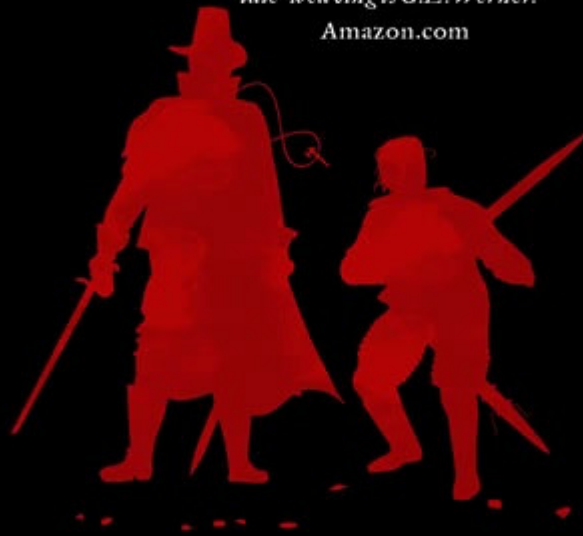


**WARHAMMER**

*'One writer who stands out,  
with his professional level  
tale-weaving is C.L. Werner.'*

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# WITCH KILLER

The third novel in the Mathias Thulmann series  
by C.L. Werner

**A WARHAMMER NOVEL**

# **WITCH KILLER**

**Mathias Thulmann - 03**

**C.L. Werner**

**(An Undead Scan v1.1)**

*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.*

## PROLOGUE

The man's breath came short and sharp, his pulse quickening as he heard the scratching of verminous claws upon naked earth. There is no shame in fear, he thought, only in how you confront that fear. He reached into his shirt, his hand closing around an icon set upon a silver chain. He smiled as he felt the hammer-shape press upon his palm. Whatever haunted the darkness, he did not face it alone.

Alone, once again Mathias Thulmann cursed himself for being such a fool. Nearly a hundred men had entered the gloom beneath the Schloss von Gotz, invading the black underworld below Wurtbad. Soldiers from the Ministry of Justice, veteran witch hunters from the Wurtbad chapter house, elite troops from the palace guard of Baroness von Gotz, even half a dozen templar knights of Morr, the forbidding Black Guard, had placed themselves under Thulmann's command, following his lead into a grotesque labyrinth of nightmare and horror: nearly a hundred men, the most disciplined fighters Wurtbad could offer.

Thulmann uttered a hollow laugh. A thousand would have been too few to explore the insane network of tunnels under the city. Passageways snaked and writhed through the dripping, stagnant earth without pattern or scheme. After a half hour traversing the madhouse corridors, Thulmann had been unable to decide if he was a few feet beneath the surface or a few hundred.

Their foe had struck, erupting from numberless openings in the walls, floor and ceiling of the tunnel. A living tide of snapping fangs and slashing claws, the ratmen had set upon them in feral savagery. Only with blood and steel had the vermin been driven back squealing into the darkness, leaving their dead littering the floor. The victorious men had given pursuit, hounding the fleeing monsters through their burrows.

It was then that the tunnel began to shake and quiver. Thulmann recognised the sound and the sensation all too well. Looking over to the hulking armoured form of Captain-Justicar Ehrhardt, he saw that the grim templar recognised it too. Both men shouted a frantic warning and the entire company took to its heels, fleeing the passageway as the skaven collapsed it in upon them.

Thulmann shook his head at his own audacity. His newly-lit torch had revealed something else to him — he was alone. None of his soldiers had reached the safety of the side tunnel he had sheltered in. Lost and alone, with only the feeble light of his torch to guide him, he had enough to worry about without wishing for a confrontation with the skaven sorcerer who had drawn him down into the darkness.

The scratching of claws on bare earth came more distinctly, with a suggestion of whispered hisses. Thulmann pulled his sword from its sheath. They'd found him at last, the scuttling horrors of this black underworld. With their inhumanly sharp senses, he had known it would only be a matter of time before the skaven tracked him down. The possibility of running passed through the witch hunter's mind, quickly subdued and killed by his iron resolve. If he were fated to die in the skaven warren, he would do so with honour, with his wounds to the front.

Chittering laughter crawled through the darkness. A loathsome shape crept forward, its scrawny body covered in lice-ridden fur. The face that snarled at him from beneath a rusted steel helmet was that of a monstrous rodent, chiselled fangs jutting from the lips of its muzzle. In an extremity that was more paw than hand, the ratman held a crooked sword crusted with decay. A long, scaly tail lashed the floor behind the creature as it squinted at him with hungry red eyes. Thulmann felt

disgust fill him as he watched the skaven creep forward. He prepared himself for the monster's attack, knowing only too well with what frenzy the ratkin could fight.

The shrill, inhuman laughter was repeated. More of the under-folk emerged, their fanged faces slavering at the lone human they had cornered. Thulmann's hopes of survival withered before him as more and more rodents emerged from the darkness. They stood there for a moment, squinting against the light of Thulmann's torch, squealing and hissing to each other in hungry anticipation. The witch hunter knew it would only be a matter of time before the skaven overcame their trepidation and pounced upon their prey. Thulmann firmed his grip upon his blade. Whichever monster was first to dare his steel, that one at least would accompany him into the kingdom of Morr.

A furry body slammed into Thulmann from behind, clawed feet digging into his legs as they scrambled for purchase, a wiry arm wrapping around his throat while sharp fangs snapped beside his ear. Only the witch hunter's heavy cloak prevented the would-be killer from ending his life, turning the murderous knife gripped in its paw so that it merely slashed along the flesh. Thulmann cried out in pain and outrage. Even as the skaven clinging to his back pulled its knife back to make another strike, the witch hunter's arm was swinging upward, thrusting his burning torch into the ratman's face. The skaven dropped away from him, its shrill screams deafening as it writhed across the floor.

There was no time to savour the cringing killer's agony. As soon as the ambusher had attacked, the other skaven were in motion, lunging forward like a pack of starving mongrels. Thulmann's sword licked out into the darkness, bisecting the snout of one attacker as it scurried towards him, gashing the shoulder of a second. Then they were on him, a burly black-furred monster crushing him to the ground as its powerful arms closed around his midsection. A clawed hand ripped his sword from his fingers as he struck the ground while furred feet kicked dirt upon his dropped torch, causing its light to flicker and dim. Ravenous eyes glared down at him, ropes of drool dripping from fanged muzzles. Mathias Thulmann had always expected his service to the Order of Sigmar would end in a hideous death, but being eaten alive by the skaven was a more ghastly end than his worst nightmare.

Suddenly the shrill scream of a skaven rattled through the passageway. The monsters turned around in fright, noses twitching. Thulmann saw the body of a ratman fly through the air, filthy blood streaming from an enormous gash in its chest, a hulking shape beyond it. The witch hunter laughed aloud as he renewed his struggle against the ratmen holding him down. The monsters had been so intent upon tormenting their prey they had failed to notice their new adversary.

It was not a battle but a massacre, and one the skaven quickly decided they wanted no part in. Thulmann could hear the meaty impact of his saviour's massive sword as it cleaved apart the bodies of the ratmen. The feral courage of the skaven swiftly crumbled, squeals of fright and the acrid reek of fear replacing their hungry snarls and mocking laughter. The monsters holding the witch hunter broke and ran, leaving only the black-furred warrior straddling his midsection. The ratman snapped its fangs in fury at its craven comrades, and transfixed Thulmann with its malicious gaze. Before the monster could bring its crooked sword stabbing down, an immense length of steel flashed through the darkness, sweeping through the ratman's body, bisecting the creature at the waist. The spurting wreckage of the skaven's lower half crumpled to the floor.

Thulmann painfully lifted himself to his feet, accepting the gauntleted hand that reached down to him. The witch hunter wiped the reeking filth of the slain ratman from his clothes. Gazing around him, he recovered his sword and hat.

His rescuer leaned upon his mighty zweihander, the point of the giant sword stabbed into the bloodied floor. Covered from head to toe in black plate armour, the warrior did not seem even slightly fatigued by the brutal battle that he had fought. The only concession to comfort he made was to lift the rounded cylinder of his helmet from his head, exposing his hard features and bald pate. Captain-Justicar Ehrhardt of the Black Guard of Morr watched Thulmann while the witch hunter recovered his gear.

“It seems I am not the only one who escaped the trap these thrice-damned fiends set for us,” Thulmann observed as he restored the wide-brimmed hat to his head.

“Indeed, Brother Mathias,” the knight growled. “These creatures seem determined to increase the retribution I owe them.” Looking at the carnage Ehrhardt’s sword had visited upon the underfolk, Thulmann almost felt pity for the vile creatures.

“I have seen some sign that others made it clear,” Ehrhardt continued. “You are the first I have actually found, however.”

“It is well that you came when you did,” Thulmann said.

The Black Guardsman shrugged off the witch hunter’s gratitude. Thulmann could understand the sentiment: Ehrhardt did what he did out of duty, not for recognition.

The witch hunter took stock of his injuries. Most were little more than scrapes and bruises; only the dampness along his back worried him. He winced as his fingers probed where the skaven’s dagger had cut him. The wound was shallow, for all its painful-ness, and seemed to have stopped bleeding. Infection was a more pressing concern than bleeding to death, but there was little he could do about this at the moment.

“You are injured?” Ehrhardt enquired.

Thulmann nodded his head as he set a linen handkerchief against the dripping wound. If it was infected it would prove every bit as lethal as the mutilating strokes of Ehrhardt’s zweihander.

“Nothing that will prevent me from doing Sigmar’s work,” Thulmann said. He studied the black openings that peppered the passageway before them. “Shall we see if we can’t find more survivors?”

“And if we do?” the knight asked as he fell into step beside Thulmann.

“We pursue our original purpose,” the witch hunter replied after a pause. “We track down this skaven sorcerer and visit the justice of Sigmar upon it.”

# CHAPTER ONE

The chapter house of the Order of Sigmar in Wurtbad stood on a winding street some small distance from Wurtbad's temple district. The building was a squat, two-storey affair, its gabled roofs pointing towards the north, a plaster icon of the twin-tailed comet fixed above its entrance. The chapter house was not immune from the caprices of change that had settled on Wurtbad. One of the dungeons beneath the structure had partially collapsed after being penetrated by the inhuman skaven, damaging the foundations themselves. More far-reaching, however, would be the death of the chapter house's master, Witch Hunter Captain Meisser, a final casualty in the fierce fighting that had raged within the Schloss von Gotz. It would be months before Meisser's successor was appointed and installed in Wurtbad.

A more immediate change, however, was what interested the man who had devoted himself to watching the chapter house since dawn. From the window of the house of a petty Sigmarite official, he had watched the comings and goings associated with the brooding structure across the cobbled street, with keen interest. With a quill, he carefully made a note of every person arriving and leaving. As darkness settled, he at last turned his eyes from the chapter house door, consulting the notes he had scratched into a sheet of vellum. A smile twisted his features.

By his calculations, there should only be two or three men left in the chapter house, one of them wounded. He considered the rather numerous household of the owner of the home, patiently waiting for him in the parlour below. Eight against two and a half were the sort of odds he was willing to entertain, especially since his eight would be a bit more durable than the denizens of the chapter house.

Yes, he decided, the risk was slight, and the potential reward, promising.

Eldred hurried through the lonely halls of the chapter house. He had been long in the service of the witch hunters and knew well the priceless value of speed. With such dark powers at work in Wurtbad, even the slightest delay might mean damnation and death. Certainly the relentless, steady pounding upon the oak doors of the chapter house bespoke urgency.

The pounding on the door continued unabated as Eldred rushed towards it. Had something gone wrong? Did the witch hunters need help? And if they did, what sort of aid could Eldred possibly render them? With a sense of grim foreboding he placed his hand on the thick steel bolt that held the door shut and peered through the narrow grate set into the portal.

The man who stood outside the chapter house was not one of the templars, although he was not unknown to Eldred. Constantin Trauer was a clerk for the temple of Sigmar, maintaining the many accounting ledgers that monitored the temple treasury. He was a small, nondescript man, with an almost effete demeanour. In the light brown cloak of his office, his thinning hair plastered against one side of his forehead, there was certainly nothing about the man that suggested menace. Yet Eldred found himself instinctively recoiling. The clerk seemed oblivious to his alarm, barely registering the fact that the door had swung open, his right hand half-raised as if to strike upon it once again.

Eldred's fingers tightened around the slim dagger he wore upon his belt. Ever since the attack in the dungeons, Thulmann had ordered all the servants to go about armed. Eldred was thankful for this edict as he watched Constantin stagger forwards, his steps clumsy and awkward. The clerk's head swayed brokenly upon his neck and Eldred gasped as the blind, lifeless chill of Constantin's eyes

met his gaze. The servant rushed forwards, dagger clenched in his fist, determined to slam the door shut before the clerk could stagger into the room.

Eldred barked a command for the clerk to withdraw, and threatened him with the dagger, but Constantin continued to shuffle forwards. His bleary eyes did not even react to the sound of the servant's voice. The eerie lack of response from the clerk sent a shiver of fear wriggling down Eldred's spine, but what he saw beyond the clerk caused him to gasp. More figures were stepping out from the darkness, moving with shuffling, swaying steps. Whatever was wrong with Constantin, he was not alone in his affliction. Too late, Eldred realised he had allowed the intruder to stand between himself and the warning bell set beside the door.

The old servant cried out, screaming an alarm to the other occupants of the chapter house. There were two other servants in the building and Franz Graef, a witch hunter who had been injured in the battle with Baron von Gotz. He only prayed that his warning came in time.

Eldred flung himself at Constantin. For all his ungainliness, the clerk was immovable, and held his ground against the charge. Eldred's fingers stabbed his dagger into the thing's shoulder. For the first time, the zombie seemed to take notice of him, lifting its cadaverous fist and smashing it into Eldred's skull, spilling the servant to the floor. Head swimming, Eldred struggled to rise to his feet and face the monster once more.

"I need one of you alive," a sneering voice hissed from the doorway. Eldred turned towards the sound, seeing a man who was almost as corpse-like as his undead followers. He wore a grey cassock around his lean body, trimmed in thick brown fur. The exposed skin of his hands and face was pallid and sickly, his black hair stringy and unkempt. But there was a malevolent life in the eyes that stared from the man's thin, hungry face, exuding an almost tangible sensation of the profane and the evil. Here, then, stood the master of the corpse-puppets.

The necromancer waved his leprous hand and the zombie of Constantin shuffled back towards Eldred. "If you behave, you can be my prisoner," the sorcerer said as he strode into the building.

With arcane gestures, the necromancer ordered the zombies into the chapter house, and watched them march silently into the building.

It was not long before screams banished the eerie silence. The necromancer's pale features pulled back in an appreciative smile as the sound reached his ears. Eldred groaned in horror as he heard his comrades murdered.

The sorcerer glared down at his captive. "Do the sounds of death disturb you?" The necromancer laughed. "This is but the prelude to the symphony!" He crouched down to stare into Eldred's eyes.

"If there was one thing I learned from the tedious operas of my homeland, it is that every instrument has its part to play" Impossibly, the smile on the sorcerer's face became even more menacing. "Now it is time for you to play yours. I will ask a question, you will provide an answer. Where did they put the vampires?"

Eldred moaned in renewed horror as he heard the necromancer's words, but a fresh string of screams from deeper within the chapter house killed any thoughts of refusal. The sorcerer rose to his feet again, motioning for the zombie of Constantin to lift their captive from the floor. With an extravagant flourish, the necromancer motioned for Eldred to lead the way. The servant complied with shocked subservience, moving almost as lifelessly as the zombies.

You may have thought yourself finished with me, Sibbechai, the necromancer thought as he followed behind Eldred, but Carandini has not yet finished with you.

"Lie down and die!"

Streng's boot smashed into the ratman's face, spattering the earthen wall with blood and fangs. The mercenary delivered another brutal kick to the creature's throat, crushing its windpipe. The body continued to shudder and twitch, but the brute was good and dead. Streng wiped a hand caked in dirt and blood across his forehead to stem the trickle of sweat seeping into his eyes. He cleaned his gory blade on the ratman's body, not allowing himself to think about how it had nearly been him



lying on the floor of the cavern. Even a moment's distraction meant the difference between life and death in the creeping dark of the skaven warren.

The mercenary turned away from the dead monster, eyes narrowed as he looked for any other sign of opposition. The floor of the cavern was strewn with furry carcasses. Some were old, others were much more recent. Streng saw human bodies mixed in with those of the vermin. Some of these, too, had been present before the ambush. Only one of them wore the livery of the von Gotz palace guard, and there did not seem to be any other soldiers or witch hunters among the dead. Streng breathed easier, but did not fully relax his guard.

"I don't think they planned that ambush," a scar-faced soldier in the griffon-tabard of the Ministry of Justice said. "I think they were trying to hide in here and we surprised them."

Streng spat on the corpse nearest him. "That evens things a bit. They damn well surprised us with that cave-in of theirs." The warrior could see the expressions of the men around him darken as he mentioned their recent escape. Only a dozen of them had gained the safety of the side tunnel before the entire passage had collapsed. Since then two emotions had struggled to control every man: terror and rage. Streng had been careful to cultivate the fury every man felt, bringing it to the fore. Fear would do nothing to help their chances of survival, but savage hate might.

"Rather peculiar hole, even for underfolk," one of the palace guards commented, tapping the side of what looked like a large iron stove with the flat of his sword. Streng looked at the strange objects scattered around the cavern: tables strewn with stoppered jars and foul-smelling bottles, a brick kiln, several iron furnaces and some sort of immense press. The hair on the back of his neck began to rise. Since taking service with Thulmann, he'd seen the laboratories of more than a few alchemists, and this apparatus looked disturbingly similar.

A thought flared through his mind and he strode towards one of the human corpses. Turning it over with his foot, he found himself looking into a villainous face, frozen in an expression of horror. But more interesting was the leather mask that he found in a pocket of the man's tunic, a leather mask with a long, birdlike beak and crystal lenses over the eyes: the mask of a plague doktor.

The inarticulate howl of frustration that exploded from Streng turned every eye on him. The soldiers watched, puzzled, as the mercenary hurled the leather mask across the cavern with a savage gesture. He'd been here, the foul scum Thulmann had hunted across half the Empire, the bastard physician who experimented upon his fellow man, filling the veins of his victims with the filth of Chaos. Freiherr Weichs had been here. This was his lab, the fountainhead of Stir Blight and the plague in Wurtbad.

Streng snarled, sweeping his arm across one of the tables, knocking jars and bottles to the floor, and then gripped the edge of the table and upended it, sending it crashing to the floor. He turned away from his vandalism to find the soldiers watching him warily.

"Come on," he barked. "There's nothing here, let's get moving!"

"Where?" protested one of the palace guards. "Where are we supposed to go? Where?"

Streng's eyes were like ice as he turned on the man. "We'll take one of these tunnels and find our way back to the surface." The mercenary stabbed a finger at one of the black tunnel mouths, a decisive gesture that gave no hint of the randomness with which he had chosen it. "We kill any rat bastard unlucky enough to come across our path!" he added with a venomous oath.

The threat of plague had kept the waterfront of Wurtbad abandoned, even the most desperate of the city's denizens forsaking the area where the disease had done such brutal work. With the quarantine in effect, the steady stream of ships plying the river had vanished, the river patrol keeping ships from the port.

Even so, two men stood upon the wooden pier in the early hours of dawn. The taller of the pair wore the heavy black robe of a priest of Morr. Beside him stood a thin figure garbed in grey, his lank black hair hanging in his eyes, his features displaying a trace of foreign blood. In his hands, the Tilean held a glass Vessel filled with black ash.

Carandini watched the sun rise into the sky, the shadows of night retreating before it. He smiled as the warm rays bathed his face. A necromancer was not the sort to cultivate an intimate relationship with the sun, their loathsome activities best conducted under the shroud of night, but today, today he could think of no more glorious a sight. His fingers stroked the surface of the bottle — it would not be long now.

“I will not do this thing,” the priest groaned. “It is an affront to Morr! I will not do it.”

Carandini took a step towards the man, shaking his head sadly. “I worry that you are looking at this the wrong way, father. While it may be true that my chosen vocation is at odds with the puerile superstitions of your morbid little cult, that doesn’t mean we can’t be friends. Why, I am doing you a great boon! I’m giving you the opportunity to do a favour for your god, to be of noble service to him. You are being given the chance to right an affront to the divinity of your god, to reclaim something stolen from his domain.”

“You are a monster!” the priest spat, horrified by Carandini’s words. “You are a profaner of Morr, a violator of graves. Corpse-stealing monster!”

The necromancer tapped a forefinger against the bottle he held. “Hardly as monstrous as what is in this bottle, father.” He thrust it towards the priest, laughing as the robed man shrank back from the vessel. “See, even reduced to ash and dust, the dread Sibbechai still has the power to frighten you! How can you say what I ask of you is some crime against your god? Why, I am only doing what the witch hunters would have done had I left the vampire’s cinders in their possession.”

“Then why steal them at all! Why this profane farce?”

The necromancer’s face lost its air of humour and condescension. “Because I owe this thing a debt. I have to see for myself that it has been destroyed, that its remains have been removed from any possibility of resurrection. I have to make sure that none of its filthy kind will learn of Sibbechai’s death and seek to restore their fellow fiend.”

