient."

The witch hunter gave Knoch a thin smile. "Your master is arbitrator of the secular law. My business is that of the temple."

The soldier nodded.

"My master is well aware of the difference," Knoch told him. "That is why this is a request rather than an order." The sergeant's voice trembled with agitation, arousing Thulmann's interest. He and Streng had not been in Wurtbad long enough to have earned this man's ire, nor that of his master. And why would Lord Markoff be interested in a witch hunter from outside the city when there was a permanent chapter house within its walls? Perhaps the reason for Knoch's resentment had something to do with the answer to that question.

"Streng," Thulmann turned to his henchman. "Go and secure lodgings for us, then begin making inquiries with some of your usual contacts." The witch hunter was always amazed at the speed with which Streng was able to insinuate himself with the criminal underworld of any settlement they tarried in, another quality that made the man indispensable. "With luck, you may learn something useful."

Streng feigned a servile bow, then retreated down the street.

Thulmann returned his attention to the soldiers.

"I am a busy man, Sergeant Knoch," Thulmann stated. "Let us see your master so that we may both of us return to more profitable endeavours."

Thulmann was taken to the monstrous Ministry of Justice, a gigantic, grotesque structure which loomed above the other ministries that had been clustered together within the cramped confines of Wurtbad's bureaucratic district. Knoch led the witch hunter through the marble-floored halls, past the glowering portraits of past Chief Justices and High Magistrates, and to the lavish dining hall that served the current Lord Chief Justice. The room was as immense as everything else about the building, dominated by a long table of Drakwald timber that might have easily served a hundred men. Just now, there was only one chair set before it; dozens more lined the far wall like a phalanx of soldiers.

Lord Chief Justice Igor Markoff was a severe-looking man, his black hair cut short above his beetle-like brow. There was a hungry quality about the man's features and his squinting eyes, not unlike that of a starving wolf. Just now, the object of Markoff's hunger was not the plate of steaming duck on the table but the man his bodyguard had just escorted into his dining room.

"Mathias Thulmann," Knoch announced without ceremony. The soldier took several steps away from the witch hunter, scowling at the man's back. Markoff set down his knife, dabbing at his mouth with a napkin before rising from his seat.

"So, the stories are true, then," Markoff said. "That idiot Meisser has finally decided that he hasn't the faintest clue what is behind our troubles."

The Lord Chief Justice's tone was harsh and belligerent, tinged with underlying contempt. Thulmann had heard such voices before, from burgomasters and petty nobles across the Empire, men who resented forfeiting even a fraction of their power and authority to the temple, even in times of the most dire need. However, the frustrated fury he saw blazing in Markoff's eyes was something even more familiar to the witch hunter, for it was the same look he saw staring at him in the mirror when his mind contemplated his fruitless hunt for Freiherr Weichs.

"I am afraid that you have my purpose for coming to Wurtbad misconstrued," Thulmann said. "I am here pursuing my own investigations. I've not been contacted by the Wurtbad chapter house, either before arriving in your city, or since."

Thulmann's apology only seemed to irk the magistrate even more. Markoff slammed his fist against the polished surface of the table.

“I should have known that fool Meisser would never ask for help,” Markoff fumed. “Why should he when no one in Altdorf seems inclined to listen to my complaints? Far be it for the Grand Theogonist and his lapdogs to rein in one of their unruly mongrels!” Markoff lifted his clenched fist, shaking it beneath Thulmann’s nose. “Damn me, but I’ll take matters into my own hands! Just let your temple try and burn me for a heretic!”

“You should be very careful about making threats against the servants of Sigmar,” Thulmann warned, feeling his blood growing warm as the Lord Chief Justice voiced his impious remarks.

To his surprise, Markoff did not even blink, but instead snorted disdainfully, before resuming his seat at the table.

“I’ll do worse than threats if this cur Meisser continues on as he has,” Markoff stated. “He has only two dozen men. I have five hundred, and the baron’s guard if I need to call upon it.”

Thulmann stared for a moment, at a loss for words. Had he actually heard the Lord Chief Justice of Wurtbad threaten violence against a chapter house of Sigmarite templars? The shock receded after a moment, replaced not with the outrage at such blasphemy Thulmann expected, but a deep curiosity at how matters between the secular and temple authorities could have degenerated to such a point.

“Perhaps I might be able to make your concerns known to the proper authorities if I were to know the particulars of the matter,” the witch hunter told Markoff.

“Particulars of the matter?” Markoff scoffed. He pulled the knife from the roast duck, pointing it at Thulmann. “Four households slaughtered in two months, slashed to ribbons. This killer doesn’t leave bodies, he leaves piles of meat!” Markoff plunged the knife back into his dinner with a savage thrust. “Nor does this human vermin prey upon the poor and unknown. No, the merchant quarter is his hunting ground! The merchant quarter, a district almost as secure as the baron’s own palace!”

Markoff rose again, his body trembling with agitation. “As if the massacres were not enough, rumour began to build among the superstitious simpletons in the street. They said that no human assassin could manage such horrors, that it was the work of some devilish sending, some daemon beast called up by sorcerers and witches!”

Markoff glared at Thulmann, his face livid with rage.