Carandini smiled once more as he looked back to the rising sun. The long game of trick and trap he had played with the necrarch was over, and it was Carandini, not Sibbechai, who had emerged as the victor. The vampire had almost triumphed, leaving the necromancer in the cellars beneath the castle, compelled to stay behind while the necrarch tried to claim *Das Buch die Unholden*. The arrival of the skaven had nearly been the death of him, the filthy magics of the horned skaven sorcerer sending an army of ravenous rats to consume the necromancer. It had taken every trace of his willpower and skill to conceal himself from the rats, to weave such a cloak of black magic around himself so that even their keen senses could not find him. The effort of focusing and maintaining such power had nearly killed him. Even now, the memory caused his heart to thunder within his breast.

But the spell had held, and Carandini had not died. He’d sensed the destruction of Sibbechai when the enchantment the vampire had placed upon him was broken. Before Carandini could rush into the castle above to look for the grimoire, however, he’d seen the skaven return, fleeing back into their burrows. Once again he had locked eyes with the horned sorcerer, but this time the ratman held *Das Buch die Unholden* in its foul paws. Had the creature been alone, Carandini might have dared to confront it, despite its tremendous power. The ratman had not been alone though, nearly a score of its fellows still hurried after it. The necromancer had remained hidden, his sense of self-preservation overcoming his lust for the book. Now he knew who had it, he would be able to find it again, and when he did, it would be under circumstances that favoured him, not the skaven.

“Are we ready, father?” Carandini asked. The cleric did not speak, merely bowed his head in submission. He joined the necromancer on the edge of the dock, a silver talisman clutched in his hands, arcane words whispering past his lips. Carandini tapped the glass bottle one last time, and held it out over the river, popping the cork from its neck. As the priest continued to invoke the rite of exorcism, Carandini turned the bottle over, scattering the vampire’s ashes into the swift moving River Stir.

*“Repast en pace,”* Carandini echoed the priest as he watched the last dregs of ash tumble from the bottle. He hoped that wherever Morr deposited the souls of vanquished vampires, it was unpleasant.

“Sir, I think I see light ahead!” The words were spoken by a young, blond-haired soldier from the Ministry of Justice. He was one of only three survivors Thulmann and Ehrhardt had encountered in the tunnels.

“Do you think there might be more survivors?” Ehrhardt asked the witch hunter.

“Possibly, or it may be our ratty friends trying to draw us into a trap,” Thulmann replied, his voice heavy with fatigue. “Either way, we can’t afford to avoid it. If it is some of our comrades, we cannot abandon them. If it is a trap, it shows more intelligence and organisation than these running battles we’ve been fighting. Something will be in charge, one of their noxious leaders. If we can capture it alive, we may be able to get information from it, find a way out of here, or perhaps find the creature we came here to kill.”

One by one, Thulmann’s group extinguished their torches, crawling through the darkness as they followed the witch hunter towards the light. Soon they were close enough to see shadows moving in the tunnel ahead, and hear voices whispering from the darkness.

“I still say we are heading the wrong way,” a man’s voice snarled.

“Do as you like,” came the growled reply, “but I’m sticking to this tunnel. The way the mangy curs have been thick along it, it has to lead somewhere!”

The second voice was terribly familiar to the witch hunter. He was pleased to find that his henchman Streng had also been lucky enough to escape the skaven trap.

“You’ve been saying that for the last half hour!” snapped another of the soldiers, busily tying a bandage around his left arm.

“And he is no doubt correct.”

The men all spun around, blades at the ready as Thulmann spoke, eyes narrowed as they peered into the darkness. The witch hunter strode boldly into the ring of light, his fatigue forgotten in his joy at finding more of his men alive. To Streng and the men with him, the witch hunter’s sudden emergence from the gloom was almost supernatural, some divine sending of holy Sigmar himself. The effect lessened somewhat when Ehrhardt and the three Ministry of Justice troopers followed Thulmann into the light. The miracle was somehow cheapened for being shared.

“We thought you was dead,” Streng observed when he managed to recover from his shock. The mercenary scratched a filthy hand through his scraggly beard. “I shoulda known it would take more than a few tons of earth falling on your head to finish you, Mathias.”

Thulmann clapped a hand on Streng’s shoulder, causing a puff of dust to rise from his leather hauberk. “I’m not so surprised to see you either. You’ve crawled your way out of more miserable holes than this in the aftermath of one of your drunken revels.”

The stocky mercenary smiled at the remark; his employer never had approved of the impiety of his ways.

“Now that you’ve decided to put in an appearance, I’ll let you lead this rabble,” Streng said, gesturing at the men around him. “You’ve fought the skaven in the past, maybe they’ll believe you when you say the best chance we’ve got of getting back is to go where the rats are thickest.”

Thulmann stared at his henchman, noting the curious look in Streng’s eyes. He was not sure exactly what the warrior was playing at, but he would follow his lead, for the time at least. “My assistant is indeed correct,” the witch hunter said in a quiet, controlled voice. “If there have been more skaven in these passages, then they are most likely trying to keep us from reaching a path to the surface and escaping this pit. Stick to this passage and before long we’ll be feeling the sun driving the dampness of these burrows from our bones.”

The encouraging words had their effect. Thulmann saw many of the soldiers smile grimly at the prospect of regaining the surface. Streng had driven them as far as he could with nothing more than simple hate. Thulmann offered them something that would take them still further: hope.

He felt remorse that his hopeful words were untrue, but knew that only by keeping the men moving would they stand any chance. Ehrhardt seemed to be the only one who detected the hollowness of Thulmann's words. He said nothing, however, simply resting his enormous sword against his shoulder and taking a torch from one of the soldiers. Holding the brand aloft, the giant knight marched deeper into the passage. The survivors lost little time in following after the imposing Ehrhardt. Streng and Thulmann lingered behind to form a rear guard.

"Mind explaining what is going on?" Thulmann asked, his voice low so that only his henchman would hear his words. "You know as well as I that whatever organised defence these monsters had has collapsed as surely as that tunnel back there. They aren't trying to keep us from some path back to the city. These are frightened, disorganised packs of animals falling back to their innermost lair, instinctively protecting the most vital areas of the warren — the breeding pits and the burrows of their ruling elite. I'm not leading these men towards the surface; I'm leading them deeper into the warren. Why?"

A harsh intensity was on Streng's face when he turned to answer the witch hunter.

"We found a room back there," the mercenary said. "A big cave with lots of strange equipment in it. The sort of stuff an alchemist might have... or a physician. We found a lot of bodies too, and not all of them were rats. Most of them, man and rat alike, had masks like that plague doktor was using."

"Weichs," Thulmann hissed, spitting the name off his tongue as if it was poison.

Streng nodded grimly. "He was here, Mathias, working with the skaven. Looked like he might have fallen out with his hosts, but if he did, his body wasn't among the dead."

Thulmann looked away, his eyes fixed upon the shadows of the passage. A hundred bitter memories swarmed inside his skull, snarling their anger in his mind. Of all the heretic scum he'd hunted over the years, he could think of only one worse than the renegade doktor.

"You think he might still be here?" Thulmann asked through clenched teeth.

"If he isn't, whatever rat is boss of this nest might know where he's gone," Streng answered. "That's why I wanted to press deeper into this maze, try to get my hands on one of their leaders."

The witch hunter nodded his head. He knew that Streng did much of what he did for money. No higher purpose motivated him, but catching Freiherr Weichs had become as much of an obsession to the callous mercenary as it had to himself.

"Our first priority must remain finding the horned skaven and recovering the book," Thulmann cautioned. The black knowledge contained within *Das Buch die Unholden* had been enough to transform the ruler of Wurtbad into a living avatar of the Unclean One. Who could say what even greater horrors the tome might unleash upon the world if it was allowed to remain in evil hands? As much as he wanted Weichs, he was forced to recognise that the book represented the greater threat.

"I'll remember that," Streng replied, favouring Thulmann with a murderous grin. "But if I have a chance at Weichs, all the black secrets in Sylvania won't keep me from taking it!"

Carandini watched with eager anticipation as the sun began to sink from the sky, casting long shadows into the dilapidated fishmonger's shop. There had been a great deal to make ready before the onset of night, yet even so Carandini had spent the last few hours in impatient expectancy. The ritual he was preparing was an ancient one, from a time when the spires of ghoulish Lahmia still stood proud and tall beside the Crystal Sea. It had been in his possession for a long time, but he'd never before had the opportunity to test its efficacy.

Thanks to the witch hunters, however, that opportunity had finally presented itself.

Carandini retreated back into the building, treading cautiously so as not to disturb the chalk sigils he had drawn on the floor. He could feel the mystical energy being pulled into the ancient

symbols, the sorcerous power growing even as the sun's light became more feeble. Soon, the light of the thirteen candles he had placed around the room would be the only thing contesting the darkness. The flames that rose from them glowed with a haunting blue light. They were true corpse candles, necromantic talismans crafted from the fat of murdered men.

Carandini was careful to avoid staring at the flames directly. The black arts were dangerous to evoke, even to necromancers. The flame of the corpse candle formed a bridge between the domain of life and that of death. The incautious might find themselves mesmerised by the haunting light, helpless to prevent their souls from being drawn into the flame, or to prevent something from the other side from slipping through and investing itself within their flesh.

The necromancer fixed his attention instead upon the object that was the focus of his ritual. Lying in the centre of the room, at the very nexus of the symbols and designs drawn on the floor, was a large black wooden box, the coffin lately inhabited by the necrarch Sibbechai. Carandini could almost see the dark energies gathering around the casket, permeating its wooden surface and iron fittings, suffusing the thing lying within. The ritual required one more component... human blood.

Carandini snapped his fingers, exerting his will. There was a gap between the circles and pentagrams on the floor, a narrow walkway leading from the outer ring of the chamber towards the casket lying at its centre. The necromancer exerted his will and two shuffling, tattered shapes began to approach the coffin. Between them, the two zombies bore the struggling, whimpering figure of the priest of Morr. The captive's cries were little more than inarticulate gargles, the necromancer having removed the man's tongue. Gods sometimes answered the prayers of priests, and Carandini was not of a mind to take any chances.

The zombies carried their charge to the casket, forcing the man to bend at the waist and lean over the open coffin. The priest's inarticulate screams rose in pitch as he saw what lay inside, and he suddenly understood the necromancer's purpose and his own role. The cadaverous claw of a zombie ripped into the priest's throat, tearing through his flesh and slashing his windpipe. The dying man struggled in the remorseless grip of the zombies as a cataract of blood exploded from his neck, spraying a wash of gore into the casket.

Carandini exerted his will once more and his undead servants withdrew, bearing the remains of the priest with them. The necromancer paid them no further notice, his attention riveted to the casket. Would it work, he wondered?

The necromancer dismissed his doubts. The ritual would succeed; it would succeed because he willed it so. He would not be denied. His enemies would not keep him from his destiny. *Das Buch die Unholden* would be his. He would make its secrets his own, and the thing inside the coffin would help him take it from those who stood in his way.

From his vantage point across the street, Carandini had seen Thulmann lead his witch hunters back to the chapter house. He had seen them bearing the ashes of his treacherous former partner Sibbechai and the more intact corpse of the vampire's minion, the vengeful creature Carandini had briefly encountered in the cellars of the castle. The ashes of his ally he had already attended to. Now he intended to put the remains of Sibbechai's errant thrall to use.

Carandini held his breath as he sensed a change in the air of the room. The light of the corpse candles dimmed, the atmosphere became colder. A black mist gathered around the casket, and was sucked down inside the coffin. Then the moment passed, warmth began to creep back into the room, and the candles returned to their former brilliance.

A pale hand rose from within the coffin, closing around the edge of the box. Carandini watched in fascinated triumph as a body slowly rose from the casket, a pallid shape that exuded an aura of strength and power despite its sickly hue. The creature turned a once handsome face in the necromancer's direction, the patrician features drawn and haggard, eyes at once both empty and hungry.

Slowly, awkwardly, the thing pulled itself up from the coffin, struggling to get out. The necromancer watched its efforts with pride, revelling in his own accomplishment. After a moment, the undead thing stood upon its own feet. It glared at Carandini and the necromancer could see a spark of awareness behind the vampire's hunger. He felt no fear, however. The wards he had placed on the floor would contain the vampire until he was ready to release it.

"Gregor Klausner, I believe," Carandini laughed, the sound filled with all the mockery and scorn of Old Night and the Dark Gods.

## CHAPTER TWO

The gaping black cavern spread out before them, only partially illuminated by the torches and lanterns the soldiers bore. What that light revealed was every bit as noxious as the stench that assaulted their senses. The men stood upon a narrow lip that circled the cavern, the floor of the pit some twenty feet below. The floor was littered with bits of straw, fur and even strips of grimy cloth. Piles of immense rat pellets were scattered everywhere, punctuated by jumbles of gnawed bone. Several immense shapes covered in dirty brown fur lay amidst the squalor and excrement. Each was the size of an ox, but the form was that of a mammoth rodent. The beasts lounged on their sides, exposing the twin rows of furless teats that pimpled their upper bodies. The rat-like faces of the breeders stared up at the torchlight with wide-eyed, uncomprehending fear, recognising danger but incapable of understanding it. The pale, wrinkled things that clung to their teats did not react to the presence of the men at all: for the blind skaven pups, their entire existence consisted of drawing milk from their bloated mothers.

Thulmann stared coldly into the pit of horror and then turned, and gave the order to the soldiers to set it aflame. The loss of the breeders would effectively destroy the warren. Without their females, any remaining skaven would scatter, finding refuge or enslavement with other tribes of their kind.

When the orders were given, a great roar ripped through the cavern. Thulmann spun around as an immense form loomed up from the darkness of a side tunnel. Its beady red eyes gleamed as it strode into the light. The true magnitude of what they faced hit the men. The monster was not unlike the bloated breeders in the pit below, but was if anything larger, its body swollen with muscle. The rat-like head that jutted from its impossibly broad shoulders snapped and slavered with diseased ferocity, bloody froth drooling from its mouth.

Scurrying out of the shadows beside the hulking rat ogre was a smaller, black-furred skaven. The creature held a sickle-bladed halberd in its paws and its body was encased in steel, more armour than they had seen on any of the skaven they had encountered thus far. Strangely, the armoured skaven appeared to have been partially burnt. Even before the creature spoke, Thulmann knew they had found the master of the warren.

“Snagit!” the warlord hissed. “Rip man-meat! Rip!”

Under its master’s prodding, the rat ogre roared again and surged forwards with a speed Thulmann would not have believed possible for such a large creature. The foremost of the soldiers turned to run, but he had not reckoned upon the monster’s speed. The rat ogre’s claw crunched through the man’s armour, nearly ripping him in two. The beast roared again as it shook its victim’s entrails from its claws and swung around to resume its attack.

Captain-Justicar Ehrhardt held his ground as the immense brute charged forwards, his black garments melding with the shadows to make him almost as spectral as the chill hand of his sinister god. But Snagit did not need his eyes to find his prey. The Black Guardsman did not react as eight hundred pounds of slavering death rushed at him, standing his ground as solidly as a statue.

Snagit’s murderous claw swept out at Ehrhardt with a powerful slash that should have knocked the knight’s head from his shoulders. The instant the rat ogre closed, Ehrhardt was in motion, dropping beneath the powerful blow and lashing out double-handed with his massive zweihander. The huge blade crunched through both of Snagit’s knees, all but severing the monster’s legs.

The rat ogre toppled like a felled tree, and the creature howled in terror as its bulk tumbled down into the darkness. A moment later there was a sickening crunch as the rat ogre struck the unforgiving floor of the pit.

The black-furred skaven warlord's eyes were round with incredulous horror. Thulmann did not give the creature time to consider flight, dropping his sword and pulling his pistol. He tried to place his shot in the beast's knee, but the fever starting to burn in his body conspired to render his aim imprecise, shattering the warlord's hip instead. The skaven shrieked as its body spilled to the floor.

Thulmann wiped perspiration from his eyes and holstered his pistol. He waved Streng off as the bearded thug moved to help him. He'd come this far on his own and he would finish it on his own feet. The witch hunter carefully made his way towards the crippled skaven leader, leaving Streng and the remaining soldiers to inspect the breeding pit and assure themselves that the rat ogre was indeed dead. He found Ehrhardt's armoured foot planted firmly on the warlord's back, the creature struggling weakly beneath the knight's weight. Thulmann paused for a moment, trying to steady his breath before closing with his captive.

"Rather lively for a keep-sake, Brother Mathias," Ehrhardt commented as Thulmann stood beside him. The creature pinned beneath his boot squirmed ever more desperately.

"No hurt! No kill!" the skaven croaked in shrill, pathetic tones.

"That depends upon how many of my questions you answer," Thulmann snarled, his words punctuated by the increased pressure of Ehrhardt's foot upon the ratman's back. "I want to know where your horned priest is and what has happened to a man named Doktor Freiherr Weichs!"

The pinned warlord chittered in twisted mirth, wrenching its neck around to fix its eyes on Thulmann. "Gone," the skaven hissed. "Fled when templar-man hunt burrow! Take doktor-pet! Take stormvermin!" The warlord turned its head still further, displaying its burned cheek. "Thrat try to slay grey seer. Grey seer magic strong."

"There was a book the grey seer stole from the palace," Thulmann told Thrat. "What became of it?" The ratman's answer was the one he feared he would hear.

"Gone. Grey Seer Skilk stole words when they fled." Thrat's lips curled in a savage snarl. "Templar-man hunt Skilk? Rip grey seer?" Faced with its own extermination, the only thought that warmed Thrat's scheming heart was that through the witch hunter it might have its revenge on the treacherous grey seer.

"First you will lead us from this rat nest," Thulmann said, rubbing at his eyes as fireflies began to dance through his vision. He only dimly heard the warlord's shrill assurances that it would show his men the way out. The last things he was aware of were his legs buckling beneath him and the bare earth floor rushing up to meet him.

Carandini's eyes swiftly adjusted to the darkness as he returned to his refuge. He could see the piles of refuse and rubble, and the silent figures of his zombies lined against one of the walls. But it was the thing squatting in the recesses of the small chamber that arrested his attention. As he entered, he saw it quickly throw something away, a gesture ridden with guilt and shame. The necromancer felt a small measure of triumph swell within his breast as he set the bag down and moved to light a candle.

The crouched figure rose to its feet as the light shone upon it. The man was taller than the necromancer, and more sturdily built. He wore coarse homespun breeches and a heavy wool vest, crude garments in contrast to the mouldering finery of Carandini's cassock. The man's fair hair and heavy, squared features were also far removed from the black hair and sharp, cunning face of the Tilean, but there was one quality that both men shared, the unhealthy pallor of their flesh.

"Dining in?" Carandini asked, voice laden with mockery. He gestured with his hand to the thing his guest had flung away, the tiny shrivelled carcass of a rat.

The other man turned his face towards the floor in shame. "I didn't want to do it," he said. "I tried not to, but its life burned so bright, calling to me, tempting me." The man clenched his fist in



anger. "Why did you do this to me! Why could you not leave me among the dead! Why did you make me come back as this unclean... thing!"

"As I have told you before, Gregor," the necromancer replied, "because you are useful to me."

The vampire looked up, snarling in hate and disgust. Even in the grey, chill world his undead eyes now saw, Gregor could discern clearly the smirking features of the sorcerer. He glared at the necromancer, seeing the sickly light of Carandini's blood shining from within his body. Then his gaze shifted to the burlap sack the necromancer carried, a sack that writhed with an inner life and glowed with the bright, beckoning promise of blood. Soft blonde hairs poked from the mouth of the sack.

"What is in that bag?" Gregor asked.

"I thought you might be hungry," Carandini said. The necromancer's smirk died as he found Gregor's hands coiled in the fabric of his cassock, lifting him savagely off the ground. Even in his weakened condition, the strength and speed of the vampire were far too easily underestimated.

"Take it away!" Gregor snarled into Carandini's face. "I don't want it. Take it away!"

Carandini's moment of fright faded as he heard the pleading tone in Gregor's voice. "Put me down, filth," the necromancer ordered. The fury drained from Gregor's eyes and the vampire released his hold on the man.

Carandini brushed dirt from the front of his garment. "Your ingratitude is becoming tedious, Gregor. Don't forget that just as I am the one who brought you back, I am the only one who can purge the taint from your body! I can make you whole again, Gregor! I can restore you to true life!"

Gregor turned away from the necromancer, wringing his hands in despair. "I only want to die. I only want to die and to stay dead, to die before this curse takes complete control of me, to die before it makes me kill."

"But you can't die, Gregor," Carandini said, "not a true, clean death. The touch of the vampire has removed that hope from you. Your spirit can never find rest. Only I can help you, but first you must help me."

The vampire turned to face Carandini, his features a mask of misery and despair. "I will do anything if you can drive this curse from my body!"

The wicked smile returned to Carandini's face. "Then you must feed, you must not deny your urges. I will need you strong if you are to help me... and I you." The necromancer gestured towards the squirming bag. Gregor shook his head, a moan of agony ripping through his throat. The vampire retreated, hiding his face in his hands. Carandini watched the wretch withdraw, lips curling with amusement.

"Fight it all you like," the Tilean muttered, "but you can't fight what you are forever, *vampire*."

An inarticulate cry ripped its way past the witch hunter's lips as his body surged upwards from the feather mattress. His hands trembled as they wiped perspiration from his face. Thulmann froze in mid-motion, wondering for a moment what had happened to the sword he had held in his nightmare, the sword he had been thrusting into the neck of the Grand Theogonist. His confusion only increased when a soft hand closed around his own and a damp cloth was set against his forehead.

"You're alright, Mathias," a soothing voice told him. Disbelief flared within him as he heard the soft, comforting tones and he tightened his grip around the hand he held. He looked up into the woman's face, almost crying out in joy as the beautiful face smiled back at him with all the old, patient understanding he remembered. Memory struggled to rebel against his senses, but Thulmann refused to allow it to affect him. He would not question a miracle.

"You are in the Schloss von Gotz," the voice said, but there was something troubling in its tone, something familiar yet different at the same time. "Streng brought you back to the surface." The more the voice spoke, the more it changed. Thulmann ground his teeth against the wave of cold, unforgiving reason that killed his fevered fantasy. The face he looked upon changed, blurring in

front of his eyes before resolving itself once more. It was still a beautiful face, but it was no longer the face he had imagined, the face he had been so desperate to see.

Thulmann knew this new face well. It belonged to Silja Markoff, daughter and chief agent of the late Lord Igor Markoff, the man who had been Wurtbad's Minister of Justice before the madness of Baron von Gotz had seen him executed, and perhaps the only person in Wurtbad he truly trusted.

"How... how long?" Thulmann's words forced themselves from his dry throat in a rasping croak.

"Five days," came the answer. Silja Markoff reached forward to place another pillow beneath Thulmann's head. "The Baroness von Gotz has taken every effort to care for you. This is the bedroom of her major-domo, and you've been attended by no less than Sister Josepha of the Temple of the Lonely Sacrament."

Mention of the Shallyan Sisterhood caused Thulmann to close his eyes and shake his head sadly. He had failed to prevent the late Baron von Gotz from removing plague victims from the Shallyan temple, confining them within Otwin Keep. Nor had he been able to prevent Meisser from setting the structure ablaze on orders from the possessed baron. Many of the Sisters had remained in the keep along with their doomed charges. Thulmann felt a profound sense of unworthiness that he should be attended by one of the few survivors.

"You stayed by me all this time?" It was strange that of all the thoughts swirling about in the turmoil of Thulmann's mind this should be the one to find voice.

Silja smiled at him and withdrew the damp cloth from his forehead. "I didn't exactly have anything better to do," she said with casual indifference.

Despite his fatigue and fever, the witch hunter managed to smile back at her. Silja Markoff had endured much in the past days, from the loss of her father to playing a part in the destruction of the daemonic horror that had infested the diseased body of Baron von Gotz. She gave no sign of the emotional ordeal she was going through, displaying a strength of will that even he found formidable. Only in her eyes could he detect some hint of pain.

Silja looked away as Thulmann studied her face, trying to conceal the emotion his scrutiny threatened to set loose. As she turned her face, Silja suddenly pulled her hands away and shot to her feet. Thulmann followed her redirected gaze. There was a man at the doorway.

"I can come back later if you're busy, Mathias." There was an impertinent tone in Streng's voice and a smug suggestion in his smile. The thug punctuated his remark with a lewd wink at Silja, bringing colour to her pretty features.

"Make your report," Thulmann snapped, putting as much strength in his voice as he could muster. "I'll get no rest with you lurking at my threshold, trying to spy on me." Streng's smile broadened and he swaggered into the room, ignoring the reproach in his employer's words and the glare Silja directed at him.

"The city guard's been busy clearing out the tunnels," Streng said, "though it seems they've had a damn easier time of it than we did! After you went cold on us, I had them put the breeding pit to the torch. You were right, Mathias, with the bitches and pups gone, all the fight went out of the vermin. Didn't so much as run across one of 'em when we made our way back up."

"Did they find any more survivors?" Thulmann asked.

"A few," Streng replied. "Biggest group was a bunch led by some of Meisser's men who found their way back to the surface before us. All told, the skaven accounted for sixty-five men, most of them from the cave-in. No sign of Weichs though, and they've been over as much of the tunnels as it's safe to search. Looks like that animal you nabbed was telling the truth."

Thulmann shook his head in regret. "You've verified the creature's story?"

It was Streng's turn to look awkward and sheepish. The mercenary avoided Thulmann's gaze as he made his reply. "I put the thing to the question back at the chapter house. It was already injured from your bullet, though. I don't think it could've lasted long in any event."

Thulmann sighed: so much for any hope of getting more information from the ratman.

“There’s more, Mathias.” Streng’s voice became even more nervous, almost frightened. “When we returned to the chapter house, it was a shambles. Everyone you left there was dead. Mathias, someone stole the vampire’s body!”

Thulmann sat bolt upright in his bed. “Gregor’s body!” The witch hunter pounded his fist against the mattress. He had determined to see for himself that the body of Gregor Klausner was properly disposed of, that the destruction of his infected remains was carried out with all the ceremony and ritual necessary to ensure that his spirit would remain at peace in the gardens of Morr. Tracking down the book and the skaven sorcerer had been a more pressing concern, however. Now he cursed his decision to pursue the skaven. There were many reasons a vampire’s body might be coveted by a practitioner of the black arts, none of them healthy.

“What about Sibbechai’s ashes?” Thulmann demanded. The thought of Gregor’s body falling into the hands of a sorcerer was sickening enough, but the theft of Sibbechai’s remains was even more terrible. The essence of a vampire was bound to its carcass, a bond that could be severed only through extensive ritual and prayer. It was not unknown for a vampire’s body to be restored through dark sorcery.

“Stolen as well,” Streng said. “Ehrhardt has his templars scouring the cemeteries and plague pits looking for any sign of them.”

Thulmann sank back wearily into his pillows. “If we couldn’t find Sibbechai before, we won’t find it now. Whatever human agency has been helping the vampire apparently continues to do so.”

“What will you do?” Silja asked. It was a question that Thulmann didn’t want to answer. He wanted to stay in Wurtbad to find Gregor’s body and make certain that his spirit had been allowed to stay at peace. He wanted to rip open every tomb and crypt in the city and see for himself that Sibbechai had not been restored to unholy life, but what he wanted and what he needed to do were two different things.

“This changes nothing,” Thulmann said. “I must find Helmuth Klausner’s grimoire and see it destroyed before anyone else can tap into its unholy powers. If what we fear has come to pass, if Sibbechai has been restored, then I think the same purpose will drive the vampire. It too will be hunting the book. If I find it, then the vampire will come to me.”

Carandini crouched on the floor of the fishmonger’s hut, black candles flickering to either side of him. Resting on the ground was a ghastly sight — a great strip of flayed human skin spread out across the floor like a roll of parchment. Even if Gregor had refused Carandini’s gift, the necromancer had found another use for what he had trapped inside his bag.

The strange words slithering past the necromancer’s lips seemed heavy with the ancient past. Carandini carefully set a jar of ink on the edge of his morbid parchment, ink crafted in part from the blood of murderers. Beside it he set an even more repellent object, a withered human claw, its shrivelled shape bound in mouldering tomb wrappings. He carefully and deliberately dipped each of the claw’s fingers into the ink.

There was a strange timidity in the necromancer’s actions. The claw of Nehb-ka-Menthu, ancient tomb king of Khaerops, was the most potent of his sorcerous talismans, an object always to be treated with respect and caution, but there was something different about it this evening. Perhaps it was something to do with the change he perceived in the winds of magic, the growing strength in the ether and most particularly the baleful energies associated with dark magic and the black arts.

The necromancer brushed aside his doubts and fears, setting the claw down upon the skin. As he continued to chant the sibilant tones of the incantation, Carandini focused his will on the claw. He could feel the lingering strands of Nehb-ka-Menthu’s spirit gathering around the claw. As he had done many times before, the necromancer bent his mind and soul towards subduing the spirit of the ancient tomb king and binding it to his power. As before, the residue of the mummy’s essence struggled to resist him, to refuse his commands with all the malice the dead reserve for the living.

This time, however, the mummy's spirit did not relent as Carandini exerted his will upon it. The necromancer could feel Nehb-ka-Menthu drawing power from the swollen magical energy in the air. He could feel the spirit's resistance growing, fighting against him... and winning. Carandini's body doubled over in pain as the tomb king's wrath boiled over into the necromancer's flesh.

*You will never be what I should have become.*

In his mind's eye, Carandini could see the cadaverous face of the tomb king glaring at him with immeasurable hate. He fought to concentrate on his physical surroundings rather than his spectral vision, but even so slight an effort of will power was a struggle. He could feel his heart slowing and his lungs collapsing as the malevolent spirit began to drain the life from him. Carandini's body trembled like a sapling in a storm as he reached towards the black candles flanking him. The necromancer focused every scrap of his being into reaching out with his shaking hand and snuffing out the candle on his right.

The instant the dancing flame was extinguished, the invisible grip on his heart was gone, the smothering pressure on his lungs vanished. Carandini sank back, breathing heavily as he struggled to recover from his ordeal. He looked with disgust at the mummy's talon. The dismembered limb had crawled off the parchment, its lifeless fingers clinging to the hem of his cassock. What, he wondered, would it have done had he not ended the ritual when he did? Carandini shuddered and pried the dead fingers free, stuffing the talisman back into the leather satchel.

The claw was too dangerous to consult with the concentration of dark magic in the air. Just as Carandini's black arts were magnified by the sorcerous energies, so too was the undead spirit of Nehb-ka-Menthu. He had thought to use the claw to divine the whereabouts of *Das Buch die Unholden*. Now he would need to find it some other way... before someone else did.

The thought gave Carandini pause. The witch hunter would still be looking for the book, that much Carandini had gleaned from the servant Eldred before he decided the man was of no further use. If he was clever and careful, maybe he could let the witch hunter do some of the work for him? It would just be a matter of keeping track of the man's movements, and, when the time was right, extracting the information he needed.

Carandini wiped a greasy lock of hair from his face and smiled. After all the complications the witch hunter had caused him, first in Klausberg and now in Wurtbad, enticing him to reveal his secrets was something Carandini was certain to enjoy.

## CHAPTER THREE

It was twilight when Mathias Thulmann led his horse down the creaking wooden pier. His convalescence in the palace had forced him to delegate much of the work he would otherwise have taken upon himself. He could not quite shake himself free from guilt over his forced rest. He felt that perhaps with him leading the effort the templars would have found the hiding place of Sibbechai and its minions. Still, with men like Emil and Father Kreutzberg of the temple of Morr leading the hunt, the work rested in the hands of good and capable men. It was the only silver lining in the black cloud that had settled over him since the theft of Gregor's corpse and the vampire's ashes.

"Look at that," Streng said from beside him. The unkempt mercenary gestured to the river. Even at such a late hour, the docks were a frenzy of activity with every manner of cargo vessel tied to the moorings and being hastily unloaded. On the water, the black bulks and flickering lights of other ships could be seen, ready to slide into position as soon as a space became free.

"The vultures gather," Thulmann observed, voice dripping with contempt. News that the quarantine had been lifted had spread along the Stir even faster than news of the plague. In response, every merchant with stores of provisions and access to the river had descended upon the city. Greed, not concern for their fellow man, moved the merchants to such impassioned enterprise. The markets of Wurtbad were both desperate and frightened. These fresh goods would command prices five times what they would in the more stable towns and villages of Stirland and Talabecland.

Streng shook his head as he saw Thulmann glaring at the merchantmen and the frenzied activity surrounding them. He set his hand against his master's shoulder and redirected the witch hunter's attention. The *Arnhelm* stood apart from the other ships. Here the docks were deserted... deserted except for the massive armoured man who loomed beside the gangplank, his immense zweihander resting casually across his left shoulder. Thulmann nodded respectfully to the Black Guardsman as he approached the gangplank of the *Arnhelm*.

"Captain-Justicar Ehrhardt," Thulmann said. "How very nice of you to see me off. I wanted to thank you for your valiant assistance. But for your strength and courage I would've been rat food several times over. I think Wurtbad little appreciates the noble protector they have in you."

The black-shrouded knight bowed in return. "Wurtbad will have to do without its protector for a time. I have it in mind to accompany you, to see this affair through to its end."

"Then you still believe skaven to be the concern of Morr's Black Guard?" Thulmann asked.

"Filling Morr's gardens with plague, digging them up to steal bodies, and raising those bodies as undead abominations. There have been enough affronts to Morr's authority and dominion to justify every templar in Wurtbad accompanying you," Ehrhardt said. "Father Kreutzberg and I reached a compromise."

"You alone instead of all your Black Guardsmen?" Thulmann asked. Ehrhardt bowed his shaved head. Thulmann nodded in agreement. Unlike many of his order, he was not averse to working with elements from the other faiths of the Empire, not when they shared a common cause and a common purpose.

"It seems, then, captain-justicar, your city will need to do without you," Thulmann said. "Your aid has been considerable. I am certain it will continue to be so. What say you, Streng?"

The mercenary scratched his scraggly beard. "So long as he shares in the work and not in the pay, I'm agreeable."

“Then perhaps you won’t mind more company.”

All three men turned at the soft, feminine voice. Thulmann had hoped to avoid any complications now that he was leaving Wurtbad, but as so often happened, his hopes were sadly at odds with reality. Standing on the pier, wearing a loose shirt, leather vest and tight riding breeches, was Silja Markoff. A flicker of joy flashed in the witch hunter as he saw her, but was quickly smothered by an even heavier cloud of gloom. Silja read the play of emotions in his eyes, her own look darkening.

“I asked myself why my good friend, my comrade in arms, Mathias, didn’t stay around long enough to say goodbye.” Silja stalked forwards. At her approach, Ehrhardt and Streng stepped away from the witch hunter. Sticking by Thulmann’s side in the face of daemons and rat ogres was one thing, but neither man wanted any part in the templar’s current peril.

“You are a cultured, refined man,” Silja continued, “surely considerate enough to treat me with more respect than some ten-shilling strumpet.” The accusation brought colour to Thulmann’s face and a coarse laugh from Streng. “Then I considered that maybe the reason you didn’t say goodbye was that you wanted me to go with you, that your snubbing me was simply a backhanded call for my help.”

Thulmann swallowed. The truth of the matter was that he had avoided Silja after he had arranged the use of a ship with Baroness von Gotz. He didn’t trust his feelings for the woman. It had been a long time since he had thought of someone the way he was beginning to think of Silja.

“Lady Markoff, I only thought to spare you the pain—”

“What? By slinking from the city like some thief in the night!” Silja’s voice cracked with anger. “Oh yes, that is much more compassionate. Now step aside and tell these idiots to let me board.”

Thulmann stepped into Silja’s way, gripping her shoulders. He stared solemnly into her flustered features.

“This hunt will take me into danger...” he began.

Silja pulled away from him, storming past Thulmann and up the gangplank of the *Arnhelm*.

“Well, maybe there’s some hot blood flowing in your veins after all,” Streng quipped as he watched Silja stalk away. Thulmann didn’t seem to notice his henchman’s jibe. His mind was elsewhere.

Streng shook his head as he observed the faraway look in his employer’s eyes. “Just remember, she ain’t on the payroll either,” the mercenary warned, his tone less amused than before.

Cold eyes watched as the *Arnhelm* pulled away from the dock back into the river. It had not been difficult to determine which ship the witch hunter would be leaving on. Other vessels had departed the waterfront as quickly as their cargoes were unloaded, eager to put Wurtbad and the lingering dread of plague behind them. The *Arnhelm*, however, had sat at her moorings for nearly the entire day. It had just been a question of waiting.

“And he’s off,” Carandini hissed. “Where are you off to in such a hurry, I wonder?” His chest heaved as he croaked a hoarse laugh. “I’ll be finding that out quite soon.” The necromancer moved away from the window of the ramshackle warehouse from which he had been observing the harbour. “Time we were leaving too,” he said. The mob of slouching, slack-jawed shapes clustered around the room stiffened as their master spoke. Carandini turned his attention from the automatons to his other minion. Gregor was sitting on the floor, his back to the wall, and the shrivelled carcasses of half a dozen rats strewn around him. The vampire’s pale face was a mixture of shame and hate as he looked up at Carandini.

“Now we simply procure passage on a ship and follow the witch hunter,” Carandini said. “The Stir is quite wide and quite deep. Ships vanish without a trace all the time. No one will ever know what happened to Mathias Thulmann.”

Gregor felt the remains of his soul darken just a little more as he heard the necromancer’s murderous plot.

Thulmann stared out into the swift-moving river, watching the moons dance across the current. It was strange to think that they were the same moons as they had been all those years ago. So much had changed; so much had been destroyed, yet Mannsleib remained as it had ever been. As it had been that night when he had proposed to Anya.

The witch hunter closed his eyes, seeing her face again, imagining the fragrant smell of her hair, the cool softness of her skin, the curve of her lips as they smiled, and the shine of love in her eyes. Thulmann opened his eyes quickly, before the memories could blacken. Even the memory of love had been stolen from him, every happy moment they had shared consumed by that final, hideous horror.

“What were you thinking about?”

Thulmann was startled to find Silja standing beside him at the rail of the ship, her flaxen hair whipping around her shoulders in the cool autumn breeze. He looked back at the river, but now found his eyes drawn not to the reflections of the moons, but to that of the woman next to him.

“I was thinking about Altdorf, and the things I must do when I get there,” he said. It was not an untruth, in its way.

“It will probably sound strange to you, but I have never been to Altdorf,” Silja said. “I understand it is many times the size of Wurtbad.”

“Forgive me, Lady Markoff,” the witch hunter said. “River travel does not agree with me. I think I had best retire.” He did not give Silja the chance to respond, hastily retreating below decks, trying to outrun the dark memories swirling around him.

Silja watched Thulmann depart. For all that she felt for him, she knew very little about the man. Perhaps there was already a woman in his life, maybe even a wife.

She spotted Streng sitting on a coil of rope at the base of the mainmast. The witch hunter was a secretive, close-mouthed man, as his vocation demanded, but Streng was quite a different creature. The mercenary winked at Silja as she walked towards him. She could smell the ale on his breath.

“Finally had a bellyful of all that pious chapel-talk, eh?” Streng took another swig from the bottle gripped in his grimy fist. “I’m not surprised. Red-blooded lass like you can only listen to so much o’ that rot!” Streng slapped his knee. “Come here and have a seat. I promise to share the booze.”

“You’ve been with Mathias for quite some time, haven’t you?” Silja asked, keeping far enough from Streng to avoid the worst of the alcohol fumes.

The mercenary nodded. “Several years,” he answered.

“He seemed very disturbed about returning to Altdorf,” Silja said. “Do you know why?”

“There’s someone he’s going to see,” the mercenary said. “Someone he should’ve killed and had done with a long time ago.”

Streng returned to his bottle and refused to elaborate on what he had told her.

\* \* \*

The witch hunter awoke with a start, his face dripping with perspiration. He rose from the bed, his limbs shaking as the nightmare slowly drained from him. He was just reaching for the small jug of water when a pounding knock sounded at the door of his cabin.

“Brother Mathias,” Ehrhardt’s deep voice sounded from the other side of the door. “Come on deck at once.” Thulmann pulled open the door, finding the knight’s armoured bulk blotting out what little light flickered in the corridor.

“Sigmar’s grace,” the witch hunter swore. “Don’t you ever sleep?”

“No,” the knight replied. “There is a strange ship two hundred yards astern.”

“Probably another merchantman waiting for the sun to come up,” Thulmann said.

Ehrhardt shook his head. “Not this one,” he said. “Something doesn’t feel right about it.”

Thulmann nodded, stalking back into his cabin to put on his boots and gather his weapons. He was not one to dismiss a man’s misgivings out of hand; the supernatural often heralded itself with perceptions of unease and dread. The witch hunter followed the knight down the corridor and back on deck. Ehrhardt’s misgivings seemed to be shared by no small number of the crew, the men clustering along the rail and pointing nervous fingers across the dark water.

What they pointed to was the dark silhouette of a ship, a fat-bodied merchantman not unlike the *Arnheim*. There was no denying that there was something menacing about the vessel. Thulmann overheard one of the sailors give voice to the most obvious enigma the unnamed ship presented. There was no evidence of anyone on her decks and not a single running light gleamed from its hull. Any river trader at night, especially one at anchor, should be ablaze with lanterns and torches, proclaiming its presence and reducing the risk of a collision.

Noticing Thulmann among the growing crowd, Streng pushed his way from the rail and strode to his employer’s side. “Ill-favoured boat, I’ll give ’em that,” the mercenary commented. “Some of the crew are all for sendin’ her to the bottom. They’ve a cannon positioned in one of the holds for stickin’ holes in the hulls of river pirates.”

“A bit drastic for a ship that’s done nothing but sit there and look sinister,” Silja commented, having followed after Streng as he pushed his way through the crowd of sailors. Thulmann felt an icy trickle along his spine as fragments of his nightmare returned to him, but managed to keep the feeling off his face.

“Even for a witch hunter, that would be extreme,” Thulmann agreed. “Although there are some I’ve known who have done worse on even more nebulous grounds. Just the same, I think it might be wise if we lowered a longboat and I had a look at that hulk. At least then we might learn if our fears are justified.”

Concern filled Silja’s eyes. “You don’t mean to go over there alone?”

Thulmann chuckled in amusement. “I’m a faithful servant of Lord Sigmar, not a suicidal hero,” he said. “I’ll take Ehrhardt, Streng and whatever sailors have the stomach to face their—”

Thulmann’s face contorted in disgust. Around him the crew’s did likewise. Silja covered her nose with her hand, wincing at the terrible smell that assaulted them.