“That is where your friend comes in! Witches and daemons are the province of Sigmar’s temple knights, those who would protect us from the menaces of Old Night. Meisser took over the investigation after the second incident, fumbling about like some backwoods roadwarden. He’s arrested fifty-seven people, hung five and burned three! The streets around his chapter house echo with the screams of his prisoners until the first light of dawn!” Markoff’s face twisted into an almost bestial snarl. “And still this murderous maniac has not been stopped! Only two weeks ago there was another incident. The Hassel family, an old and respected house, butchered like swine from the old grey-headed Erik Hassel to Frau Hassel’s infant child.”

Thulmann listened to the magistrate’s tirade, feeling the fury communicate itself from Markoff to the witch hunter himself. This Meisser, this witch hunter captain, sounded to be as much of a terror to the city as whatever fiend was perpetrating these atrocities. Without having met Meisser, Thulmann could guess his type—brutal and incompetent, perfectly willing to hang and torture the innocent simply to mask his own inability to uncover the real villain. Perhaps there was another reason behind such doings, but Thulmann had seen enough brutality and incompetence wearing the colours of the temple to doubt it.

“Thank you for voicing your concerns, Lord Chief Justice,” Thulmann said, bowing his head to the official. “Rest assured that I will personally investigate this matter. That is, if you will officially sanction such an investigation.” For the first time since the witch hunter had entered the room, Markoff’s hostility abated. He returned to his seat, nodding thoughtfully to himself before speaking.

“Whatever you need from me, you will have,” Markoff declared, a smile crawling onto his face.

The battered human body that lay lashed to the top of the wooden table might once have been a woman beneath the dirt, dried blood, singed flesh and blackened bruises. Now, she was like everyone else in the dungeons beneath Wurtbad's chapter house—a condemned heretic, guilty of consorting with the Dark Gods to bring horror and death to the city. There was only the rather irritating formality of wringing a confession from the sorry wretch before she could be legally executed.

Witch Hunter Captain Meisser loomed above the table, his piggish features smiling down at the prisoner with false sympathy. Meisser was an aging man, his body no longer strong and virile, but flabby and wasted beneath his soft embroidered tunic and sleek green hose. His hair had begun to desert him, leaving only a fringe of white about his temples and the back of his head. In some ways, his overall appearance suggested an old hunting hound that had outlived its best days and now desperately clung to what remained of its former power.

"You have been through a terrible trial," Meisser said, his dry voice echoing about the stark stone walls of the cell. The woman looked up at him, eyes nearly swollen shut, reaching desperately toward the sympathetic tone the witch hunter had allowed to colour his voice. She did not see the knowing smiles that formed on the faces of the two men standing on the other side of the table, the torturers who had reduced her to such a state. They had seen this tactic many times, seen the interrogating witch hunter shore up a prisoner's fading hopes only to smash them like a child's sandcastle.

"You have not confessed to any wrong doing, you have sworn that you are a faithful and devout servant of most holy Sigmar." Meisser brushed aside a stray lock of matted hair from the woman's face, returning the painful smile that worked its way onto her battered features. "Perhaps Sigmar has seen fit to gift you with strength enough to resist the ordeals which law dictates we must employ to unmask the heretic and the infidel, the witch and the sorcerer. Still," Meisser's tone became less insinuating, more careless, as though speaking of trivialities rather than the life of another human being, "we cannot be entirely certain that you have been truthful with us. You say that you sold herbs and roots to the households in the merchants' quarter, doing so from door-to-door. But how can we be certain that this was your true purpose, that you were not simply using it as a cover for your real activities, a blind to conceal your unholy witchcraft?" Meisser paused for a moment, as though deep in thought. He let the implications of his words sink into the injured wretch strapped to the table.

"What we need is corroboration," Meisser declaimed, as though the thought were entirely novel and new. He looked again into the red-lined eyes of his prisoner. "I understand that you have two children." He let the statement hang in the air, watching as the look in his prisoner's eyes went from one of confusion to one of absolute horror. The woman's body began to tremble, slapping against the wooden table as she began to sob. Meisser waited while the woman's excess of emotion played itself out, until her shuddering body began to lie a little more still upon the table. Meisser cocked his head in his prisoner's direction, then smiled down at the woman. There was no friendliness in his smile now, only a predatory grin.

"What was that you said?" Meisser asked. "I thought I heard you say something." The last light flickered out within the woman's eyes, the last gleam of hope draining out of her. She closed her eyes and opened her bruised lips.

"I confess." The words escaped her in a sob that shook her entire body. Meisser turned away, striding back toward the door of the cell.

"My associates will take down the details of your confession," he said. "Please furnish them with whatever they require. We will, of course, need to corroborate them later." Meisser closed the door on the horrified scream that sounded from the cell as the full level of the witch hunter's ruthless treachery impacted against the prisoner's darkest fears.

Meisser made his way through the maze of darkened bare-stone halls until at last he ascended the wooden stair that would lead him from the dungeons to the chapter house above. There was a

great deal of work still to be done. Another confession meant that he would need to arrange a date for another public execution with the Lord Chief Justice and the city burgomasters. That another execution would displease Markoff did not overly bother the witch hunter. The magistrate had no conception of just how deeply the seed of corruption had taken root in his city, and how desperately in need of people like Meisser Wurtbad really was. He'd continue to uncover every witch and heretic in the city before he was through, and when the murders stopped, then even Lord Chief Justice Markoff would be unable to cast derision upon Meisser's methods.