“What in the name of Manann is that reek?” Captain van Sloan’s voice barked from the quarterdeck. Before anyone could answer the Marienburger, a scream rose from one of the sailors. Illuminated by the moonlight, a number of shambling shapes were pulling themselves over the portside rail, their clothes hanging from their bodies in dank, dripping folds. In less light, they might have been mistaken for men, but Mannsleib was full and there was no mistaking their lifeless state. Many of them sported ghastly wounds, and the flesh of others was split and decaying. Nor could there be any question about the stink rolling off them, the corruption of rotting meat.

Thulmann drew his sword. “Steel yourselves!” he cried. “If you would save your flesh and your souls, strike these abominations. Strike in the name of holy Sigmar!”

Ehrhardt was the first to close with the zombies, his immense blade crunching through the torso of something wearing the ragged remains of a priest’s robe. The butchered carcass spilled across the deck, putrid organs flopping from the mutilating wound. The knight hacked the arm from a second zombie as it shuffled forwards. The undead monstrosity did not notice the injury and set the belaying pin clutched in its remaining hand cracking against Ehrhardt’s helm.

Thulmann hurried to Ehrhardt’s side, slashing the legs out from under his attacker, and then removing its head with a twist of his blade. Some of the crew were overcoming their terror and closing with the zombies with billhooks, daggers and even lengths of chain. Thulmann caught sight of Streng over his shoulder. “Get some of the crew below and fire that cannon!” he snarled. He was certain their attackers had come from the strange ship. It was probable that whatever fiend was guiding them had remained behind, preferring to orchestrate the attack from afar.



The slack-jawed thing that slashed at Thulmann with a sword caused the witch hunter to recoil in disgust. Despite the decay gnawing away at it, there was no mistaking the face of old Eldred from the Wurtbad chapter house. Before Thulmann could react, the zombie's blade was slashing at him again. He flung himself back from the zombie's attack. The creature shuffled forwards after its prey, but found Silja's sword crunching into its breastbone. Silja freed her weapon with a savage tug that sent Eldred's zombie falling to the deck. As the zombie awkwardly began to rise, she severed its spine, leaving it twitching on the planks.

Thulmann had no time to thank Silja for her help. The decks were swarming with zombies. At least two score of the things had pulled themselves from the river and a few stragglers were still climbing up the portside. Thulmann was thrown through the air, crashing against the side of the forecastle with such force that lights danced before his eyes. He groaned as he rolled onto his side, and then groaned again as he saw what had attacked him.

"Surprised to see me, Mathias?" the pale-faced creature snarled as he stalked towards the witch hunter. Gregor's face was twisted into an almost inhuman mask of rage. One of the crew tried to stop the vampire as he prowled across the deck. Gregor seized the man's sword arm, breaking it with a single twist of his wrist. "Are you not pleased to see the fruit of your carelessness? The spawn of your timidity?" The vampire reached down to seize Thulmann by his tunic, lifting the witch hunter from the deck.

"Where is the book?" Gregor hissed.

"Don't do this, Gregor!" Thulmann pleaded, his heart cracking beneath the weight of the guilt swelling up within him. "Let me help you find peace again!" Thulmann fumbled at his belt, struggling to drag one of his pistols from its holster.

"The peace of an uncertain grave?" Gregor snarled, shaking the witch hunter like a rag doll. "The oblivion of the undead for all eternity!"

The pistol fell from Thulmann's fingers as the vampire shook him again. "I've had a taste of your charity, Mathias. I will save myself my way! Where is the book?"

The deck of the *Arnhelm* trembled as the cannon roared from below decks. Shortly afterwards the crack of timber sounded from across the river. The cheers of Streng's gun crew rose through the planks. The vampire paid the turmoil no notice, tightening his grip on Thulmann, strangling the witch hunter with his own clothes.

"Alive or dead, he will find out what he wants to know from you!" Gregor snarled.

"You... will... be... damned..." Thulmann wheezed as the air began to burn within his lungs.

"I already am," Gregor said. "He will set me free!"

The vampire threw back his head and roared in agony, dropping Thulmann to the deck. The witch hunter sucked in deep lungfuls of air, clutching his injured neck. He saw Silja standing behind Gregor, Thulmann's silvered sword clenched in her hands. She had been paying attention during the fight with Sibbechai in Wolfram Kohl's home and knew that normal weapons would not harm a vampire, but blessed ones like Thulmann's would. The slimy treacle seeping from Gregor's side told the rest of the story.

"Stay out of this!" Gregor roared at her. "Don't come between me and the templar!" Thulmann could see the terror in Silja's eyes as the vampire snarled at her, but felt proud to see her hold her ground, to see his sword still clenched in her hands. The vampire lunged at her with unholy speed. Gregor's flesh smoked as he swatted the sword from her grasp. With the back of his hand, Gregor split Silja's lip and spilled her to the deck. The vampire glared hungrily at the stunned woman, at the blood trickling from her wound.

"Keep away from her, Gregor!" Thulmann drew his remaining pistol, aiming it at the vampire's head. The man he had known was gone. All that was left of him was this abomination, this unholy slave of Sibbechai. He felt regret and guilt that he had not destroyed Gregor's remains when he had the chance. This time nothing would keep him from doing a proper job. The witch hunter pulled the

trigger of his gun. The hammer fell, clicking noisily against the steel. Thulmann looked down in horror. Misfire! Over the course of the struggle the firing cap had come loose.

Gregor spun and pounced on him like a wild beast, crushing him to the deck. The vampire's fangs glistened inches from his face, his unclean breath washing across Thulmann's features.

"I don't want to kill you," Gregor said. "I only want the book!"

"No," Thulmann retorted. "It is the fiend who made you what you are that wants the book!"

Shouts of confusion rose from the melee beyond them and Thulmann could hear heavy bodies striking the water. A look of despair and confusion came over Gregor's face and he turned his head in the direction of the other ship.

The vampire looked back down at Thulmann. "I'll come for it again," Gregor warned, rising and stalking back towards the side of the ship. "Next time there may not be enough of me left to care how I get it."

Thulmann scrambled for his other pistol where it had fallen on the deck, but by the time he recovered it, the vampire was gone. The zombies were gone too, at least those that had not been destroyed by the crew.

"Damndest thing I've ever seen," Ehrhardt said as he strode towards Thulmann. "One minute they are full of fight, the next, they turn tail and rush back over the side."

"There's your answer," Thulmann said, pointing at the other ship. It was listing badly as water rushed into the two ragged holes the cannon fire had blasted into its hull. "It seems I was right about the power behind this attack being on that ship. Clearly he's not terribly keen on the idea of sinking and called back his slaves to try and salvage the ship."

"So what do we do now?" Silja asked, carefully rubbing her bruised jaw.

"We make certain that thing goes straight to the bottom and everything that goes down with her stays down with her," Thulmann declared. But even as he said the words, the efforts of Captain van Sloan's orders began to bear fruit. The *Arnhelm* was under sail once more. It seemed the captain had reconsidered braving the narrows by night.

For the better part of ten minutes Thulmann argued, demanded, ordered and bullied the captain, trying to get him to bring his vessel about and go back to ensure that the sinister ship and its passengers were destroyed. But even the captain's fear of witch hunters and the Order of Sigmar could not overcome his fear of the undead. Unable to captain the ship himself, Thulmann had no choice but to watch in frustration as they sped upriver and the sinking hulk slowly slipped from view.

"You knew that monster?" Silja asked.

"He was Gregor Klausner once," Thulmann replied, "a valued friend and ally. Now he is a slave to the thing that killed him.

"It seems that we once again find a common purpose. I too would like to know where *Das Buch die Unholden* has gone."

The musty stink of fur and raw earth filled the narrow tunnel. They had been travelling for a week through the cavernous network of passages and burrows that connected the far-flung strongholds of the skaven realms. The journey had been one of gruelling monotony, punctuated by moments of absolute terror. They had endured attacks by packs of enormous rats, ambushes by crazed escaped slaves, tunnel collapses and horrifying swims through icy underground streams. They had even been attacked by some massive blind creature that resembled an enormous mole! After seeing what the creature had done to a pair of Skilk's stormvermin, Weichs found a new appreciation for the word "mutilation".

The scientist's fear was compounded by the attentions of his ally. The grey seer's command of written Reikspiel was poor, yet the sorcerer-priest had recognised exactly what the book was. Every time the skaven had stopped to rest, Skilk had demanded Weichs work on the book, only relenting

when the former physician presented the grey seer with several translated rituals. The attrition rate of their warrior bodyguard climbed each time Skilk tested new spells from the book.

At last, just when Weichs was beginning to think the ordeal would never end, they reached their destination. The tunnel they had been following for the past day was narrower than any they had thus far travelled, barely wide enough to allow three skaven to pass through it side by side. The barren walls of the tunnel had begun to display the scratchy writing of the underfolk, and Weichs could sense the feverish excitement of his ally/captor as the symbols became more frequent. Some time later, the tunnel widened, opening into the gaping mouth of a barred gateway. Several black-furred guards stood poised around the gate, their whiskers twitching as they caught the scent of Skilk's entourage, their eyes gleaming weirdly in the green glow of the warpstone lamps around them.

Grey Seer Skilk strode towards the gate, his crook-backed figure deceptively frail in the eerie light. The skaven wore no armour, dressed instead in a ragged cloak of grey. Skilk's grey fur was speckled with black, and the horns on his head stabbed upwards, curling in on themselves. The grey seer barked commands to the guards. Several abased themselves, while others scrambled through a small door set into the gate. Weichs could feel the tension in the air as Skilk leaned on his staff and waited.

"Master, what it do?" The half-articulate question came from the slopping, disfigured vocal cords of Lobo, Weichs' mutant assistant. Some scholars held that halflings were immune to the forces of mutation, but Weichs had proved that with enough warpstone, anything was possible. The little, hunchbacked creature was the only one of his assistants to escape from the disaster in Wurtbad.

"Be still, Lobo," Weichs ordered. "Just wait and see, and be ready to make a run for it."

It was not long before the gates opened and a procession of skaven emerged from what Weichs deduced must be another burrow stronghold. However, these were no warlords and petty chieftains, but a group of robed, horned priests not unlike Skilk himself.

"Skilk crawl home, yes?" one of the grey seers said, baring its teeth at Skilk. The other grey seers seemed to find great humour in their leader's scorn, chittering laughter echoing through the tunnel. "Find place? Serve Gnatrik now!"

Skilk's lips pulled back, exposing his yellowed fangs. "Skilk learn much. Now show all Skrittar-kin! Fester Gnatrik-meat!"

The sneering Gnatrik coiled himself into a bundle of hate-ridden fur and fangs. Weichs could see the unholy light glowing within Gnatrik's eyes as the sorcerer called magical energy into his body. The grey seer stretched his paw forwards, sending a blast of crackling green light sizzling towards Skilk.

Skilk responded by hissing one of the new words of power he had learned from *Das Buch die Unholden*. Skilk's body seemed to flicker and fade. Gnatrik's warp lightning passed harmlessly through Skilk's spectral body and incinerated three of the stormvermin behind him.

"Gnatrik-meat die now!" Skilk snarled as his body became once more a thing of flesh and bone. The ratman swept its paws in a complicated series of gestures, daemonic words burning Skilk's throat as it forced them into sound. Gnatrik had time for one ear-splitting scream as the scintillating light Skilk had called into being engulfed him. Then the cavern resounded with the sound of tearing flesh and cracking bone. When the light had faded, all that remained of Gnatrik was a puddle of gore and offal. It looked as if some incredible force had literally turned Gnatrik inside out.

Skilk stalked towards the gory ruin and rubbed his paws into the mess. The other grey seers bowed in obeisance, accepting Skilk as Gnatrik's successor by right of challenge. The triumphant Skilk turned away from his new minions, striding back towards Weichs.

"Now doktor-man learn more for Skilk!" the grey seer patted the skin-bound book where it reposed in a sling at its side. "Teach Skilk make dead-things speak." The skaven laughed as it swaggered back to take command of his new domain.

## CHAPTER FOUR

A pall had settled on the mightiest city in the Empire, a palpable sense of loss that hung heavy in the air. The snapping fangs of doubt and despair followed upon that sense of mourning. Grand Theogonist Volkmar the Grim was dead. The leading priest of Sigmar's holy temple was gone. More than ever, the future seemed dark and uncertain.

The streets of the city were far from deserted, although the throng was not quite the teeming morass of humanity that Thulmann had always encountered on his other visits. Their very numbers added to the unreal, spectral air that gripped Altdorf. Those who travelled the streets did so in silence. Not the slightest murmur rose from the crowd, and the few who did speak did so in soft whispers, as if measuring the value of every word. As Thulmann and his companions left the waterfront and passed through a dockyard marketplace, he was treated to the eerie spectacle of two men silently haggling over the price of fish.

It was not only the spires and towers of Altdorf that had been draped in mourning. Leading the way from the waterfront, Thulmann soon discovered that every window was draped in black, dark cloth hung from every street lamp and nearly every doorway sported a crude griffon image drawn on it in charcoal. The men and women they passed on the streets were similarly dressed, even the beggars displaying at least a black rag tied around their arms. Aristocratic nobleman, scruffy rag collector or fat-bellied banker, the faces of everyone they passed was downturned.

The despair was infectious and Thulmann felt his own dread taking new strength from the gloom all around him. He could see tears in Silja's eyes, her thoughts no doubt returning to her father. Even Streng's gait lacked its usual, careless swagger, his uncouth tongue for once still. Only Ehrhardt seemed unaffected, but the Black Guardsman was hardly an example of cheer and light in any surroundings.

Even as his mind turned over the troubles gnawing at it, Thulmann's senses were alert. His ears strained to listen to the hushed, whispered exchanges between the despondent citizens of the city. Time and again, he heard a name uttered — the name of the monster that had killed the grand theogonist, the name of the dark champion who would usher in a new age of Chaos. Archaon, they called him, and made the sign of the hammer as they did so.

Thulmann stopped his horse in the middle of the street and dismounted. He handed Streng the reins. "Take the horses to the Parravon Stables, and get us lodging at the Blacktusk. See that Silja gets a nice room." The remark brought a brief smile to the woman's face.

"And what about you?"

"I have to report to my superiors," Thulmann replied. "They will want to hear about my investigation in Klausberg and what happened in Wurtbad." The witch hunter rested his gloved hand on Silja's shoulder. "Before you ask, it is something I need to do alone. Besides, I need someone to keep an eye on Streng and make sure he gets everything done *before* he finds some bottle to crawl into."

Silja's expression told Thulmann she was far from convinced, but she nodded. "Will you be long?"

"I can't say," Thulmann said. "Zerndorff may ask me to expand upon my report. It could take some time." The witch hunter smiled as a thought occurred to him. "Why don't you have Streng show you some of the sights once you're settled in. Head to the Fist and Glove around dusk. If I can, I will meet you there for dinner."

Silja watched Thulmann go, navigating his way through the crowds until his black hat and cloak vanished in the distance.

"I must part company here as well," Ehrhardt's deep voice rumbled. "Like Brother Mathias, I too have superiors I must report to." The knight bowed, and then turned and marched off through the crowd, the pedestrians nervously stepping aside as the grim black templar strode past.

"That just leaves you and me then," Silja sighed.

Streng smiled back at her, displaying yellow teeth behind his beard.

"You'd better lead the way" she said.

Streng chuckled, adjusting his hold on the reins of the horses. "Don't worry, you'll get your bearings soon enough. Upwind are all the good areas, downwind are the Morrwies and the slums."

"I wasn't worried about getting lost," Silja said. "I just want you where I can see you. I haven't forgotten Mathias' warning about your hands."

Streng grumbled, sullenly pulling the horses after him. "Something else I have to thank Mathias for. And what was that crack about me crawling into a bottle? He knows as well as me we haven't been paid yet!"

Thulmann was left alone with his thoughts for longer than he had expected. Sforza Zerndorff maintained a set of offices within the grim facade of the templar headquarters. The squat structure nestled in the shadow of the Great Cathedral of Sigmar. Its situation permitted daylight to reach it only for a few brief moments when the sun was directly overhead, the Cathedral and other buildings of the Domplatz acting to keep the structure in perpetual shadow. The symbolism had never been lost on Thulmann, for witch hunters forever lived their lives in the shadows. The templars of Sigmar were men who surrendered the clean life of their fellow man to prowl a world of limitless intrigue and darkness.

The waiting room was spartanly adorned, although Zerndorff's extravagant touch was still in evidence. A long carpet, its thread woven into the sinuous, writhing patterns of Araby, cushioned Thulmann's feet as he paced the small hallway. Velvet-backed cherry wood chairs lined the wall and tempted him away from his vigil.

If Zerndorff was trying to wrong-foot him by keeping him waiting there was no need. Before setting foot in Altdorf, Thulmann's mind was already afire with doubts and fears. The news of Volkmar's death had only increased their strength and number. The grand theogonist had been a great man, a man of faith and courage, truly touched by the light of Sigmar. Not all who wore the mantle of a Sigmarite could claim such virtues and grace. The late Lord Protector Thaddeus Gamow was one such creature, rumoured heretic and worse. Thulmann considered Sforza Zerndorff another, a man whose ruthless ambitions took second place to nothing. While Volkmar had been alive, there had been a force to keep such men in check, a power to which they would answer should their ambitions grow too bold. Volkmar had been an embodiment of hope, Thulmann realised, hope that the sickness within the temple would be contained, would one day be cut out.

Thulmann continued to pace the small room. He feared towards what purpose Zerndorff might put his report. There was the ruin of the noble Klausner name, and what Zerndorff might do with that information, discrediting and diminishing those who had been close to the Klausners. Then there was *Das Buch die Unholden* itself to consider. Thulmann knew that the potent tome would excite his superior's interest. It was not that Zerndorff would seek to actually use the book — he was no heretic — but the capture of such an artefact would do much to impress the scions of the temple, and to cause Zerndorff's name to circle within the upper echelons.

The hall door of the small waiting room swung open. A short man dressed in grey entered, a black cape billowing around his shoulders and a shapeless black hat scrunched on his silver hair. He clutched a gold-tipped cane in his gloved hand. There was colour in his full features, the neatly trimmed beard drooping in a smouldering scowl. Sforza Zerndorff's eyes narrowed as he saw Thulmann, the scowl remaining fixed on his features.

“Brother Mathias, you were expected several weeks ago,” Zerndorff said, his words clipped. The Witch Hunter General did not break his stride but continued to move towards the inner door of the waiting room.

“There were complications, my lord,” Thulmann replied. “I was delayed.”

Zerndorff paused, his hand on the gilded doorknob. “Delayed?” he asked, in disgust. “You are a servant of Sigmar’s temple, on temple business. Would our Lord Sigmar allow petty considerations to distract him from his duty? Did he tarry in Reikdorf while orcs sacked Astofen? Did he stay safe and secure in his golden halls while the Black One’s lifeless horde stalked the land?”

“Wurtbad was struck down by plague,” Thulmann answered, chafing under Zerndorff’s withering reprimand. “It was impossible to leave.”

Some of the colour left Zerndorff’s features and he took a step back from Thulmann, pulling the door open as he moved. He seemed momentarily at a loss for words. Another voice intruded into the silence, a deep imperious voice that Thulmann knew quite well.

“Plague did you say?”

Thulmann had been so intent on his superior that he had allowed his normally keen senses to slip. He had not paid attention to the second man who had entered the waiting room, dismissing him as one of Zerndorff’s bodyguard. Now he found himself looking at someone who was far more imposing than the pair of silent, matched killers that served Zerndorff.

The man was tall and lean, with broad shoulders and long arms. The riding breeches and tunic he wore were of fine leather and cut in military fashion, but the black cloak draped around his shoulders, the ornamentation of his boots and the leather vambraces around his wrists could tell any observer that this was no officer of the militia. The golden ornaments were twin-tailed comets and the style of the cloak was of the kind that only one organisation in the Empire wore. The face of the other witch hunter was sharp and aristocratic, black hair swept back in a widow’s peak, the eyes penetrating and commanding.

“I trust that Brother Mathias has not come here in too great haste?” There was a suggestion of actual amusement in the witch hunter’s tone as he spoke, although Zerndorff did not share his companion’s mirth.

Thulmann forced a strained smile on his face when he made his reply. “No, Brother Kristoph, there is small cause for worry. I remained in Wurtbad until the disease was defeated. Graf Alberich lifted the quarantine. That is how I come to be here, tardy, but healthy.”

Thulmann’s words displayed more confidence than he felt. Kristoph Krieger was far from a stranger to him, there had been several occasions in the past when the two had crossed paths.

Krieger was everything that Thulmann was not. Coming from a long line of templars, the Kriegers were almost an institution in Bogenhafen and Kristoph’s star had risen quite quickly and effortlessly within the Order of Sigmar. Thulmann had been the son of a Bechafen priest, entering the Order of Sigmar with only his own determination and talents to recommend him. Krieger was something of a political animal, currying favours and debts where they would prove the most beneficial. By contrast, Thulmann refused to play the parasitic game of politics, working for everything he earned.

“Since we are all in good health then,” Zerndorff said, opening the door to his office, “I would hear your report, Mathias.”

Thulmann followed Zerndorff through the gilded portal, Krieger close behind him. The time for doubt and fear was past. Now there was only duty and honour.

It was well into the night before Thulmann was dismissed from Zerndorff’s chambers. The witch hunter general had listened attentively to every facet of Thulmann’s report, hanging on his every word as he related the corruption of the Klausner family, and their employment of the unholy *Das Buch die Unholden* to protect themselves from the vampire Sibbechai. When Thulmann described the book, and its gruesome history, he could almost see the greedy light burning in Zerndorff’s eyes.

The remainder of his report was continually interrupted with questions about the book and its fate and whereabouts. It did not ease Thulmann's conscience that Krieger seemed as keenly interested in the matter as Zerndorff was.

Given the turn his meeting had taken, it was small surprise to Thulmann that Zerndorff was agreeable to Thulmann's intention to track down the skaven sorcerer. Also not surprising, although exceedingly unpleasant, was Zerndorff's decision that the matter was too important for Thulmann to take on alone. Kristoph Krieger would help Thulmann in his hunt and ensure that the book was recovered and brought back to Altdorf.

Thulmann left the meeting feeling weary, but it was a fatigue of the soul not the body that sapped his strength. The long river journey had given him much time to think about what he would need to do. There had been time to desperately struggle to devise another plan, a way to proceed without going to the Reiksfang, without seeing the creature confined there. There had been time to remember all that had passed between them. It was the pain that never left. He could feel it still, like a cold dead hand closing around his heart. Thinking about the man in the Reiksfang had caused that pain to stab into him with a vengeance. If there were any other way, he wouldn't come within a league of the Reiksfang, content to allow the man there to rot in his black cell, but he had no choice. The prisoner was his best hope of tracking down the skaven sorcerer.

As darkness settled on Altdorf, only the mourning bell of the Great Cathedral of Sigmar continued to toll, leaving the rest of the city to grieve in silence. Thulmann turned away from the dark alleyways leading from the Order of Sigmar, striding out into the wide plaza before the cathedral. The plaza was deserted, save for a single line of black-robed monks, silently lashing themselves with whips as they marched, lamenting with their blood the death of Volkmar. Thulmann watched them for a moment, impressed by their devotion, and then mounted the massive stone steps leading up into the cathedral's cavernous chapel. The fortress-like doors stood open, the hall within glowing with the light of thousands of candles. Thulmann took a silver coin from his belt, handing it to the shaven-headed initiate standing beside the doors and bowing his head as the priest handed him a small black candle.

The witch hunter walked through the nave, down past the aisles of pews where even at so late an hour a small army of mourning Altdorfers kept vigil. Ahead, Thulmann could see the sanctuary, glowing with the brilliance of thousands of candles, their flickering light making the enormous golden hammer fixed above the altar seem alive with molten flame. A bronze brazier fumed on the altar, its sacred fire filling the sanctuary with foggy incense. The sight was both spectacular and woeful, uplifting and despondent at once. The eerie beauty of the sanctuary could not erase the reason it was so adorned: the loss of the grand theogonist.

As he reached the altar, Thulmann knelt, bowing his forehead to the cold stone floor. He thought again of Volkmar, the stern, uncompromising priest who had been the heart and conscience of the Sigmarite faith for decades. He remembered the priest who could bring hope to the miserable with a few soft words, and with a single glance bring the mighty low with humility. Thulmann had been fortunate enough to meet Volkmar several times, and the sword the witch hunter bore had been blessed by the grand theogonist's own hand. The Empire would mourn its grand theogonist formally, but to the teeming masses, Volkmar was a distant, unknowable figure. Thulmann knew exactly what sort of man they had lost, and knew how much diminished the Empire was without him.

The witch hunter began to retrace his passage between the aisles. He had nearly reached the nave when he heard a voice call his name. Out of habit, his gloved hand dropped to the hilt of his sword, but as he turned he saw that he would not need it. A man dressed in the white and red of a warrior priest of Sigmar hurried down the aisle. Thulmann smiled as he recognised the weathered features and rampaging grey beard that curled down to the priest's chest.

"Father Brendle," Thulmann greeted the priest, keeping his voice low to avoid disturbing the mourners. "Of all the people I expected to see in Altdorf, you certainly weren't one of them."

“It has been a long time,” Brendle replied, “but I could not fail to recognise Mathias Thulmann when he walked to the altar. It warms my heart to see you fit and well.”

“I could say the same, old friend,” Thulmann said, clapping the priest’s shoulder. Despite his age, the body beneath Brendle’s coarse robes was still muscular, retaining some of the strength his years as a mercenary had given him.

Brendle looked around him and shook his head. “I fear that it might be disrespectful to catch up on old times here. I know a wine shop not too far away where we can sit down and talk like gentlemen, or at least reasonable facsimiles of gentlemen.”

“Are you certain I wouldn’t be taking you from your duties?”

“Quite certain,” Brendle said, waving aside the question. “I’ll explain once we have a bottle between us.”

The wine shop Brendle led Thulmann to was a small, nondescript little building. Except for themselves, the only denizens of the shop were a bleary-eyed watchman deep in his cups and a pair of lamplighters trying to drive the night’s chill from their bones. Brendle appropriated a bottle of Reikland Hoch from the wine seller, and settled down at the rearmost of the establishment’s few tables.

“To Volkmar,” Brendle said as he poured a glass for himself and his guest. Thulmann returned the toast and sat down at the table.

“I must confess to being surprised to see you serving at the cathedral,” Thulmann said as Brendle poured another glass, “quite an advancement from your old posting in Middenland.”

Brendle laughed and took another drink. “You’d think so, but actually I had no more reason for being in the cathedral than you, just a faithful Sigmarite paying his respects to the grand theogonist. I think mentioning the name of Horst Brendle in connection with a position at the cathedral would cause a few arch-lectors to have heart attacks. I’m between postings, to be honest.” Brendle coloured as he made the confession and then laughed. “Seems I was sent up there more as a liaison between the temples of Sigmar and Ulric. It probably made a bit of sense to some high-up, what with me being from Middenheim and all. Anyway, it didn’t work out so well.”

“Why do I find that unsurprising?” Thulmann asked. “Please tell me you didn’t call Ar-Ulric a backwards heathen or some such?”

Brendle’s colour grew a shade more crimson and he refused to meet Thulmann’s gaze.

“Nothing that scandalous,” he replied. “The fellow I had words with was several steps beneath Ar-Ulric. We had a pretty good scrap just the same.”

Thulmann almost choked on his wine. “You... you got in a fist fight with a priest of Ulric?”

“Something like that,” Brendle admitted. “He had an axe handle and I had a plucked chicken. You’d be surprised how hard you can hit a fellow with one of those. Cleared the street plenty quick when they heard that thing smacking against his arm.”

“You got into a street brawl with a priest of Ulric?” Thulmann’s incredulity continued to grow. He knew Brendle could be hot-tempered, but brawling with another priest in the middle of a street was riotous even by Brendle’s standards.

“We were in the street when it started. Everything on the Ulricsberg is a street of some sort or another.”

“The Ulricsberg! Middenheim?” Thulmann shook his head. Middenheim was the city-state fountainhead of the Ulrician faith, the centre of Ulric’s worship. Brendle’s brawl would have been bad enough in some Middenland backwater, but in Middenheim itself...

“Well, that’s where Wolf-father Baegyr was.”

“Wolf-father Baegyr! Ar-Ulric Valgeir’s cousin! Never mind, I don’t want to hear any more.”

Brendle poured himself another glass of wine and smiled at his friend. “So, what brings you to Altdorf? Last I heard you were down in Stirland someplace tracking a heretic physician. Don’t tell



me the news about Volkmar has reached Stirland already? They only found out about him here three days ago.”

“No, official business brought me back.” Thulmann related in the most general terms his reasons for returning to Altdorf, keeping from Brendle details such as the involvement of the skaven and the existence of *Das Buck die Unholden*. When Thulmann had finished, Brendle leaned back in his chair, nodding his head as he turned over the witch hunter’s words.

“You are certainly in an unenviable position, my friend,” Brendle stated. “Sforza Zerndorff isn’t somebody I’d like to be reporting to. Now more than ever.”

“Why is now so inauspicious a time?” Thulmann knew he would like hearing whatever details lay behind Brendle’s comment even less than he had the account of his brawl with Baegyr, but he also knew it would be wise to hear the information.

“The temple’s in turmoil,” Brendle said. “Volkmar’s death has sent shock waves through the church. Worse, it has made the cult of Sigmar look vulnerable in the eyes of the commoners. They’re already talking about this Kurgan filth Archaon as if he’s the second coming of Asavar Kul. The temple needs to do something to reassure the people, and they need to do it soon. The lectors are already holding meetings behind locked doors. I think before the week is out, you’ll find they’ve elected a new grand theogonist.”

“Any idea who?”

“Yes, from the information I’ve heard it’s going to be Arch-lector Esmer.” Brendle nodded as he saw Thulmann’s face drop. “Yeah, that’s how I felt too. He’s a far cry from filling Volkmar’s mantle.”

“But that should be better for Zerndorff, not worse,” Thulmann pointed out. “There was never any love lost between Volkmar and Zerndorff, but I don’t think he’s ever crossed swords with Esmer.”

“However, Zerndorff is one of the witch hunter generals appointed by Volkmar after he abolished the position of lord protector.” Brendle tapped his finger on the table as he made his point. “What is the one thing Esmer is absolutely infamous for? He’s a miser, guards the temple treasury like it was his daughter’s chastity belt. You take a man like that and make him grand theogonist, first thing he’s going to do is start streamlining the church and seeing where he can save money. Then we have the witch hunter generals, three officers, each with their own staff and command, doing the job one man was doing only a few years ago; a man whose heresy was never even proved.”

“Esmer’s going to restore the position of lord protector?” The thought was a troubling one, because if true, Thulmann knew Zerndorff would be doubly determined to claim it for his own, both to expand his power and to prevent him losing that which he had accumulated as Witch Hunter General South.

“That possibility is certainly the rumour of the moment within the Order of Sigmar,” Brendle replied. “A few templars are even sending out feelers, trying to get their name where it might be noticed. Zerndorff is certainly sparing no effort in that regard and neither is Lord Bethe. I’m actually surprised that you hadn’t heard any rumours. These days they are thick as flies at the Fist and Glove.”

Mention of the infamous tavern frequented by Altdorf’s witch hunters caused Thulmann to rise from his seat. Silja! His mind had been so troubled that he’d forgotten he was to sup with her. He glanced out of the wine shop’s small window, wincing as he saw how dark the night had grown. Small chance she would still be waiting.

“Forgive me, Horst, but I just remembered I was supposed to meet someone at the Fist and Glove.” Thulmann recovered his hat and turned from the table.

“If it was Streng, that lout has probably drunk himself under a table or into a cell by this time.” Brendle laughed as Thulmann made his retreat from the wine shop.

Mathias Thulmann slowly mounted the stairway that wound, upwards from the extravagant foyer of the Blacktusk. Like the Fist and Glove, the Blacktusk inn was an institution in Altdorf, serving as a luxurious alternative to the barracks of Altdorf's three chapter houses. The proprietors of the Blacktusk were retired witch hunters themselves, a tradition that stretched back almost to the time of Magnus, and were more than happy to turn over rooms to their, brother templars in return for whatever small gratuity they saw fit to bestow. Such pious devotion never failed to touch the normally stern hearts of their patrons, so the gratuities were rarely inconsequential.

As he had expected, Silja was long gone from the Fist and Glove. Streng was present however, sharing cups with a scar-faced ruffian named Gunther whom Thulmann recognised as the underling of a witch hunter named Gottfried Verdammen. Streng managed to detach himself from his new drinking crony long enough to tell Thulmann that he had stabled the horses and secured rooms at the Blacktusk inn. Silja had waited until after sunset before leaving. Streng supposed she had gone to her room at the inn.

The oak boards of the inn's upper floor creaked beneath his feet as Thulmann made his way down the narrow hall to the numbered room the innkeeper had given him. The witch hunter entered the darkened room, removing his cloak and hat and draping them across the top of a small bureau. As he began to unbuckle his weapon belt, the sound of movement made him spin around, his hand dragging a pistol from its holster.

"Who's there?" he demanded, eyes striving to penetrate the shadows. A slender silhouette slowly resolved itself as it drew nearer.

"It's only me, Mathias," Silja's voice purred from the darkness. The voice sent a thrill racing along Thulmann's spine and then the old gnawing fear began to creep back into his mind.

"My apologies, Lady Markoff," Thulmann said, reaching for his hat and cloak. "I was informed this was my room."

"It is," Silja said. Thulmann could see that she had swapped her travelling clothes for a loose gown of frilly lace and diaphanous silk. The sight dried his mouth on the instant. "Please don't think me brazen. I've been quite patient and a woman should only wait so long, after all."

Thulmann could feel the old fear struggling to find purchase within his mind, could feel every black and hideous recollection trying to force itself before his eyes, but Silja Markoff's warm, inviting smile held them at bay.

"You shouldn't be here, Silja," Thulmann said. Silja's expression dropped as his words reached her.

"If that is the way you feel, Mathias..." she said in a quiet, fragile tone.

Thulmann set his cloak and hat down on the bureau again. "You shouldn't be here, Silja," he repeated, "because tonight... tonight I don't have the strength to turn you away."

## CHAPTER FIVE

Mathias Thulmann sat in a claw-footed chair and watched as the light slowly illuminated the sleeping woman. He felt a tinge of envy, watching Silja sleep. It had been a long time since he had slept so soundly. There were too many black deeds and fell memories to allow him the sleep of the just. Of late the problem had been made even worse by his feelings for Silja. The nightmares he suffered were not merely the horrors of the past, but fears for the future. If he closed his eyes too long he could see Anya's face, not the way it had looked when he had wed her but the way it had looked that last ghastly night in Bechafen. Reason told him it was impossible for the same thing to happen to Silja, but reason did not keep that dread from filling his heart and tormenting his mind.

The great witch hunter, Thulmann thought. The man of iron whose courage never wavers, whose resolve is as unshakeable as the Great Cathedral of Sigmar. Only he wasn't. He knew the fear of Old Night and the uncertainty of pity and mercy. He knew the despair of loneliness and the desperate longing for someone to fill the emptiness of his heart. He'd been unequal to the labour of holding his selfish desire in check, too weak to deny himself the solace and warmth Silja offered him.

Thulmann felt guilt well up within him. He should never have accepted Silja's love. He couldn't claim her, couldn't do justice by her. All he could do was bring her more pain, and she had already had enough of that in her life. Perhaps far worse than pain, he thought, considering the task he intended to accomplish before the day's end. Anya had been destroyed for loving him. He had no right to allow Silja to risk the same. He would tell her as much and force her to understand that their night had simply been a pleasant happenstance, nothing more.

It couldn't be allowed to be more.

Thulmann nearly jumped from his chair when a fist pounded against the chamber door. He saw Silja stir uneasily in the bed as the sound reverberated through the room. The witch hunter leapt to his feet and hurried to the door before the summons could be repeated.

"About time you was moving your arse, Mathias." Streng's grimy countenance filled the doorway. The mercenary carried a pair of heavy leather coats over his arm. "You still have a mind to go?" he asked. Then his gaze settled on the bed and a bawdy smile spread across his bearded face. "Of course if you are too tired we could always go tomorrow."

Thulmann snatched one of the coats from his henchman. "Damn your tongue," he snapped, joining the mercenary in the hallway and closing the door behind him. "Is everything ready?"

"Just the way you wanted it," Streng said. "I hired a pair of horses for us from a stable near the south gate of the city. If anybody's waitin' for us to take our own mounts they're going to be disappointed."

"As they should be," Thulmann said. "I'll have none of Zerndorff's dogs meddling in my business." With the uncertain political climate in the temple of Sigmar and the upper echelons of its witch hunters, Thulmann knew there would be even more spies and informants abroad than usual, each eager to catch some morsel of information their masters might find of use. The change in horses, the early hour and the crude clothing both men had adopted by way of disguise should cause at least enough confusion to see them free of Altdorf without any undue interference.

When they reached the street, Thulmann cast one last look back at the Blacktusk and the window of his room. He thought again of Silja Markoff and how peacefully she slept. Then he thought of the monster he was going to see, the monster who had robbed him of so much in the past, and who now stole from him whatever happiness he might have claimed with Silja.

Fiery twilight smouldered on the horizon before their destination rose up before them. They had followed a cautious, circuitous route, leaving by Altdorf's most southerly gate, and riding a winding path that turned in upon itself several times, circling their way past the numerous small towns and villages scattered beyond the walls of the city. The witch hunter showed extreme care while they travelled, constantly watching for any sign that they were being followed.

Their destination was an island, a jagged fang of rock rising from the middle of the River Reik. The rough grey rocks were capped by an immense structure, its fang-like towers apparently stabbing vindictively at the starlit sky. A palpable atmosphere of suffering and misery drifted down to them from the island fortress as they drew near.

The ferryman was not hard to find in the encroaching gloom, the light from his house the only sign of life along the desolate shore. A scrawny boy led their horses into a large stable building while the ferryman lit a lantern and led the way to the large flat-bottomed skiff. Thulmann hesitated as he saw the boat, and his hand unconsciously closed around the small hammer icon hanging from his neck, the holy symbol of Sigmar.

The river was shallow along a narrow expanse, stretching from the shore to the rocky island. The ferryman propelled his skiff through the water with a long pole, pushing them ever closer to their goal. The feeling of misery grew as the craggy grey rocks and crushing architecture of the fortress drew nearer. Streng blanched as the grim influence washed over him, retrieving a small flask from his boot and taking a liberal pull on its contents.

A small wood jetty projected from the base of the rocky cliff, a long winding stair snaking its way up towards the fortress perched on the island's summit. Two soldiers watched them with keen interest as the skiff drew near. Streng recognised the funnel-mouthed contraption one of the pair held as a blunderbuss, a murderous weapon infamous for its ability to butcher multiple foes with a single shot. The man trained the weapon on them, his face as expressionless as a stone mask.

"I have business with the castellan," Thulmann told the soldiers as the skiff came to a rest beside the jetty. The two guards remained silent, studying the coarse, ox-hide coat and scruffy clothing Thulmann had adopted. "Tell him that Herr Grübel is here," he added. It was an old alias. He didn't want anyone knowing of his visits to the Reiksfang. The soldier without the blunderbuss turned, stalking into the small shack nestled between the jetty and the stairs. A moment later he reappeared, a slip of parchment in his fingers. He placed it in a small clay jar, its rim attached to a slender rope that rose up into the darkness. The soldier glanced at Thulmann, and then struck a large brass bell. The jar began to rise as the rope was pulled up.

Long minutes passed. The guards remained immobile, the blunderbuss still fixed in the direction of the skiff. The ferryman sat at the far end of his little boat, ready to drop into the river if the soldier started to fire.

Thulmann closed his eyes and thought about what he had come to do. Perhaps the castellan would not admit him? Perhaps the man he had come to see had finally died? The witch hunter dismissed both possibilities, refusing to deceive himself with such desperate and fountless hope. The castellan would admit him. Thulmann knew too much about the man for him to do anything else. The prisoner would still be here, alive, because Morr would not admit such scum into his kingdom.

At last, the clay jar reappeared, dropping from the darkness as if by magic. The guard withdrew a slip of parchment from the vessel. He read it for a moment and nodded to his companion. Streng gasped in relief as he saw the soldier turn his blunderbuss away.

"Herr Grübel," the first guard was saying as Thulmann stepped up onto the jetty, "welcome to Reiksfang prison."

The sprawling bulk of the prison fortress loomed above their heads as Thulmann and Streng made their way deeper into the heart of the Reiksfang. Streng had drained his flask of schnapps, yet still

he could not keep the hairs on the back of his neck from crawling. The Reiksfang was perhaps the most infamous structure in Reikland, if not the Empire. Once consigned to the black depths of the Reiksfang, few would ever see the light of day again. Disease, malnourishment and despair were the great killers within the prison, running rampant through its close, confined labyrinth of halls. With the onset of winter, hundreds of the miserable wretches would perish from the frosty chill that would sink into the cramped, lightless cells.

The castellan's meeting with Thulmann had been brief. The aged officer had been quick to hand over a set of keys to his unwelcome visitor, and then hurried back to the upper reaches of the Reiksfang's central tower. One of the keys served to unlock a heavy iron-bound door, exposing a narrow stairway that wound its way deep into the bedrock. With only a small torch to light their way, the two men had descended. The eerie silence of their passage was broken only by the occasional muffled moan, reaching to them through the stone from the network of cells and dungeons just beyond the walls of the stairwell.

In years past, the lord and master of the Reiksfang had been the notorious Judge Vaultberg, a power-mad magistrate who had terrorised the Reikland for decades with his sadistic and brutal brand of justice. Vaultberg had ordered special dungeons excavated far beneath the main prison, so deep within the roots of the rock that they were below even the level of the river. It was here that Vaultberg confined his choicest prisoners, those who had in some way earned his personal enmity.

Down, ever down the stairs wound, until at last the chill of the river began to turn their breath to frost. Streng stifled a sneeze with the sleeve of his tunic. The stair twisted around one final corner and stopped before a massive steel door. Thulmann hesitated a moment, and then fumbled among the keys the castellan had given him before selecting the one that would open the portal.