Meisser paused as he walked down the wood-walled hallway of the chapter house. Ahead of him in the corridor he could see Emil, one of his apprentice witch hunters opening the door of Meisser's private study, a tray in his hands. The witch hunter captain snarled under his breath, hurrying forward to confront his underling. No one was admitted into that room unless he himself accompanied them. Emil would not soon forget that rule again once his superior was done with him.

Emil hesitated when he saw Meisser, the colour draining from his face. But it was an even more apprehensive look that he gave to the room itself, lingering but a moment at the threshold before slipping inside. Meisser did not pause to consider his underling's curious actions, but hurried after the man, opening the study door almost as soon as Emil had closed it.

Meisser's study was opulently furnished, a massive desk dominating a room flanked by bookcases crammed with leather-bound folios. A massive portrait of the witch hunter captain himself consumed the wall directly behind the desk. A tall, thin man was standing before the portrait, looking up at it as he drank from a wineglass taken from the tray Emil had carried into the room.

"Rather poor quality," the thin man commented. "You should have commissioned an artist to do this rather than trying your own hand with a brush."

Meisser felt his already aroused anger swell. "You insolent cur! How dare you!"

The tall man turned around, glaring at Meisser with unrestrained contempt. "Allow me to introduce myself. Mathias Thulmann, templar knight of the Order of Sigmar." Thulmann turned toward where Emil had retreated after bringing him his wine. "Thank you Brother Emil, that will be all. I would have words with your captain."

A visibly relieved Emil bowed to each of the men in turn and hurried from the room.

"To what do I owe this visit?" Meisser asked, striving to regain his composure. He fumbled at the tray Emil had left sitting on his desk, pouring wine for himself. "You have not come from Altdorf, have you?"

"No," Thulmann replied, stepping away from the portrait and turning a seemingly idle eye upon the shelves of neatly ordered folios. "Is there any reason you should be expecting a visitor from Altdorf?"

"Why no, none at all," Meisser responded, taking a deep drink from his glass.

"Then you must have some very influential friends," Thulmann snapped, spinning about like a cornered wolf. "The Lord Chief Justice has sent no less than five official protests to the Great Temple calling for your removal! I did not want to believe all that he told me, but since entering this room and reading these," the witch hunter's hand slammed against the desk where Meisser noticed a number of parchment sheets from his records had been piled, files relating to his investigations into the merchant quarter massacres and the arrests he had made since the first incident.

"These horrors run deeper than they might at first seem," Meisser sputtered, taking another sip of wine.

"The only thing that runs deeper than it seems is your incompetence!" Thulmann snarled back. "You've filled your dungeons with innocent men and women on charges so outrageously stupid that it is a wonder the people of this city haven't already ripped down this chapter house and stretched that miserable neck of yours!"

“Now see here!” Meisser retorted. “You’ve no authority to speak to me in such a manner! Wurtbad is my posting, my responsibility!” Meisser cringed as Thulmann’s hand fell to the sword hanging from his belt.

“You have friends in Altdorf?” Thulmann sneered. “So do I. You see this sword? It was a gift to me from the Grand Theogonist himself. I would advise against making this a matter to be arbitrated by our superiors.” Thulmann felt a great sense of satisfaction as Meisser wilted before him.

“What would you advise?” the witch hunter captain asked in a haunted, defeated voice.

“First we will free these people you have detained. If they have already confessed, you will strike out their words and burn the confessions,” Thulmann told him. “Secondly, we will work with Lord Markoff’s men in this matter, not exclude them. He has a much larger body of men at his command and we will need them.”

A suspicious curiosity brought words to Meisser’s lips. “Why will we need Markoff’s men? If you are thinking to place a permanent guard upon the merchant quarter, it won’t work. It’s already been tried.”

“You’ve been too busy arresting herbalists and midwives,” Thulmann chided the other man. “You’ve ignored the more obvious facts in the case.” Thulmann’s hand slapped against the piled papers on Meisser’s desk. “Each of these massacres occurred during either the first night of Morrslieb waxing full or the first night of Mannslieb falling dark—nights when the powers of evil are at their most powerful. And you have failed to notice another pattern to these crimes.”

“Pattern?” Meisser scoffed. “There is no pattern to these crimes. They are the work of some daemonic beast spat up from the blackest hell!”

“Perhaps,” conceded Thulmann. “But if it is a daemon, then someone called it into being. There is a human intelligence behind these attacks. Or do you think a mere beast would select only the households of merchants involved in Wurtbad’s river trade?”

“You learned all this just from reading my records of the investigation?” Meisser demanded, his tone incredulous.

“It helps when you do not make up your mind about something before considering every fact,” Thulmann reprimanded the older witch hunter. “You were so fixated upon the bestial violence of these killings that you did not pause to look for any subtlety behind them. How so inept and pompous a man could ever rise to the become captain of a chapter house is proof enough to me that the Dark Gods are at work in Wurtbad.”

“Then what is our next move?” Meisser asked, his voice struggling to contain the rage that flushed his skin. “We warn the river traders? Move them to a safer part of the city?”

Thulmann smiled indulgently and shook his head.

“We do neither,” he told Meisser. “Ask yourself this, who profits the most by these murders, who stands to gain by the slaughter of wealthy ship owners? The answer is, of course, another river trader. We warn these people and we alert the very man who set these atrocities in motion. No, Brother Meisser, the situation calls once more for subtlety. The moon of Mannslieb will grow dark in three days. Until then, we will watch and patrol as before, this time with the aid of Markoff’s people. But on the third day, every one of your men will situate himself near the home of a river trader. Because on that day, our killer will strike again.”