Beyond was a long corridor, stretching away into the gloom beneath the Reiksfang. Heavy steel doors were interspersed along the stone walls of the passage. A few torches sputtered and crackled in sconces set into the walls, their light illuminating the condensation seeping through the walls and dripping from the roof.

Streng tried to stifle another sneeze and failed, and the sound of his affliction rolled down the silent corridor like thunder. Thulmann cast an annoyed look at his companion and then returned his attention to the passageway. One of the steel doors creaked open, slapping against the wall with a metallic ring. An immense hand gripped the edge of the doorframe. A gigantic arm followed it and then a huge bulk pushed its way through the opening, bent nearly double to fit through the doorway. Streng fingered his sword nervously, and then realised that the weapon would be about as much use as a letter opener when the creature emerged fully into the corridor and straightened to its full height. It had been many years, and he'd forgotten the gruesome aspect of the secret dungeon's special gaoler.

The monster was immense, easily twice the height of either of the men and as broad as an ox. Two complete bearskins had been stitched together to form the long fur coat it wore. One foot was shod in a leather boot, the other nothing more than a steel-capped peg fixed to the iron rod that had replaced the creature's right leg from the knee down. Yellowed tusks jutted from its enormous mouth, a deep scar bisected the side of its broad nose and a scabby black burn pitted the left side of its face from cheekbone to scalp. In his years serving with the Count of Ostland's army, Streng had seen many ogres, but none as hideous as Ghunder.

The ogre stared at the men, his nostrils flaring wildly as he snorted down their scent. Streng found himself backing away towards the stairs as the ogre rumbled forwards but Thulmann held his ground, meeting Ghunder's formidable stare. The ogre's peg clapped against the floor as he strode towards the men, the sound stretching away into the unseen limits of the dungeon. Streng could see the powerful muscles rippling beneath the ogre's fur coat and shuddered as he recalled some of the stories that were still told about Ghunder in Reikland taverns when the hour was late. Ghunder had served Judge Vaultberg as his chief executioner, lopping off heads with such violence that they shot away from their bodies like corks from a bottle.

“Key,” Ghunder growled, his deep voice vibrating through the passageway. The ogre extended his enormous hand to Thulmann. The witch hunter nodded, placing the ring of keys in the monster’s palm. Ghunder turned, hobbling across the passage towards one of the cells. Thulmann found his eyes locked on the door, the only thing still remaining between him and the thing that haunted his darkest nightmares.

The door swung open and Ghunder stepped away, exposing the inky darkness of the cell. Thulmann felt his body shudder as he found himself staring into the darkness, visualising what it contained in his mind’s eye. “Come along Streng,” he said, still staring into the darkened cell.

The witch hunter’s words startled his henchman. In their past visits to the Reiksfang, Thulmann had always left his associate in the corridor while he had gone into the cell alone. Streng wondered at how uneasy Thulmann must be to require the mercenary’s company to give him the strength to face whatever was in the cell.

It was a small room, scarcely ten feet square, with a low, dripping ceiling. The walls were bare, fungus-ridden stone. Scraps of straw and muck littered the uneven floor.

An iron cage hung from a chain set into a hook in the ceiling at the centre of the room. Streng wrinkled his nose at the stink emanating from the tattered shape crushed inside the iron box, and even more at the wooden slop bucket resting on the floor beneath the cage, filled to the brim with the inmate’s filth.

The man in the cage turned his head ever so slightly, blinking milk-white eyes as the light from Thulmann’s torch intruded upon his universe of darkness. A raw pink tongue licked at scabby lips as the prisoner’s ragged breath became rapid with excitement. The man’s arms were folded awkwardly against his chest, palms turned outward so that his fingers were able to grip the bars of his cage. In his agitation, the prisoner tried to move them, succeeding only in a sickly, fluttering motion. The mercenary recognised the brutal residue of extreme torture and long years of confinement — the man’s bones had been broken before he had been imprisoned in his cage. The bones had reset, but they had healed in the crooked manner dictated by his contorted position inside the cage.

The prisoner continued to blink at the light, his empty mouth snapping open and closed as slow, dry croaks wheezed their way up his throat. It was with a start that Streng realised the croaks were actually words.

“Nephew,” the inmate wheezed. “Nephew...” There was a hate beyond hate in the croaking voice, a limitless malice. As the word rasped across the cell, Streng took a harder look at the crushed, malformed thing inside the cage. Beneath the dirt, beneath the filth and the scabs, beneath the liver-spotted skin and the wrinkled flesh, there was the faintest suggestion of a resemblance, the echo of a face that had once, perhaps, not been very much unlike that of Mathias Thulmann.

“I see you remember me, Erasmus,” Thulmann said, every word coming as an effort.

The thing in the cage began to cough, choking on his sickly laughter. “See? See? I see nothing, nephew.” Erasmus Kleib twitched one of his broken fingers, trying to point at his milky eyes. “Too many years in this tomb you made for me. Only your light, just a yellow glow, that’s all. That’s all there is, just a yellow glow.”

Thulmann handed the torch to Streng and took a step closer to the cage. “You had sight enough to know it was me when I came here, sorcerer.” Erasmus Kleib’s festering laughter hissed again from his wasted frame.

“In ten years, who else has come here? Only the ogre to feed and water me like some potted plant.” The captive closed his blind eyes, tears crawling down his face. “Doesn’t bring a light with him! No, not that one! Just sniffs his way over here, like a great big cat. No light. No warmth. Never ever, only the dark and the cold. Always the dark and the cold.”

The witch hunter was without pity as his uncle’s mind fell into half-mad babble. Erasmus Kleib could not suffer enough to pay for the crimes he had committed against humanity and the Empire, the crimes he had committed against his own family. Instead, a deep satisfaction throbbed through

Thulmann's chest. Perhaps it was the same sort of sadistic pleasure creatures like the late Captain Meisser or Sforza Zerndorff took when they watched suspects being tortured, the perverse enjoyment they experienced that had nothing to do with justice or retribution. If it was, Thulmann did not care, giving himself over to it completely. He knew the feeling was as fragile as a desert flower. As he watched the monster that had destroyed his life weep, he remembered everything his uncle had done. Other faces filled his mind, faces Kleib had destroyed. The moment was gone, replaced by the deep sorrow of all that he had lost, all that Kleib had taken from him.

Thulmann's hand closed around his sword, pulling it a hand's-breadth from its scabbard. Kleib cocked his head at the sound of steel sliding against leather, an obscene light of hope filling his blind face. Disgust overwhelmed Thulmann's rage and he slammed the blade back down. "I have questions, heretic," he snarled. "Questions you will answer."

"All that I hear, all that fills my endless night is the dripping water," Kleib's voice wheezed from the cage. "Drip, drip, splash. Drip, drip, splash."

"Listen to me sorcerer, I will not be ignored."

Kleib's nearly empty mouth spread into a mocking smile. "Drip, splash, drip. Drip, drip, drip." Thulmann glared into the heretic's sightless eyes.

"Douse the torch, Streng, we are done here," Thulmann growled, turning his back on the cage. Kleib's body shuddered as he wailed in horror.

"No! No! For all pity's sake don't take the light away!"

Thulmann waved his hand stopping Streng as the mercenary moved to extinguish it against the damp stone floor. Slowly the witch hunter turned back towards his uncle. "You are still sane enough to know fear, Erasmus, aren't you? Perhaps coming here wasn't a complete waste of time after all."

The relief in Kleib's face faded, and even in his milk-white eyes a vindictive hate could be seen. The caged sorcerer spat into the shadows, his lips curled in a sneer. "It has been a long time, nephew. Tell me, is your family well?"

An inarticulate growl exploded from Thulmann's chest and the witch hunter lunged forwards, gloved hands closing around the bars of the cage. With savage fury Thulmann shook the hanging prison. Kleib cried out in agony as his crushed body was thrown about within his cramped container.

"I ask the questions, filth!" Thulmann roared. "The only things I want to hear from that crooked tongue of yours are answers!"

"Or what?" Kleib challenged. "What more can you do to me, nephew? Kill me?"

Thulmann leaned forwards, so close that he could smell the sickly breath gasping from the sorcerer's lungs. "Believe me, Erasmus, I have spent many sleepless nights thinking of things that could still be done to you. Every time I hear a child laugh, every time I see a face that reminds me of Anya, every time I feel alone and forgotten, I think of you and I think what more can be done to increase your suffering. Do you really want to discover how inventive my imagination has become?"

As much as he was able within the confines of his cage, Kleib slumped in defeat, all the defiance draining out of him. He shook his head, weakly. "Speak your piece, nephew."

Thulmann stepped back from the cage, wiping his hands on his trouser leg in an effort to remove the filthy grime from his fingers. "I need information about your old friends, the ones who used to help you so very much. The ones you helped so very much."

"The underfolk will gnaw your bones yet, nephew," Kleib swore, "but this time Erasmus Kleib will not be there to stop them. Strange you should be so ungrateful to your uncle for sparing your life."

"I trust in Sigmar's protection, not yours, heretic!" Thulmann spat. "I have returned the 'familial courtesy' you showed me beneath the streets of Marienburg. I did not burn you at the stake, Erasmus. You spared my life, I spared yours."

"You call this life!" Kleib moaned.

“I call it revenge,” Thulmann retorted, his tone more venomous than an Arabyan viper’s kiss, “but you have not answered my question. I am looking for a particular skaven, one of the horned sorcerer-priests who command their verminous breed. The creature stole something, and I will have it back.”

Kleib’s coughing laughter returned, causing the cage to shake once more. “A grey seer? You are hunting a grey seer? Your bones will line the nest of skaven pups and your soul will be a chew toy for the Horned Rat!”

“I will find this creature,” Thulmann said, “and you will help me. Your dealings with the underfolk were extensive, there is no man in all the Empire who knows more about their pestilential kind.”

“There are thousands upon thousands of the rat-kin!” Kleib continued to laugh. “Their tunnels stretch from the Wastes to the jungles beyond Araby, from the hills of Estalia to the mists of Cathay! Better to ask me where to find a particular leaf in the Forest of Loren, the chance of success would be much higher!”

“Then you cannot help me,” Thulmann said. “I am sorry to have wasted your time, Erasmus. Streng, we are done here.”

Kleib could sense the yellow glow of the torch withdrawing as Streng moved to the cell door. The sorcerer cried out in panic, desperate to keep himself from being plunged back into complete oblivion. Thulmann motioned with his hand again and Streng stepped back into the cell.

“Yes, Erasmus? You have perhaps thought of something?”

“Maybe, maybe I can help you.” The sorcerer’s words were rapid, fawning, and eager to please the witch hunter’s demands. “I have had dealings with the grey seers; they are not so numerous as the rest of their kind. Perhaps if you described the creature you are looking for, I might recognise it.”

“The creature I am hunting is an older specimen of its kind, crook-backed by the weight of its years. Its fur is grey speckled with black, the fur of its hands completely dark. Two great ram horns grow from the sides of its head. When I saw it, the creature wore black robes and a curious patchwork fur collar.” Thulmann studied Kleib’s face as he described the monster, watching for any sign that might betray the sorcerer’s thoughts. He saw Kleib’s eyes narrow as the witch hunter described the fur collar. Something about that detail had touched upon Kleib’s memories.

“You know something, Erasmus,” Thulmann stated. “I will hear it.”

Kleib shook his head. “Only if you promise me something. Promise me that you will kill me when you leave here.”

“I will not,” Thulmann replied. “I suffer for your crimes every day I draw breath. So should you. No, Erasmus, I will not kill you. It would sit ill with me to execute the heretic who spared my life.”

“Then promise me you will leave the torch,” Kleib pleaded. “Promise me you will leave me the light.”

Thulmann was silent for a moment, and then slowly nodded his head. “I will leave the torch for you if you can tell me something useful.”

“The rat-kin you hunt is indeed a grey seer,” Kleib said, “one that belongs to a particular sect of their kind called the Skrittar. Their talisman is that unusual collar you described. It is the custom of the Skrittar to rip the fur from the throats of vanquished rivals and stitch their trophies into a garment they wear around their necks. This grey seer you saw was one of the Skrittar.”

“The warren the creature was operating from has been destroyed,” Thulmann told the captive. “We captured the warlord of the nest and before it died it claimed the grey seer had escaped to some other lair. Where would it have escaped to?”

“I have your promise about the torch, nephew? Then I shall speak. My dealings with the Skrittar were extensive; I came to know them quite well. They are more interested in mankind than most of their breed. They think it might be possible to domesticate us one day.” Kleib’s coughing laughter wracked his crumpled body once more. “For centuries they have maintained a stronghold in the



western reaches of the Reikland, a few days' journey from the foot of the Grey Mountains. I visited that lair once, if you were to release me I am certain I could guide you to the place."

"The years have not rendered me an idiot, Erasmus," Thulmann snarled. "It cost many good men to put you into that cage and in that cage you will stay until Sigmar returns and cleanses the land of all its evils. If you can show me how to find this stronghold, you can tell me how to do so."

"You will need to travel into the south-west corner of the Reikland," Kleib said, his voice subdued after his desperate gamble for release had been firmly rejected. "Find the old Silver Road that once ran through the province into the dwarf holds of the Grey Mountains. Follow this into the west until the mountains blot out the twilight and then turn south until you find the township of Wyrmvater. The stronghold is somewhat near Wyrmvater. With diligence and care, you should find it easily enough. If the skaven don't find you first, that is."

The witch hunter was silent again as he considered Kleib's directions. The Order of Sigmar maintained one of the best collections of maps outside the Imperial Cartographer's Guild. It should be easy enough to verify the existence of Wyrmvater and its situation in Reikland. It was not much to go on, but it was a start and somehow, despite the vile nature of its source, Thulmann could not shake the conviction that by following Kleib's directions he would indeed track down both the grey seer and *Das Buch die Unholden*. Perhaps even a despicable wretch like Erasmus Kleib could be made into an instrument of Sigmar's will.

"That will be enough, Erasmus," Thulmann said, turning away from the cage. "You have given me a place to start." The witch hunter walked to Streng, relieving him of the torch and then stepped back to the cage. The warm glow of the torch washed over Kleib's face and it twisted with ecstatic pleasure.

"Farewell then, nephew," Kleib said. "Remember me to your family, won't you?"

Thulmann felt the sorcerer's words plunge through him like a knife through his vitals. Pain flooded his face. The witch hunter's voice was a low hiss as he snarled at the cage. "Here is your torch, Erasmus." The light vanished as Thulmann plunged the brand into the overflowing slop bucket beneath the sorcerer's cage. The witch hunter turned and stalked through the darkness out of the cell. Behind him, Kleib shrieked his despair and outrage.

"Liar! Liar!" Kleib cried. "Kill me, Mathias! Kill me, you spineless cringing cur! Your wife was a harlot and your child was an idiot brat! The best thing for them was to die! Kill me, you bastard! Kill me!"

The cell door swung shut behind Thulmann, drowning out the obscene cries of the sorcerer. Streng stood beside the witch hunter, watching as he tried to force back the pain tearing through his body. At last, Thulmann seemed to regain some of his composure, enough to accept the ring of keys from the hulking Ghunder.

"Come, Streng," Thulmann growled, marching off towards the stairway. "We have work to do."

Streng lingered behind, watching as the witch hunter mounted the stone steps and disappeared beyond the first spiral of the stairwell. The mercenary dug into his pouch belt and removed a few coins he had yet to squander on cheap drink and tavern doxies. He turned towards the ogre, placing the coins in Ghunder's callused grip.

"That thing in there," Streng said, pointing his thumb to Kleib's cell door, "has too many teeth. I'd appreciate if you'd take care of that."

## CHAPTER SIX

Thulmann stood in the centre of the courtyard and watched as the packhorses were loaded with everything from hard tack to casks of fresh water and canvas tents. He turned away, regarding the curious faces watching them from beyond the stone walls of the courtyard. The Nag and Mare was the only inn in the village of Reikwald, and as such was the centre of the community. For all that it was situated only a few hours outside the walls of Altdorf, it was still a sleepy little village where the appearance of a witch hunter and his entourage was certain to be noticed. Every villager who wasn't at work had swarmed around the inn to watch as Thulmann's party sorted out its supplies and prepared to leave.

Thulmann turned his attention away from the villagers as a hulking black-armoured shape appeared in the doorway of the inn. Captain-Justicar Ehrhardt strode across the courtyard, stable boys and mule skinnners hurrying out of his way. The Black Guardsman seemed indifferent to their frightened deference, striding directly to the witch hunter's side.

"We leave soon, Brother Mathias?" Ehrhardt asked. "I confess that I grow impatient to send more of these creatures to stand before Morr's final judgement."

"Very soon now," Thulmann replied. "We wait only for Streng to get back from the city. If Krieger hasn't seen fit to grace us with his presence by then... well, he can just catch up with us later." Without providing Zerndorff with too much detail, Thulmann had reported to his superior that he would be pursuing a new line of enquiry that he hoped would lead him to *Das Buch die Unholden*: The witch hunter general had informed Thulmann that Kristoph Krieger would be accompanying him, in the event that his wild goose chase turned out to be something more. Thulmann told Zerndorff about his intention to set out from Reikwald, and Zerndorff agreed that Krieger would meet him there so as not to draw even more attention to their departure from the city. Zerndorff seemed even more concerned about watchful eyes than Thulmann was, and especially concerned about Sister Karin and some of Lord Bethe's more proactive supporters. He agreed with Thulmann that the hunt for *Das Buch die Unholden* should be conducted with as much secrecy as possible.

The crowd of villagers at the gate of the courtyard slowly began to part. Thulmann turned to see Streng riding up to the inn, another rider following close behind him. The other rider was a plump, pop-eyed little man, his swarthy hands clenched around the reins of the mule he rode, a stream of invective dripping from his tongue as he cursed his mount. Upon laying eyes on Thulmann, however, the target of his wrath shifted. With a muttered curse, the man pulled hard on the reins of his mount, and awkwardly scrambled his way free of its saddle.

"I see you had no trouble finding him," Thulmann congratulated Streng.

"I'll show you trouble!" the little man snarled at Thulmann. He was dressed in a set of thin linen hose and an extravagantly sleeved tunic, its deep blue fabric accented by scrolling vines of gold thread. A frilly hat of identical hue was crushed down around his ears. "You send this... this maniac to drag me out of my own house... in the middle of breakfast... halfway across the province." He stabbed ringed fingers at Thulmann as the words sputtered past his enraged lips.

"Would you have preferred I sent the city watch?" Thulmann asked. "I don't think the years have changed you so very much that you'd care to have them poking through your home."

The little man pulled himself straight, holding his head high. "Let them look all they want. I am a respectable dealer of tinwares."

Thulmann shook his gloved hand at the man. "It isn't nice to lie to servants of Sigmar, Lajos. Some people even call it sacrilegious."

Lajos Dozsa's face became pale as the witch hunter made his thinly veiled threat. "I... I didn't mean it like that. You know that! Just a little joke between two old friends!"

"Since we are such good friends, Lajos, perhaps you can help me out?" The way Thulmann said it Lajos had the feeling it wasn't really a question. He simply sighed and removed his hat, sullenly waiting to hear what Thulmann had to say.

"You used to peddle all across Reikland, especially in the south," Thulmann said. Lajos shrugged his shoulders, acknowledging that he might have done something of the sort. "I imagine you knew the area quite well, given your penchant for hasty departures when people's property started vanishing." Again Lajos shrugged his shoulders, but this time there was an expression of guilty embarrassment on his face. "Excellent! I need the services of a guide familiar with that area for a few weeks."

"A few weeks!" Lajos gasped, twisting his hat in his hands. "I can't go gallivanting all across the province and just abandon my business. Besides, I know you, Mathias. Wherever it is you want a guide to isn't the sort of place I want to be within a hundred leagues of! Where are we going, Castle Drachenfels?"

"Your business will survive without you," Thulmann told the irritated little man. "It might even turn a legitimate coin for a change in your absence. As for where my final destination is, that is something that needn't concern you. All I need you to do is lead us near enough for me to find it on my own, to a town called Wyrmvater, and perhaps smooth things with the locals. Unless of course you robbed them too badly the last time you were there."

"Oh I don't think they'd still remember that," Lajos muttered, his face reddening when he realised he'd made the comment out loud. "No, no, Mathias, I simply can't do it. I'm much too busy."

"Think of this as your chance to perform a noble service to Lord Sigmar," Streng suggested.

"Actually, friend Lajos here is no great patron of our temple," Thulmann explained. "He prefers his heathen strigany godlings to a decent, civilised faith." The witch hunter's eyes narrowed as he stared hard into the merchant's nervous face. "But you will help us all the same."

"My wife will be worrying about me," Lajos whimpered in a final effort to change Thulmann's mind.

"Which one? Last time we met it seemed to me you had one in Nuln, one in Altdorf, two in Marienburg..."

"Three in Marienburg," Lajos piped in before thinking. Thulmann cocked an eyebrow at the strigany's comment. Streng's harsh laughter rolled across the courtyard. "I was married last Mitherbst."

"Congratulations," Thulmann said. "But it doesn't change things. You are coming. The pay is ten silver shillings."

Lajos looked down at his hat, which he had twisted almost into a knot. He made an effort to smooth it out on his leg. "I suppose I have no choice," he grumbled. "Can I at least get a change of clothes?"