Twilight found the city of Wurtbad gripped by fear as tired labourers and craftsmen hurried to their homes, bolting their doors and windows. There was an almost palpable aura of terror in the streets as the sun began to fade, a despair that would not abate until morning broke. Thulmann had noted the air of dread since his first night within the city walls, but this night, it seemed to him, the fear was even greater, the haste of the townsfolk as they scrambled to their homes just that little bit faster than it had been previous nights.

Torches and oil lamps blazed upon every street corner and in every window in the merchant quarter, lighting up some streets almost as intensely as the noonday sun. Armed patrols of private

militia, professional mercenaries and the regular city watch marched along the deserted lanes, the tramp of their boots echoing across the cobbles.

Thulmann turned his eyes to the fading sky, watching as stars began to wink into life, the pale sliver of Morrslieb peeking above the horizon. It would be a long night, a dark night for all the precautions the merchants had taken. But perhaps it would be the last such night the people of Wurtbad would need to suffer through.

"It seems no different from yesterday," the man standing beside Thulmann commented. Meisser had forsaken his soft shirts and patterned tunics for a sturdy suit of leather armour reinforced with steel, a long-barrelled duelling pistol thrust through the band of his belt, a heavy broadsword sheathed at his side.

Thulmann rolled his eyes at the comment. Meisser had spared no opportunity to cast doubt and derision on his rival's every move, but even for the arrogant, pompous windbag it had been a stupid remark.

"We will know in the morning if tonight is the same," Thulmann replied. "Until then I suggest that you keep your eyes open."

Thulmann had positioned himself and a pair of witch hunters from the chapter house in an alleyway near the home of a merchant named Strasser. Other men were scattered about the district, teamed with soldiers from the Ministry of Justice and led by the more capable of Meisser's apprentices. Thulmann had attached Meisser to his own group, not trusting the man to keep out of mischief were he let out of Thulmann's sight.

"What do you expect us to look for?" Meisser asked, his tone surly and petulant.

"We will know it when we see it," Thulmann said curtly.

One more idiotic quip and he was sorely tempted to have the man locked in his own dungeons until morning. The thought brought a smile to the templar's stern features. He was still considering the idea when he saw Streng round a street corner and jog toward where Thulmann and his group were hidden. Thulmann had placed his underling in command of the men charged with watching the house of a merchant named Bromberg. If Streng had taken leave of his post, Thulmann knew that it could be only to bear very important news.

The bearded warrior came to a halt at the mouth of the alley, gripping his knees as he caught his breath. Thulmann hurried forward to learn whatever news his henchman had brought.

"We caught someone prowling around Bromberg's house," Streng informed his employer. "Making devil's marks on the walls he was."

"It would seem that I owe you an apology," Meisser commented, his tone making it sound as though he had just stepped in something foul. "Night hasn't even fallen and already our plan has netted us a sorcerer."

"Perhaps," Thulmann mused, his suspicions aroused. It was far too easy, and Thulmann had learned the hard way that it was the simple things that were to be trusted the least. "Let us go see for ourselves." He turned, ordering Meisser's men to maintain their vigil, then told Streng to lead him to the man he had captured.

The scene before the home of the merchant Bromberg was anything but the one Thulmann had expected to find. Bromberg's entire household was on the street, arguing violently with the dark-clad witch hunters Streng had left behind. Hunched upon the ground, hands tied against his back, was a miserable-looking man wearing a shabby blue robe. Resting on the ground beside him was a large satchel, its contents spilled onto the cobbles. Thulmann could see several sticks of pigment, a number of brushes and a small chapbook among the debris.

"What is going on here?" Meisser demanded, taking the initiative away from Thulmann before the other witch hunter could seize it. "Get these people back in their home!" he ordered his men.

"They claim that this man is innocent, captain," one of the witch hunters spoke, uncertain whether to direct his words at Meisser or Thulmann.

“We caught him making devil’s marks on the walls of the house,” Streng growled at the merchant and his family. “Probably saved all your necks!”

“Doomed us you mean!” a thick-set man Thulmann took to be Bromberg himself snarled back. “I hired this man to protect my home with his magic!”

“Magic? What heresy is this?” demanded Meisser.

“No heresy,” protested the prisoner, struggling to rise to his feet, but at last resigning from the effort. “I am a licensed practitioner, a student of the Colleges in Altdorf. I was hired to paint protective runes upon this man’s home, to ward away the evil spirits.”

Thulmann listened only partially to the magician’s story, turning over the man’s effects with the toe of his boot. They seemed to bear out his story, the chapbook proving to be a volume describing certain hex signs employed by the ancient elven mages of fabled Ulthuan. Unsettling, to be sure. Unpleasant, certainly, but nothing heretical.

“You’d hire a mage to protect you from a witch?” Meisser was snarling at Bromberg. “Why not simply set fire to your house now and be done with it! Arrest these people!”

Thulmann turned away from his examination of the conjurer’s effects to countermand Meisser’s excessive commands when a shot echoed into the night. Every head turned in the direction from which the sound had originated. Thulmann had given the other witch hunters strict orders to signal if they were in need of help by firing a shot into the sky.