Thulmann grinned at the plump thief. "Of course. I am sure there are some children in Reikwald who would be willing to donate some of their cast-offs. Captain Ehrhardt, would you accompany Herr Dozsa and see that he finds something a bit more suitable for travel?" Lajos' eyes threatened to burst from his head as the hulking armoured knight stepped towards him. Ehrhardt closed his gauntlet around the little man's shoulder.

"I'll check with the local shrine of Morr," the Black Guardsman said as he led Lajos away. "I am sure the priest will be able to dig something up for your friend."

Thulmann was still chuckling when the templar and his charge disappeared into the village. Lajos Dozsa was far from the most dependable or trustworthy of men, but he had a yellow streak as

wide as the Sea of Claws. Thulmann could be certain the strigany wouldn't try to run, not with someone like Ehrhardt acting as his chaperone.

The witch hunter's good humour drained away when he saw someone else emerge from the Nag and Mare. He'd tried to delay the moment as long as possible, praying that somehow the right words would come to him, that time might make what he had to do easier. The right moment should have been when they had relocated from the Blacktusk to Reikwald, but he hadn't been able to do it then. It was ridiculous, a man who had stared unflinchingly into the eyes of vampires and daemons was afraid to look into the eyes of a mere woman and speak a few simple words.

It did not help that Silja Markoff looked so damnably appealing in the cool morning light, her blonde hair ablaze with the vibrant rays of the sun. She wore the tight-fitting riding breeches and loose blouse she had worn on their departure from Wurtbad, a slender longsword sheathed at her side. She smiled across the courtyard at him, a smile Thulmann hastily returned even as he tried to find the strength to confront her.

Thulmann felt needles of agony stabbing into his heart. He could see the desperate plea in Silja's eyes; the terror of being left behind lost and alone as she had been when her father had died. But in his mind he saw very different things. He saw the shambles of a nursery, bloody strips of a child's nightshirt strewn about like so much litter. He saw the misshapen thing crouching amid the ruin, jaws worrying a tiny bone. He saw Erasmus Kleib's mocking face, supreme in his hideous triumph.

"I have to ask again, Silja," the witch hunter said, his tone solemn. "Will you stay? It won't be safe where I am going."

"Old ground, Mathias," the woman replied, a warning tone in her voice. "We've discussed this before."

"I still have to try," Thulmann said, but there was defeat in his voice. He knew when a battle was lost before it was begun.

Streng watched the exchange between Thulmann and Silja, trying to decide if there was something he could do to intervene. The wry amusement with which he had regarded Thulmann's tryst was gone, killed in the black pit beneath the Reiksfang. In its place was a deep concern for Thulmann. Streng had briefly glimpsed an ugly memory from the witch hunter's past, something that had made the ex-soldier's own turbulent history seem as idyllic as a summer daydream. It had given him some inkling of just how much Thulmann needed Silja to overcome that past, to finally shake free the spectres of blackened memories.

The crowd at the gates of the courtyard parted and Streng saw several riders approaching the inn, the foremost draped in the black of the Order of Sigmar. It seemed that Thulmann's hope that Krieger would fail to show had been in vain.

The arrival of Krieger and his entourage put an end to the emotional debate between Thulmann and Silja. The witch hunter saluted the new arrivals, forcing a strained smile onto his face. Silja simply glowered at the men, furious that they had interrupted just when she had sensed Thulmann giving ground before her.

"Brother Kristoph," Thulmann greeted the mounted witch hunter. "I was beginning to worry we would be forced to leave without you," he added in a tone clearly devoid of anxiety.

Krieger removed his leather hat, running through his disordered hair. "Have no fear, Brother Mathias," he said, "we would have crossed paths soon enough had I missed you here." The witch hunter turned his attention to Streng and then to Silja Markoff. Krieger nodded his head in deference to the attractive woman. "It seems your retinue has expanded somewhat from what Lord Zerndorff described."

"I might say the same for your entourage," Thulmann retorted. He'd paid scant attention to Krieger, instead fixing his attention on the other riders. Two of them were rough-looking villains that might not have been out of place in one of the seedy dives Streng liked to call home. One of these was a large, bull-necked man with a scarred head who had a large, ripple-bladed sword lashed

against the saddle of his mount. The swordsman's companion was much smaller. A slender-necked firearm rested on the saddle of this man's steed and leather ammunition pouches swung from the belts that criss-crossed the marksman's chest.

It was the third of Krieger's associates that truly drew Thulmann's attention. Like Krieger, this man was dressed in the black of a witch hunter, his tricorne hat sporting a hatband displaying a silver icon of the twin-tailed comet. The cut of the man's clothes was more severe than the more refined style of Krieger's tunic and breeches, almost suggesting the robes of a full priest. His face was withered and drawn, high cheekbones and deep-set eyes conspiring to create a cadaverous air. Peder Haussner, for all the frailty of his frame, was infamous, within the ranks of the witch hunters, having earned a reputation as a religious fanatic in an organisation where such qualities were normally regarded as virtues.

With Haussner's foreboding presence, Thulmann was expecting the mob of tattered, unkempt men who sprinted into the courtyard a few minutes after the riders. "Haussner's Wolf-hounds" as they were often deridingly labelled were half a dozen wild-eyed, ratty-haired zealots, perhaps even madder than the witch hunter they served. The men were dressed in dull robes of coarse cloth, eschewing the comforts of footwear, their feet swollen and bloodied by their hurried sprint from Altdorf. As the men came panting to a halt, they gripped the rope belts that circled their waists, pulling free the long leather lashes tucked there, and began to lash themselves fiercely with their barbed whips. The sight of the flagellants seemed to finally satisfy the curiosity of the Reikwald crowd and the people began to slink back to their homes. Silja regarded the ugly display with obvious shock.

"You know Brother Peder and his assistants?" Krieger asked.

"Only by reputation," Thulmann replied, his tone making it clear that Haussner's reputation was anything but a good one. "The other two are your own, I assume?"

"Anton Driest," Krieger said, indicating the wiry marksman, "one of the best shots in Hochland. The ugly fellow is Udo Gernheim, lately detached from the Carroburg militia. Given the nature of our hunt, and what we are apt to find, I thought it would be prudent to bolster our forces." Thulmann considered that Krieger was less concerned about *their* forces than he was about *his*. Apparently, Krieger was trying to take the upper hand in their alliance.

"This... this female is tagging along?" Haussner interjected, his nose raised in pious disapproval.

"Her name is Lady Silja Markoff," Thulmann informed the zealot, turning towards Silja.

"I had understood this expedition was to be conducted with some discretion," Haussner said.

"Lady Markoff can be trusted to be discreet," Thulmann said. There was a tone in Haussner's voice he didn't like and he was reminded again that the man was a delusional fanatic, fully capable of almost anything.

"The wagging tongue of a woman has ever been the swiftest messenger of corruption and heresy," Haussner stated. Thulmann could hear the twisted gears turning inside the fanatic's withered head. "A woman has no place in temple business," Haussner stated. "I must protest this decision, Brother Mathias."

Krieger smiled snidely at Thulmann and then shifted his attention to Haussner. "I think that Brother Mathias is quite right. Lady Markoff may be of some help to us."

"The female mind is too feeble to withstand the temptations of the ruinous powers," Haussner persisted. "Its innate iniquity is the breeding ground for doubt and confusion. Allowing this woman to accompany us is like inviting a viper into the fold." Haussner snapped his fingers and the mob of flagellants took a step forward. Thulmann found his hand closing around the hilt of his sword in response.

"I have made my decision, Brother Peder," Krieger's voice, loud and imperious boomed. The smouldering light behind Haussner's eyes dimmed, something approaching reason struggled to the fore. He snapped his fingers again and the flagellants came to a halt. "Come along, Brother Peder,

let us leave Brother Mathias to attend to the baggage train. We will ride ahead and discuss... matters." As the mixed entourage of Krieger and Haussner began to file back out of the courtyard, Krieger glanced back at Thulmann. There was no mistaking the meaning behind that look. *Now you owe me*, it said.

Thulmann let out a breath he hadn't realised he had been holding when he saw the last of Haussner's lunatics disappear around the wall of the courtyard. He wrapped a hand around Silja's waist, crushing her against his side. He could feel her pulse hammering through her body. He could sympathise with her, a witch hunter was a menacing figure in his own right, but someone like Haussner was a different story entirely.

"So that's the infamous Peder Haussner," Streng commented, joining them beside the gate. The mercenary's crossbow had somehow found its way into his hands during the tense exchange. "Rather pleasant chap. Would have been a shame to stick a bolt between his eyes."

Eerie green light flickered from the iron lamps fastened to the rough rock walls, casting a ghostly illumination around the room. It was little more than a cave, a cavity chiselled out of the bedrock by arcane technology and inhuman diggers. A few ramshackle tables were scattered around the place, their surfaces littered with such apparatus as Weichs had been able to salvage from his laboratory in Wurtbad. Iron baskets were heaped against one wall of the dingy cavern, each holding a snarling rat the size of a lamb, the only subjects Grey Seer Skilk had seen fit to provide the scientist with for his experiments. The skaven sorcerer-priest had lost much of his interest in Weichs' work, concerned now only with the man's translation of the unholy grimoire.

The scientist rubbed at his eyes, trying to force the weariness from them. He'd been scouring the pages of *Das Buch die Unholden* for weeks, resting only when he was too fatigued to continue. The devilish tome was taxing his scholarship to its limits, the antiquated language and curious jargon of many sections making them as impenetrable as the scratch-slash script of the skaven. Then there were the assorted ciphers and enigmatic codes the original authors had employed to further obscure their words. Under the best of conditions, with an entire library to consult and a dozen or so capable assistants, it might have taken years just to translate a small portion of the volume. But Weichs had no library to consult, his only assistant was the twisted mutant halfling Lobo, and his aid was limited to ensuring that his master did not forget to eat from time to time. As for the conditions...

For the first time, Weichs fully understood the grave mistake he had made. His alliance with Skilk and the skaven had been one born of necessity, the lure of a limitless source of wyrdstone too great to resist. But he had entered into the agreement thinking he would be an ally, a partner. He had believed Skilk's claims that the skaven were truly interested in his experiments, that they were eager to share in the fruits of his research. Now Weichs understood his inhuman patrons better. They did not make allies, they did not share accomplishments. He was not their partner, he was their vassal, their serf, their slave. Skilk's insane obsession with unlocking the secrets of the book had stripped away the thin veil of deception, exposing the naked truth of their relationship. Weichs lived in constant terror of the grey seer's visits, grovelling before the impatient Skilk, begging for more time. He was under no illusion that each time he was begging for his own life.

The damnable book! It seemed to mock him, revealing no more than tantalising hints and clues that he might be close to unlocking its secrets. Pages would appear to move within the tome, scuttling between its skin-bound covers like crawling lice, resisting his efforts to catalogue them, to pin them down. Bookmarks would change position, dancing about like carnival acrobats. Sometimes the words themselves would change before his very eyes. But always, just when he was on the verge of giving up, some new hint would catch his gaze and he would be drawn back to his quest to unravel the tome's dark secrets.

Finally, after many long weeks, the book gave up the black secret that Weichs had been trying so desperately to find. It had happened just after one of Skilk's visits, when the grey seer had seemed at his most impatient, when a gruesome death seemed only hours away. Weichs tried to

resist the mad idea that somehow the book had been toying with him, that it had somehow known Skilk's patience was at an end and that it could no longer torment the scientist by keeping from him what he needed to find.

Weichs stared in a mix of horror and relief at the translation he had composed for Skilk. The original had been transposed on two pages, in such an old dialect of Estalian that it was a miracle he'd been able to make sense of it at all. Yet he was uncannily certain of the translation's accuracy.

What he had written nauseated him. It smacked of necromancy, the most loathsome of all the black arts. Yet the spell promised what Skilk wanted most — to call up the spirit of one who had crossed the threshold to Morr's realm, thus enabling the caster to summon the shades of the dead.

How strange, Weichs thought, that a man who had devoted himself to science, who had given his life to unlocking the secret contagion of mutation, should find his life dependent upon a scrap of centuries-old magic. The irony might have made him laugh, had not the sour scent of the guards outside his subterranean grotto suddenly impacted against his senses. He knew only too well what the fear musk of the skaven sentinels portended.

"Doktor-man find spell, yes?" Grey Seer Skilk stalked into the chamber, his staff clicking against the uneven rock floor with its every step. There was a hungry, feral light in the sorcerer's beady eyes, the sort of gleam Weichs had grown accustomed to seeing when the grey seer had overindulged in its consumption of warp-stone. Lobo crawled under one of the tables and hid his misshapen head beneath his arms.

"Yes, grey seer, I have made significant progress!" Weichs said, his words hurried and frantic.

"Doktor-man speak truth?" Skilk threatened, black paws snatching the translation from Weichs' hands. The skaven's hungry eyes scoured the pages of Reikspiel, his twitching nose hovering above the paper as if trying to sniff the ink. "Nice," Skilk squeaked. "Doktor-man learn words nice."

"I live to serve," Weichs said, bowing his head to the exultant grey seer. Skilk seemed to like the sound of that sentiment, and Weichs knew his life depended on remaining in his good graces. The skaven priest continued to read the translation eagerly and Weichs decided there would be no better time to try and exploit the ratman's goodwill. "Now that I have translated the spell for you, perhaps you will allow me to resume my experiments. I am very eager to return to my studies and I must confess that I've learned more about the dark arts than I ever wanted combing through that insufferable tome."

The scientist's words caused Skilk's eyes to narrow and the grey seer looked away from the papers in its hands. The ratman's eyes first focused on Weichs and then shifted to *Das Buch die Unholden*. The ratman scurried towards the grimoire and lifted it from the table, setting it in the crook of its arm. Weichs felt a thrill of horror as he read the thoughts squirming through Skilk's mind — the skaven was worried about what else Weichs had translated from the book, what spells the man might have kept to himself.

"Maybe doktor-man catch much," Skilk hissed. Weichs felt the colour drain from his features. He decided to misinterpret the grey seer's meaning.

"No, there is still much my experiments can tell us," he insisted. "There is still a great deal to learn. Before we left Wurtbad I was certain I was on the verge of a great discovery, one that would hold enormous benefit for both our peoples." Weichs held his breath as Skilk digested his words, as the grey seer considered his next decision. At length the grey seer uttered a chattering laugh, turning and stalking out of the cave.

"Doktor-man make experiment. Learn to make sick," Skilk told him as he left the makeshift laboratory. At the entrance, Skilk turned, patting the book. "Maybe let doktor-man find words again." The grey seer laughed and vanished into the blackness of the tunnel.

Weichs breathed a deep sigh of relief. Let Skilk think he was an idiot. It would make the skaven underestimate him, hopefully relax his guard. Somehow Weichs knew he would have to escape the ratman, preferably before Skilk decided to enact the obscene ritual he had translated for him.

Disgusted, despising himself, the vampire crept back through the shadows, back to the small woodsman's shack that had become his refuge. The blood of the deer he had killed had done little to satisfy the hunger pounding inside him, but it was all the sustenance he would allow himself. Gregor had grudgingly allowed himself to claim birds, rats and squirrels when the unholy lust became too hideous to endure. Carandini took a sardonic amusement from Gregor's desperate determination to resist the urge to graduate to higher forms of life.

Gregor was coming to despise the necromancer as much as Sibbechai. The attack on Thulmann's ship would have succeeded had it not been for the Tilean's cowardice, his panic when his own ship began to take on water. Gregor should have left Carandini to drown like the rat he was, but the vampire knew he could not allow the necromancer to die. Carandini was the only man who promised him any measure of hope, who claimed there was a way to purge the evil from Gregor's soul.

After dragging themselves from the river, any chance of picking up Thulmann's trail was quickly lost, but Carandini had said that there were other ways to find someone. All they needed to do was be patient and wait for the moons to become amenable. So they moved from the river to the woods, keeping to the shadows like a pair of wraiths, waiting for Carandini's moons to align.

As Gregor drew near the shack, he could feel the fell energies gathered around it. His undead eyes could see wisps of black mist swirling around the structure, slithering between the logs that formed its walls and seeping down through the thatch roof. The necromancer's voice echoed on the night wind, raised in some profane invocation to the unholy forces of the night. Gregor felt his flesh crawl as he heard the ancient names Carandini cried out. Strangely the vampire found the sensation reassuring — it meant he hadn't completely forsaken his humanity yet.

Suddenly the invocation was cut short, silenced by a loud gasp and then a low, hideous gargle. Gregor rushed through the trees with all the supernatural speed his altered body could command. In an instant he was at the door, tearing the heavy oak portal from its hinges and tossing it aside as if it was nothing. Inside the tiny confines of the shack he could see the sheets of flayed skin the necromancer used in his rituals scattered on the floor, black candles shining in the darkness. Carandini himself was writhing on the floor, hands clasped around his throat.

There was a third hand at Carandini's throat, closed around it like a python. It was the tattered, withered mummy claw he used in his rituals, the dismembered hand of Nehb-ka-Menthu. Some dreadful power beyond the necromancer's control animated it, giving it a terrible and malevolent life of its own. Carandini's face purpled as he fought to suck breath down into his collapsing throat.

Gregor lunged at the necromancer, seizing the mummy claw. Even with his unnatural strength, Gregor found it hard to pry the claw from Carandini's throat. At last the foul thing came free. The claw twisted in his grip, its talons ripping into his flesh. Disgusted, Gregor dropped the vile thing to the floor. The hand landed on its back, fingers flailing at the empty air. Then, with a powerful twist of its small finger, the claw flipped onto its palm. Like some mammoth spider, it scurried across the floor.

Something sharp and silver flashed in the dim light within the shack, stabbing down into the animated claw and pinning it to the floor.

"The... the winds... blow strongly" Carandini rasped, releasing his grip on the dagger he'd used to impale the mummy's hand. He began to massage his torn and bloody neck. "Too... much. It slipped from my control."

Gregor looked at the necromancer, and then back to the still struggling claw. Some sign of his horror must have shown on his face, because Carandini laughed.

"Don't worry, my friend," he said. "I am quite all right."

Gregor chafed under the necromancer's grim amusement. "You should be more careful, sorcerer. I can't have you dying on me. I am lost without you."



Carandini's face spilt into a weasel's smile. "Yes, I am quite aware of that fact," the necromancer said, "but this evening's experiment proved most useful, for all of its hazards." He turned his eyes again to the squirming mummy claw and some of the bravado slipped from his demeanour.

"I was granted a vision before Nehb-ka-Menthu's spirit became strong enough to prove uncooperative," Carandini stated. "I saw a clearing with three huge grey stones, perhaps the ruin of one of the standing circles your barbarian ancestors used to build."

"The book you need is there?" Gregor asked. Carandini shook his head.

"No," he said. "Wherever the book is being kept, it is in a place where the spirits will not go. Instead, I asked how we might find the witch hunter again. In answer I was shown the clearing and the stones."

"Where is this place?" Gregor demanded after considering the necromancer's words.

"I will be able to find it, do not trouble yourself on that account," Carandini replied. "The vision would have been of little merit otherwise. Perhaps it is a force kindred to what drew you after Sibbechai, or perhaps something as simple as what moves the birds south when Ulric's bite is in the air, but I will be able to lead us to the place. The only thing I do not know is how long we might need to wait there for our quarry to show himself."

"Whatever it takes," Gregor said.

Carandini stepped towards the struggling claw, pulling it from the floor and dropping both claw and dagger into a large leather satchel. There was an evil glint in his eyes when he turned back to Gregor. "You know we'll have to kill the witch hunter when we catch up with him again."

Gregor stared hard at the grey shadow world around him, at the beckoning glow of Carandini's blood shining within his veins. He thought of the unliving claw of Nehb-ka-Menthu, still bound to the earth aeons after its death. He wouldn't allow himself to exist like this, in the obscene world of the undead.

"Whatever it takes," Gregor repeated.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

The journey south through the Reikland was a forlorn, forbidding one. With winter's chill in the air, there was far less traffic on the roads, and the landscape was a desolate shadow of its green exuberance and golden abundance. Brown fields stood barren after the harvest. The lush greenery of the woods was gone, smothered by the clinging frost that lingered long into the afternoon. The few travellers they encountered had their forms and voices muffled beneath heavy layers of fur and wool. At night, the haunting howls of wolves pierced the darkness, the savage cries replacing the whistle of night birds and the clatter of crickets as less hardy creatures abandoned the land to the coming cold.

It was not only the surroundings that made the travel tense and uneasy. The expedition was anything but a homogenous enterprise, but rather a group cast together by the politicking of Sforza Zerndorff and his lofty ambitions. There was little enough love lost between Thulmann and Krieger, he and his henchmen keeping themselves to themselves both on the road and in camp. Haussner's flagellants followed a similar example, sprinting behind the riders during the day, and then lashing their exhausted bodies with their whips until they collapsed from fatigue every night when the witch hunters made camp. Thulmann marvelled that the fanatics could maintain such a gruelling, brutal regime day after day, but as his respect for their devotion to Sigmar grew, his apprehension about their twisted vision of reality grew as well.

Silja remarked that it was as well that Krieger could maintain control of Haussner and his men. Thulmann found the observation of little comfort. He was far too familiar with Krieger's methods. Krieger might control Haussner, but who would control Krieger?