“That came from Strasser’s,” the witch hunter said, a dark foreboding clouding his thoughts. Whatever horror was stalking Wurtbad, he was certain that it had chosen now to strike. They’d allowed this foolishness with the hex-dauber to draw them away from where they were needed the most. But perhaps it would not be too late if they were to hurry.

“Come!” Thulmann shouted to Streng and the two apprentice witch hunters. “We’ve no time to waste!”

“But the prisoners?” protested Meisser, still waiting for someone to carry out his order to arrest Bromberg’s household.

“Leave them,” Thulmann spat. “You’ve got a real monster to deal with now!”

The front door of the Strasser home was open when Thulmann and his party arrived, the heavy oak portal creaking in the chill night breeze. There was no sign of the two men he had left behind, and Thulmann decided that they must have rushed into the Strasser residence when the alarm was raised. The witch hunter cast a warning look to his companions, drawing both of his pistols with a single motion. The other templars nodded their understanding, each man pulling his own weapon. Thulmann looked back towards the house, cautiously making his way to the yawning doorway.

The foyer within seemed unremarkable enough, a slender-legged table laden with a massive clay pot resting against the opposite wall. A gaudily chequered carpet clothed the bare wood floor, and it was this item that immediately caught Thulmann’s attention, for it was smouldering beneath an overturned oil lamp. The witch hunter stepped over to the object, Streng and his other companions following close behind. Thulmann knelt to inspect the lamp, discovering that part of the carpet’s gaudiness was due to the bright crimson that stained much of its surface.

A sound of shock and disgust brought Thulmann back to his feet. One of Meisser’s apprentices was peering into the room that opened to the left of the foyer. The man now recoiled away in horror, fighting to maintain his composure.

Thulmann raced forward to see what had disturbed the witch hunter, maintaining a ready grip on his pistols.

The room inside was a parlour, judging by the numerous chairs and divans. Now it was a slaughterhouse, walls and furnishings dripping with slimy gore. Heaps of human wreckage were strewn about the chamber. Thulmann considered how apt Markoff’s words had been. “This killer does not leave bodies, he leaves meat.”

“I guess this means you were right,” Streng commented from the doorway, scratching at his beard. He looked about the room, his expression indifferent. “I hope they don’t expect us to clean...”

The remainder of Streng’s irreverent remark was silenced when a scream rang out from the floor above. Thulmann raced past his henchman back into the hall. With hurried steps, he raced toward the stairway at the end of the corridor, not pausing to see if anyone followed him. As he ran, the scream sounded once more, high pitched and hideous in its conveyance of agony and horror. That a human being was dying an ugly and terrible death, the witch hunter did not doubt for a moment. He only hoped to be quick enough to catch the murderer.

Thulmann reached the wooden stairway, and stared up at the gloom that held dominance in the rooms above. A dark shape toppled out of that darkness and it was only by an effort that Thulmann managed to keep himself from putting a bullet into it. In the slight illumination offered by the stairway, Thulmann could see that it was a body wearing the cloak of one of Meisser’s men. He could also see the wet, ragged mess that had once been the man’s chest, the ruin of a throat that had been torn out. The dying man crashed down the stairs, narrowly missing Thulmann as he jumped out of the way. The dying templar smashed against the balustrade, then rolled to the base of the stair, a scarlet pool spilling from his mangled body as he came to rest.

Thulmann spared only a moment to consider the man’s ruin, then sprinted up the remainder of the stairs, taking them three at a time. The unfortunate templar could not have lasted long with such horrible wounds, which meant that his killer was still near at hand.

A sound like tearing cloth greeted the witch hunter as he reached the upper hallway. Here, the dark was almost complete, broken only by the fitful light trickling in through the windows. Thulmann hesitated for a moment, trying to decide from which direction the sound emanated. He turned toward the room on his left, kicking the door open.

A spindly figure rose from the floor as the witch hunter entered, a crumpled heap lying at its feet. It was little more than a shadow, a black silhouette lit by the feeble light shining through the window, but even so, its inhuman outline chilled the witch hunter’s heart. It was much too thin for even the most emaciated beggar, much too tall for the lankiest of men. The motions of the thing were jerky and unnatural, like the death spasm of a slaughtered beast. It lifted a thin arm and Thulmann could see claws gleaming in the faint light. With an awkward motion, the shadow took a step towards him.

Thulmann fired his weapons into the ghastly apparition, the roar of the pistols almost deafening within the confines of the room. The flash of the muzzles revealed the shadow’s leering visage, its spindly body and talons. One bullet smashed through the thing’s shoulder, another tore into its belly. The creature’s thin form jerked and twitched as it was struck, but no cry of pain sounded from its gash-like mouth, nor did it falter in its gruesome advance. Thulmann noted with horror that the bullet which had struck the abomination’s belly had set something alight, yet the creature paid its smouldering wound not even the slightest notice.

More shots rang out and Thulmann became aware for the first time that he was not alone. Meisser and the two apprentice witch hunters discharged their weapons into the creature, causing its skeletal form to twitch and jerk with each impact. Streng lunged forward, slashing at the monster with his sword. There was the sound of steel slamming into wood as the blade bit into the creature’s leg. Streng freed his weapon only with effort, barely rearming himself in time to meet the downward swipe of the creature’s claw. Sparks glistened in the darkness as steel scraped against steel and Streng was flung back by the strength of his enemy’s blow.

Then the creature paused, glaring at its attackers from the centre of the room. With a speed that Thulmann would have thought the abomination incapable of, it turned, sprinted toward the window and leapt through it in an explosion of glass and splintered wood. The witch hunters hurried forward, expecting to find their monstrous foe sprawled in the street below. Instead, they had a fleeting glimpse of a lank-limbed figure scuttling across the rooftops, a twinkle of light flashing out

from where the wound in its belly continued to smoulder. Thulmann looked back to the street where a number of Markoff's soldiers and Meisser's apprentices were charging toward the Strasser house. He called down to one of the mounted soldiers.

"You!" Thulmann shouted. "The killer is escaping across the roofs! Follow it, but don't confront it!" The soldier looked in the direction in which the witch hunter pointed, at once sighting the glow of the creature's burning wound. The man nodded his understanding and set off at a gallop.

"By all the gods," muttered Meisser, leaning against one of the walls to support his sagging frame. "What was it?"

Thulmann circled the room, staring at the floor. One of the apprentices had lit a candle, shedding some light upon the carnage that had taken place here. The other apprentice removed his cloak, casting it over the sorry remains the creature had been standing over—all that remained of the other man who had been left behind to watch the house. Thulmann at once noticed the thin, clawed footprints of the creature, picked out in blood upon the floor. They were mismatched, each foot of a different size, and yet as regular in outline as the print left by a man's boot. Scattered about the floor were pieces of burnt straw. Thulmann picked one up, sniffing at its blackened end, unsurprised to detect the smell of gunpowder.

"What in the hell was it?" Meisser repeated, striving to master the hysteria that threatened to overwhelm him.

"Some abomination of the black arts," Thulmann told him. "A degenerate derivation of the ancient pagan practices of lost Nehekhara. But where the liche-priests employed stone and precious metal to construct their ushabti, our killer has employed much humbler materials to construct his assassin." Thulmann looked back out the window, across the silent rooftops. "And now the puppet is returning to its master."

* * *

The horseman had exceeded Thulmann's expectations, maintaining his pursuit of the fleeing apparition beyond the city walls until at last the flickering fire in its belly ceased to burn and he'd lost sight of it. By that time, however, there were other signs for the creature's hunters to follow. The soil outside Wurtbad was soft and rich, easily holding the track of any creature's passage across it. The witch hunters followed the strange clawed prints until at last the trail led them to an overgrown wheat field and the ramshackle hovel that crouched beyond it.

It was nothing much to look at really. Just a tiny little hovel like so many others that might be found beyond the walls of Wurtbad: four walls of timber tilted at an angle by the attentions of time and the elements. The thatch roof was old and ill-maintained, the roofing damp and rotting where it was not missing altogether. Creeper vines and sickly yellow moss clutched at the chinking between the log walls, and the awning of planks that had once shaded the front of the structure now drooped across much of the façade, one of its support poles knocked down by some past storm. Indeed, despite everything, the dozen men who had furtively crept through the muddy, overgrown wheat field might have thought they had been led to the wrong place were it not for the thin plume of greasy smoke rising from a hole in the rotten roof and the flicker of light that danced behind the sagging door.

Thulmann went ahead of the rest of the hunters, creeping through the muddy overgrown field until he could study the derelict structure from the very edge of the rampant crop. Thulmann kept a ready hand on the butt of one of his pistols, the other pulling at his thin moustache, a gesture that indicated a mind deep in thought. When he had seen enough, he scrambled back to where the other witch hunters awaited his return.

"You were long enough," observed one of the men crouching amidst the mud and rot. He was a short man with an unpleasantly cruel face, his features somehow suggesting both a pig and a cur. His hair had begun to desert him, leaving only a fringe of white. He wore a tunic of reinforced

leather, stained black and studded with steel. A large duelling pistol was held in his leather-clad hands. The man's fierce eyes glared at the returned watcher, voicing the unstated challenge lurking within his words.

"Perhaps you would prefer that we simply announce ourselves," sneered the moustached man. "I am certain that this murderous sorcerer would welcome us with open arms. Perhaps invite us for tea before we take him away to torture and burn." He turned from the balding man, shaking his head with disgust. "You've made enough of a mess of things, Meisser. Just do as I tell you and we will free Wurtbad of this horror tonight."

Meisser's hand clenched about the grip of his pistol making the leather creak. "See here, Thulmann," he snarled. "I command here! Wurtbad is my posting, its protection is my duty, not yours! I'll thank you to remember that," the piggish man added, his voice boiling with indignation. The other witch hunter rounded on the balding Meisser, a face livid with rage.

"I'll remember four households butchered in their beds while you stumbled about in back alleys arresting midwives and herb-sellers," Thulmann stated, brimming with contempt, thrusting every word like a dagger into the inflated ego of the pompous Meisser. The older witch hunter retreated back several steps before Thulmann's cold fury.

"I'll report this flaunting of my authority!" Meisser warned, eyes round with shock. Suddenly his words were brought up short as the witch hunter felt the sharp prick of steel pressed against his side. He turned his head, finding himself staring into the smiling features of Thulmann's underling. Streng grinned as he pressed the dagger in his hand a little more firmly against Meisser's side.

"You'll do exactly like he tells you," Streng hissed into Meisser's ear. The balding witch hunter looked toward the other men lurking in the muddy field. They were his men, apprentice witch hunters under his command and tutelage. However, not a one of them moved. Meisser might be their commander, but they recognised a fool when they saw one, and none of them were eager to follow a fool into battle.

Meisser licked his lips nervously and nodded his head in defeat.

"Well done, Streng," Mathias Thulmann told the knife-wielding thug. "Now if you will kindly relieve Brother Meisser of his pistol in order that I need not worry about a bullet in the back, we'll be on about our business here." The witch hunter looked around him, gesturing for the apprentices to draw close in order that he might disclose his plan of attack to them.

Mathias Thulmann crouched just outside the filthy hovel, listening for any sign that the occupant of the hovel had detected the presence of his party, or the men he had deployed to surround it. He looked back at the five he had chosen to accompany him into the witch's lair.

"I remind each of you," Thulmann whispered. "Guard your own lives, but see that the witch is taken alive." The witch hunter studied each man's face, making certain that his warning was understood. He met the questioning gaze of his henchman, Streng.

"You certain that this is how you want to do it?" Streng asked. "Wouldn't it be better just to put the place to the torch and have done with it? We'll be burning the heretic eventually anyway."

"I want to know the reason for these atrocities," the witch hunter told him. He thought again of the four households, slaughtered down to the last child, each of them the household of one of Wurtbad's most prosperous river merchants. There was something more than simple evil and malevolence at work here. Someone was hoping to profit by these horrors. Greed was one of the simplest motives by which any crime was countenanced. But it had taken a truly sick mind to consider witchcraft as the solution to such ambitions. "And I would hear who paid to have them done," Thulmann added.

"Shouldn't you at least send him back to guard the perimeter?" Streng gestured with his head to indicate Meisser. The witch hunter captain of Wurtbad was now equipped with a sword, his confiscated duelling pistol tucked securely under Streng's belt.

“No, I want him with us,” Thulmann commented. “I wouldn’t want Brother Meisser to miss one moment of the excitement.” The witch hunter sighed, drawing his own sword. He pointed his sword at the hovel, and with a shout, the gathered men lunged forward, Streng at their forefront. The burly henchman sent a savage kick smashing into the ramshackle door, tearing it from its rotted leather hinges to crash upon the earthen floor of the hovel. Streng leapt into the room, Thulmann and the other witch hunters right behind him.

The interior of the hut was small, but crammed. Dried bundles of weeds and herbs drooped from the ceiling, dead and eviscerated birds hung from leather straps fastened to every roof beam. A huge pile of bones was heaped against one wall, a collection of foul-smelling jars and pots filling a crude series of shelves beside it. The head and skin of a black cow stared at the intruders with its empty eye-sockets from the hook that fastened it to the support beam that rose from the centre of the hut. Beyond, shapeless masses dangled and drooped, drifting back into the inky recesses of the chamber. A dozen noxious stinks fought to overwhelm the senses of the men, but no more charnel a reek assailed them than that which rose from the small fire-pit and the black iron cauldron that boiled above it. As the attention of the witch hunters was drawn to the only source of light in the gloomy shack, a dark shape rose from beside the cauldron, glaring at the intruders.

It was an old woman, bent backed and shabbily dressed. Straggly white hair hung about her body, drooping as far as her knees. The hag opened her gash-like mouth, letting a trickle of spittle drool from her lips.

“So, my boy was followed after all,” the witch observed, the words escaping her toothless maw in a scratchy hiss. “But if you think you’ll be stoking a fire with these old bones, you’re sadly mistaken.”

“Your unholy tricks won’t protect you now, old hag,” declared Thulmann, striding toward the witch, sword and pistol both pointed at her breast. “The judgement of the god you’ve profaned and mocked is upon you this night!”

The old crone’s smile broadened, ghastly in its malevolence.

“Think so, do you?” she cackled. “But you’ve forgotten Chanta Favna’s darling boy!” From the black interior of the hovel, the sound of creaking wood and groaning iron issued, followed a moment later by the tottering form of the monstrous abomination which the witch hunters had tracked to this, the lair of its creator and controller.

It was so tall that it was forced to stoop under the low ceiling of the hovel. It was rail thin, which was fitting, since just such an object had been used to form its spine. Its body was an old burlap sack stuffed with rubbish and old dried out reeds. Its arms were long sticks, hinged at the shoulder and elbow with iron fittings. Its legs were poles, wooden feet nailed at their ends. The monster’s head was an old pumpkin, upon which had been carved a leering and ghastly suggestion of a face. About its neck hung a withered, dried out toad, a talisman that reeked of loathsome and unholy magic. However, it was none of these features which arrested the attention of the men who had moments before challenged the construction’s mistress, rather it was the long, sharp claws of steel that tipped each of the scarecrow’s slender arms, the bladed hands that still dripped with blood from those it had slaughtered already this night.

Almost before the men could fully register its appearance, the scarecrow was upon them, lashing at them with its murderous swipes of its rickety limbs. One of Meisser’s apprentices fell under the monster’s steel claws, wriggling on the floor as he tried to push his entrails back into the gaping hole the scarecrow had ripped from his belly. The other witch hunters warded off the butchering sweeps of the automaton’s flailing arms, swords crashing against claws of steel. Thulmann fired his pistol into the ghastly pumpkin face, the shot shattering against the sorcery-strengthened shell. Streng tore Meisser’s own pistol from his belt, firing at the scarecrow as its bladed hand swept toward the throat of his employer. The shot glanced off the claw, the impact redirecting the flashing talon to chew into the timber wall of the hovel.

Meisser lunged at the scarecrow as it tried to free its hand from the wall, stabbing and slashing at the unnaturally strong substance of its backbone. It seemed impossible that such a ramshackle thing could move with such deadly swiftness. Thulmann moved to aid the witch hunter captain in his efforts, but was dealt a glancing blow that knocked him to the floor. One of Meisser's remaining apprentices shouted a warning to his mentor as the scarecrow freed its trapped arm, but the older witch hunter was too slow in recognising the danger. The scarecrow's claws slashed downward, ripping open Meisser's swordarm. With a scream of anguish, Meisser fell back, his apprentices stepping forward to protect their master. The scarecrow lashed at the swords of the two men, its powerful blows forcing them to give ground before it.

"That's it!" laughed Chanta Favna. "Kill them all! But do it slow my pet, I want to savour every scream!" The hag's hands were held before her, swaying and jerking in time to the scarecrow's movements. Dangling from those withered claws was an articulated wooden doll, a small manikin that the witch manipulated with deft motions of her scrawny fingers. The severed leg of a toad was fastened about the scarecrow's neck, another also fastened around the midsection of the tiny figure. As the doll moved, so too did her sorcerous construction. From the edges of the battle, Streng noted the old hag's manipulations.

"Mathias!" the bearded henchman called out, deflecting another slash of the scarecrow's claw with a desperate sweep of his sword.

Rising from the floor, half-dazed by the automaton's blow, the witch hunter looked over at his hireling. "The witch's doll! She's controlling the scarecrow with it!"

Upon hearing Streng's words, the witch's ugly eyes focused upon the recovering Thulmann. She cackled and hissed slippery, inhuman syllables, forcing the witch hunter to meet her transfixing gaze. Chanta Favna placed all of her dark will and malignancy into her hypnotic spell, willing the witch hunter to remain where he was. With her hands, she manipulated the wooden doll. In time to her manipulations, the scarecrow turned away from its hard-pressed opponents, its creaking steps turning back toward Thulmann.

Mathias Thulmann could feel the dread power of the old witch surging through his body, paralysing every nerve, urging him not to rise, commanding him to remain still. He could feel himself struggling to resist her, but it was as if his body was not his own. The witch hunter was dimly aware of the creaking, tottering steps that were closing in upon him, yet such was the numbing power of the witch's magic that he was unable to muster any sense of haste to speed his struggles. Indeed, his entire being seemed to be in a stupor, a stupor not merely of body but of soul as well. Only one part of his being seemed to be clear and distinct. The witch hunter's right hand yet retained its grip upon his sword, the sword that had been given to him in the Great Temple of Sigmar in Altdorf, the sword that had been blessed by the Grand Theogonist Volkmar himself. Thulmann forced himself to focus upon the sword and his hand, and as he did so, the numbing deadness seemed to lessen. He could sense his arm now, then the feeling of warmth and control spread to his shoulder.

Chanta Favna stared in disbelief as the witch hunter began to fend off her viperous gaze. The witch's face grew dark with worry, her manipulation of the manikin a bit hastier and more desperate. She risked a glance to see how her automaton was doing, but found it beset once again by the other witch hunters, their clumsy efforts to destroy it nevertheless managing to impede its progress.

As the witch's attention wavered, Thulmann tore himself from her lingering spell. The witch hunter surged to his feet and sprang at the old woman. "Enough of your black magic crone!" he cried out. The steel of Thulmann's sword flashed in the flickering light as it swept downward at Chanta Favna. The witch screamed in a howl of pain and despair as the blade bit through her wrists. The scraggly clawed hands of the hag dropped to the floor, the manikin still held in their disembodied clutch. As the doll struck the floor, so too did the scarecrow, tottering for one moment

like a puppet struggling to stand after its strings have been severed. The bundle of sticks and straw struck the ground and broke apart, the pumpkin head rolling away from its wooden shoulders.

Mathias Thulmann loomed over Chanta Favna and watched the witch as she pressed the bleeding stumps of her wrists against her body. "Fetch brands from the crone's fire," the witch hunter snarled, glancing to see the surviving men from Wurtbad ministering to Meisser's hideous injury. "See to him later!" he snapped. "I want this hag's wounds cauterised before she bleeds out. There are questions I would ask her." The witch stared up at Thulmann's menacing tone.

"I'll tell you nothing you filth! Swine!" The witch managed to forget her own agony to heap maledictions upon the witch hunter.

"Streng, go and fetch the men watching the perimeter," Thulmann told his henchman, ignoring the curses bubbling from the witch's mouth. "Tell them to ready some torches. I want this place razed when we leave it." He turned his attention back to Chanta Favna. One of the men from Wurtbad held her fast while the other pressed a knife he had heated to a red glow against the bleeding stumps of her arms.

"I'll tell you nothing!" the witch managed to scream between painful shrieks. Thulmann considered his prisoner, his face grown cold and expressionless now that the hunt had reached its end.

"They all say that," he stated in a voice that was not without a note of remorse and regret. "But in the end, they all talk." Thulmann turned away from Chanta Favna, and stalked toward the doorway of the witch's hut.

"They all talk," the witch hunter muttered. "Even when they have nothing left to say."

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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