Nestled along the slopes of several rolling hills, flanked on two sides by the lush growth of the Thrungrwald forest, the town of Wyrnvater basked in the late afternoon sun. It was a small clutch of half-timbered structures, surrounded by fields of grain and bisected at its centre by a swift-moving stream. Even from a distance, Thulmann could see that the buildings in the town were very old, displaying a style of architecture that had fallen out of fashion centuries before. Thulmann could feel the weight of the town's antiquity pressing upon him the nearer they drew to it. He could see squat little grubenhausen scattered between the fields of crops beyond the town, simple structures of thatch and clay no different in any respect from those that men had dwelt in before even Sigmar had walked the land.

"Doesn't look like they're too happy to see us." Streng gestured with his crossbow towards the town beyond. Thulmann could see people rushing from the fields, abandoning their labours and racing back to the safety of the town's timber walls. Some manner of bell or gong could be heard ringing and at the town gates a small group of armed figures was assembling.

"I rather see your point, friend Streng," Thulmann said.

"Perhaps they think we're bandits," Silja suggested.

The remark brought a withering sneer to Haussner's lips. "We are holy servants of Sigmar, as any fool can see!" Haussner glared at Silja, his anger only swelling when she did not back down from his gaze. "Bandits indeed!" he finally snarled.

"However preposterous it might seem," Krieger said, "we had better make allowances if we can't convince these people who we are." He snapped his fingers and both Driest and Gernheim dismounted. The sharpshooter Driest pulled the elegant Hochlander rifle from its saddle holster and

settled into position behind a small rock pile beside the road. Gernheim, the scarred swordsman, removed his own weapon from his saddle. Nearly the height of a man, the lightning-shaped zweihander was hardly the weapon of a mounted fighter. Gernheim stalked ahead of the witch hunters several yards down the road and took up position. Captain-Justicar Ehrhardt dropped down from his own horse and joined Krieger's man on the road. Looking on the two massive warriors and their deadly weapons, Thulmann hoped the people of Wyrmvater would see reason.

It would cost them much blood to wrest their road back from two such fighters.

"Silja, stay close to Streng and keep an eye on our flank," Thulmann said. "I don't want any surprises popping up from those fields." He really didn't think they were in any danger of a flanking action, but Thulmann knew giving Silja a task would be more effective than another concerned injunction for her to keep back and keep safe. "Lajos, I want you up here with me."

The little strigany stopped scratching at his uncomfortable garments. "Couldn't... wouldn't it be better if I..."

"With me, Lajos," Thulmann said. "You've dealt with these people before. You can talk to them."

Lajos began to wring his much abused hat through his hands again. "That... it might be better... I should stay here and make sure our line of retreat is open."

"Lajos, up here," Thulmann repeated. "These people know you. They see you and they will know we aren't bandits."

Lajos rolled his eyes and slowly walked his mule forwards. They spot me and they'll *know* we're bandits," he muttered under his breath.

The armed group at the gates of the city had grown to nearly two score men. Thulmann saw the afternoon sun gleaming off a surprising number of weapons. He'd expected whatever force the town could muster to be armed mostly with farming implements and hunting spears. More men were standing behind the timber walls on a palisade, an assortment of bows and crossbows clutched in their hands. Perhaps his disdain for the warcraft of Wyrmvater's leadership had been erroneous. He only hoped it was not fatally so.

Wyrmvater's militia parted as a mounted figure emerged from the gate and then the iron-banded timber doors swung shut, sealing off the town. The group advanced slowly, warily, down the road towards them.

"Hold your ground," Krieger ordered, his words directed mainly at Haussner and his mendicant fanatics. "We're past the range of their archers here. Whatever happens, don't let them draw you closer." The witch hunter turned his head and called over to the rock pile. "Driest, can you hit the walls from here?"

"Just say the word and I'll start carving notches," the sharpshooter responded, his head cocked above the length of his rifle, his eye almost resting against the smooth metal as he sighted his weapon.

"Let us pray it does not come to that," Thulmann said.

"Keep faith in Sigmar, but hobble your horse," Krieger replied, repeating an old adage that warned against bothering the gods with the petty concerns that a man should see to himself. The almost flippant tone in Krieger's voice sickened Thulmann. The lives of the innocent, frightened townfolk didn't matter to Krieger, to him they were simply an obstacle to be overcome. If they had to butcher half the town, it would be of little consequence to the man.

Thulmann turned from Krieger in disgust, watching instead the slow advance of the militia. The distance between them and the witch hunters diminished steadily. Thulmann could make out greater details now. While they wore no armour, the men bore weapons that might have been the envy of most state regiments: sharp-bladed halberds and poleaxes, leaf-headed spears and steel-tipped bills. However, for all the sophistication of their weapons, the militia approached in a disordered fashion, lacking in precision and drill. Still, they were disciplined enough to stop well before reaching Ehrhardt and Gernheim, and well before leaving the range of their own archers on the town walls.

“Skaranorak’s black bones!” Krieger swore. “Now we’ll have to do it the hard way. Driest.”

Thulmann grabbed Krieger’s arm before the other witch hunter could give the order to his man. “They are just being cautious, trying to protect their lands and their families,” he said. “Let me go forward and speak with them.”

“You’ll be within range of their bowfire,” Krieger stated, shaking his head. “If they don’t listen to you, you’ll never make it back before they are all over you. And don’t think I’d risk any of my people becoming pincushions trying to get to you. Better to sit tight and get them to make the first move. If they know we can hit them even from here, they may prove more cooperative.”

“At least let me try and reason with them,” Thulmann persisted. “Besides, I’d think you’d be rather eager to get rid of me; no one to share Zerndorff’s appreciation.” Krieger smiled as Thulmann made the remark and then extended his hand towards the roadway in a gesture that seemed to say “be my guest”.

Thulmann walked his horse slowly forwards. “Come along, Lajos,” he called back when he noticed the merchant’s mule was not beside him.

“I can see things perfectly well from here,” Lajos said. “Good luck, Herr Thulmann. My best wishes go with you!”

Thulmann brought his horse to a halt, turning in his saddle to look back at Lajos. The fat little man withered under his stern gaze, trying to muster a friendly wave of his fingers to appease the angry witch hunter. “Brother Peder, if that fat strigany trash isn’t at my side in the next few seconds, you have my leave to execute him.”

“You’re certain we’re in no danger?” Lajos asked for what seemed the fiftieth time since they had ridden past Gernheim and Ehrhardt. Thick streams of nervous sweat plastered the merchant’s hair to his forehead, while the hat in his hands was contorted into a rumpled coil of fabric.

“No,” Thulmann said, deigning at last to answer his companion. “If they are certain we’re bandits, they’ll attack us before we can even say ‘Good morning’. But that’s a risk I’m willing to take.”

“Well I’m not,” Lajos hissed, turning his mule’s head.

“I wouldn’t do that,” Thulmann said. “We’re within bow range now. Turn tail and run back and your back will sprout more feathers than a goblin headdress.” The words had their desired effect. Lajos fell into a terrified silence and followed meekly beside the witch hunter. The armed militia were only a dozen yards from them now. They were grim-faced, weather-beaten men, farmers and woodsmen, their hard, lean bodies wrapped in wool breeches, fur tunics and leather boots. The weapons they bore shone murderously beneath the sun.

The mounted figure in the midst of the militia was dressed in a fur cloak and a massive silver pectoral rested against his chest, fastened around his neck by a thick silver chain. The rider was different from his fellow townsfolk, his skin paler, his features a bit fuller and less hungry. The clothes beneath his cloak did not have the stamp of crude utilitarianism of his fellows and the rings on his fingers gleamed with gold. The rider watched Thulmann approach and when he judged the strangers had come close enough he raised his hand. At once the witch hunter and his reluctant companion brought their steeds to a halt.

“Who are you and what is your purpose in Wyrmvater?” the mounted leader called out, his voice heavy with authority. “If you think to do mischief here, it will not go unopposed.”

Thulmann lifted his own hand in greeting. “I am Mathias Thulmann, templar knight of the most holy Order of Sigmar,” he said. He noticed that the pronouncement did not seem to diminish the wary hostility that exuded from the militiamen. “Who do I address?”

“I am Bruno Reinheckel,” the leader said, “duly appointed burgomeister of Wyrmvater township these past twelve winters,” he added, patting the silver pectoral. “But you have answered only one of my questions, sir. What business do you have here in Wyrmvater? We are a decent, Sigmar-fearing community, why should we interest a witch hunter?”

Thulmann could hear the anxiety in the burgomeister's voice. Far from relieving the man's unease, Thulmann had the impression Reinheckel would almost have preferred a gang of brigands than a visit from witch hunters. The grim servants of the Order of Sigmar were hardly popular beyond the confines of their own temple, their fearsome reputations well known in even the most remote corners of the Empire. No man's conscience was so clean that he felt entirely at ease in the presence of a witch hunter, be he burgomeister or baron. The question was: how far would Reinheckel allow his reservations to take him? There were a good many witch hunters who vanished without trace in remote towns and backwoods villages, and only a naive fool would believe all had been the victims of the ruinous powers.

"He's not interested in your town," Lajos offered. Thulmann wasn't the only one who had appreciated the lingering suspicion in Reinheckel's expression. "The templars are on the trail of some heretics who are supposed to have taken refuge in the forest near here." The merchant looked towards Thulmann as he spoke, repeating the story they had decided to tell were they challenged about their mission. It would hardly have helped matters telling Reinheckel they were hunting for a nest of the mythical under-folk. The burgomeister was uneasy enough entertaining a witch hunter; he would be even more so if he thought Thulmann was mad.

Lajos was largely unconvinced by Thulmann's tales of scheming ratmen, although he was certain the story was meant to conceal an even more horrible truth he was better off not knowing.

"Yes, the men we are looking for are hiding in the woods around your town," Thulmann said. "They could cause you any measure of hurt if allowed to linger here."

The burgomeister listened to Thulmann's words, but kept looking at Lajos, eyes narrowed as he scrutinised the little man. "No, brother templar, things have been very quiet in Wyrmvater. We've seen no strangers since Mitherbst, either in the woods or in the streets. You are the first guests our town has seen in some time."

"Perhaps my information was erroneous," Thulmann said, adding a ring of disappointment to his voice. It was much too early to tell if what Kleib had told him was actually false. "Just the same, I would be remiss in my duty if we did not make a search of the woods." Thulmann noted that he still enjoyed only a part of Reinheckel's attention. The burgomeister continued to stare at Lajos. The merchant squirmed nervously in his saddle. It was just possible somebody did remember him.

"It is my intention to use your town as a base of operations while we search the woods," Thulmann continued, hoping at least some of what he said was being heard by the burgomeister. "Perhaps you have a building we could employ as a headquarters?"

Reinheckel nodded. "The Splintered Shield, Wyrmvater's only inn. It's empty just now, only Schieller and his family in residence there. I'm certain he would give you the run of the place if I ask him."

"I'm certain he would," Thulmann agreed. "I should also like to consult your town records. If there are any ruins or old mine works in the area they might prove a good place to start looking for my fugitives."

"I'll have them ready for you by the time you are settled at the inn," Reinheckel said. He turned in his saddle, waving to the town behind him. Slowly the archers began to withdraw and the gates swung open. The militiamen began to disperse, filing off towards a squat stone building that Thulmann assumed must be the town armoury.

The witch hunter followed the burgomeister's example, waving his hat over his head, giving the sign to the watching Krieger that all was well.

When Thulmann turned back around he could see peasants already heading back into the fields. The last of the militia had vanished into the town, but Reinheckel remained on the road, still staring at Lajos.

"I shall leave you then to gather the town records," Reinheckel said, turning his horse back towards the gates of Wyrmvater. "Believe me when I say I will do everything I can to ensure a quick hunt, brother templar."

Lajos crumpled into his saddle as the burgomeister rode off, muttering to himself in his singsong strigany dialect. Thulmann had heard enough prayers of thanksgiving over the years to recognise the gist of Lajos' whispers.

The witch hunters rode through the narrow streets of Wyrmvater, their arrival watched with keen interest from behind shuttered windows and cracked doors. Frightening and forbidding even in the cosmopolitan environs of Altdorf or Nuln, in a backwater village the arrival of such men was viewed in equal parts fascination and dread. Hushed voices whispered half remembered travellers' tales of witch hunters and their doings. Not in living memory had men such as these descended upon Wyrmvater and its people could only wonder at what their arrival might mean. The burgomeister would be busy the rest of the day, not in securing the records Thulmann wished to consult, but in addressing and alleviating the fears of his citizens.

Thulmann's expedition marched through the cramped streets until at last the timber and plaster walls of the Splintered Shield rose before them. Testament to the prosperity Wyrmvater had once enjoyed, the inn was a large, three storeyed structure with glass windows and a cluster of brick chimneys.

The witch hunters unloaded their gear from their horses, leaving Streng and Gernheim to settle the animals in the stables.

When the last of Thulmann's group had entered the inn, a lurking figure rose to his feet in the alleyway from which he had observed their arrival. The tall, gaunt man dusted the grime from his long brown coat, and scowled at the building. With a stifled oath, the old man slipped deeper into the back alleys of the town, putting distance between himself and the witch hunters. Freiherr Weichs had enough to trouble his mind without the accursed witch hunter intruding upon his affairs.

Thulmann, always Thulmann. The man's tenacity was matched only by his lack of vision. Superstitious prayer-mongers like him would never be able to grasp the noble work, the great experiment upon which Weichs was engaged. Through his studies, mankind might one day be free from the taint of mutation, immune to the baleful energies the theologians dismissed with the word "Chaos". What did it matter if a few hundred, or even a few thousand, had to be sacrificed to bring about such a noble end? But no, instead of acclaim and recognition, Weichs had been pursued and hunted across the Empire by zealot lunatics like Thulmann, forced to hide like a hunted animal and seek refuge with creatures straight from a nightmare.

Weichs was not sure how Thulmann had tracked him from Wurtbad. Nor did he care. That the witch hunter had chosen to turn up just as Skilk had finally allowed him to resume his experiments, to venture beyond the caverns of the skaven to collect test subjects, this was more than Weichs could endure. It was unjust for the witch hunter to interrupt his great experiment again.

The scientist hesitated, allowing his thoughts to turn down roads they had not travelled before. Always he had run before the witch hunter, always he had allowed Thulmann to set the pace. He had accepted the role of prey and allowed Thulmann the guise of predator. No more: now it would be the witch hunter who would be the victim, the witch hunter who would be the hunted. Weichs thought of the Splintered Shield, of the room Thulmann had no doubt secured there. The templar might still be looking for his quarry, but Weichs had already found his.

For all that it was virtually unused, Schieller and his family maintained the sprawling inn in admirable condition. The rooms were somewhat musty, thick layers of dust on the windowsills, but otherwise were exceedingly spacious and comfortable. In Thulmann's opinion, the Splintered Shield's rooms put a number of better-known establishments to shame. The vacancy of the building allowed nearly all in his group to secure separate rooms, only Haussner's fanatics eschewing the comfort of the establishment, opting to sleep in the loft above the stables instead to avoid "the pitfalls of hedonistic indulgence".

After dinner, the witch hunters discussed their plans, Thulmann illuminating once again where they should be concentrating their search. They would scour the town records for any mention of old ruins, abandoned mines, troll caves, fissures in the earth, or any other place that might easily conceal a tunnel. They would keep a keen watch for any mention of beastmen, mutants, goblins or fey folk — anything that might be a disguised reference to the skaven or their activities.

It was long into the night by the time they broke away from their consultation. Thulmann mounted the stairs leading to his room with a leaden step, fully appreciating the ungodliness of such a late hour.

As he climbed the stairs, his soul felt again the echoes of that long ago dread, of the terror that had so filled him. He'd raced home from the temple, from his betrayal of Erasmus Kleib's vile scheme. As soon as he'd thrown open the door of his home, he'd known he was too late. Some instinct, some sense of wrongness told him Kleib was gone. The witch hunters had searched the lower floor anyway, leaving Thulmann to make that long, terrible climb upwards. His steps were no longer hurried. He knew that he was too late, knew that he didn't want to see whatever had been done, what terrible revenge Kleib had visited upon him. He wanted to delay the moment for as long as he could, the moment when he would see his fears realised, when he would know his wife and child were no more.

Thulmann paused at the door of his room, his mind still fixated upon the past. He'd paused then too, forcing his arm to rise with an effort that dredged every speck of courage from his pounding breast. The bedroom door swung inward beneath his hand. It took long, tortuous moments for his eyes to adjust, for him to see that the room was empty. Strangely, Thulmann felt an intense wave of relief rush through him — his illusion of hope had been preserved for another fleeting moment. Then he discerned the sounds coming from further down the hall. Grotesque, hideous gnawing, slobbering sounds that sickened his sensibilities and ignited his terror to still greater depths of misery. He trembled with fright, his body shaking as with an ague, yet somehow he forced himself to follow those sounds, to find his way to the closed door of the nursery.

Thulmann shuddered again, forcing his mind away from its morbid reverie. The past was the past, and there was nothing even the gods could do to change it. It was the present that he needed to focus on, the real horrors that plagued the land and would work their evil upon it. He needed to let the dead rest.

He pushed open the door to his room. His eyes had grown sharper since he'd left Bechafen all those years ago. Thulmann saw at once the slender figure waiting for him in the darkness. His eyes told him he looked into the pretty face and shining eyes of Silja, but the waking nightmare still lingered at the edges of his consciousness. In his mind he saw not Silja but a thing of dripping hideousness, its gaping mouth ghastly with blood, its cyclopean eye glowing like a pool of rancid pus. He thought he could smell its pestilent stench, the reek of excrement, thought he could hear it gnawing, gnawing on the tiny bones clasped in its wizened claws. Thulmann cried out in horror, recoiling against the door.

Silja rushed forward, her stern expression draining away into a look of concern. The nightmare's grip lessened as she reached out to him, the evidence of his eyes and not his fears finally prevailing within Thulmann's mind. The witch hunter sank to the floor as he tried to collect himself and recover from the ghastly phantasm he had imagined.

"Mathias! Mathias, it's me, Silja," her soft voice told him over and over again. Slowly, gradually, the hammering in his chest lessened and his breathing resumed its normal steadiness.

"I am... I apologise, Lady Markoff," Thulmann said. "I was... my mind was...elsewhere. I'm afraid you gave me a fright" He smiled weakly at her. "I wasn't expecting to see you."

Silja helped him to his feet. A trace of the old severity worked its way back onto her face. "I wanted to talk to you."

"Please, Silja, not now," Thulmann said. "Tomorrow will be a very busy day." He laid his hand on the woman's shoulder, moving her towards the door.

“Who is Anya?” Silja asked. The question caused Thulmann to freeze. He looked at her in disbelief. “When you came in just now you cried out ‘No, Anya! No!’ Who is she, Mathias?”

The witch hunter let his hand fall to his side. He paced deeper into his room, sitting down at the side of his bed. His words were hollow, rasping echoes devoid of their usual strength and command. “Anya was my wife,” he said, almost in a whisper. “She... she died, our daughter with her. It was a long time ago, but sometimes it seems like only yesterday.”

Silja closed the door and walked across the room, sitting down beside Thulmann, taking his hand in hers.

“I’m sorry, Mathias,” she said. “I really do know how you feel. Sometimes I imagine I can still hear my father’s voice calling to me. Someone once told me that the pain never goes away, but it does get better.” Thulmann nodded as she spoke to him. Those had been his exact words when he had broken the news of her father’s execution to her in Wurtbad.

“For me, it doesn’t,” Thulmann said. “There are some wounds that never heal.”

“Maybe you haven’t let them,” Silja replied. Thulmann shook his head.

“I failed her. I should be the one who is dead, not Anya,” he said. “It was because of me that she was... destroyed. I was forced to make a choice. I knew what I was doing when I made it, knew that she would pay for my ‘duty’, but I did it anyway I thought I could have things both ways, but the world is never so kind.”

Silja was silent, uncertain what she could say, what she should say. Thulmann stared at the darkened walls of the room, his eyes lost in some horrible past. Silja held him, trying to soothe the turmoil in his mind. At length, the witch hunter turned his face towards her.

“That is why we can never be,” he said. “I failed her. I would fail you. I cannot let that happen.”

“You wouldn’t,” Silja insisted, rubbing his hand. It was so cold, as if all the life inside Thulmann was retreating from her touch.

“Silja, I can’t let anything happen to you because of me,” Thulmann said, rising to his feet. “You should ride back to Altdorf. I’ll see to Haussner and Krieger.”

“If that’s what you really want, Mathias,” Silja replied, “but I want to hear you say it. I want you to say you don’t want me. Tell me you don’t love me.”

Silence filled the room as Thulmann stared down into Silja’s face. He knew what he needed to say, but he could not force the words to his lips. Silja waited for him to speak and then rose, embracing him, crushing her lips to his.

A tremor of fear crawled its way along the templar’s spine. After so many years, after all he had suffered and lost, he hadn’t learned anything.

He still thought he could have things both ways.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

The town hall of Wyrmvater was a large, timbered structure that dominated two corners of the town square. The lower walls had been reinforced with stone, and a quick inspection verified Thulmann's suspicion that the precisely cut blocks had been exhumed from the old dwarf road rather than hacked from any local quarry. The interior of the building, at least those rooms Burgomeister Reinheckel led them through, was spacious, with high ceilings, panelled walls and tiled floors. The witch hunter was reminded again of Wyrmvater's lost prosperity as he encountered the unexpected finery of its town hall. He broached the subject with Reinheckel as the official led him up a flight of stairs towards the record room.

"Ah yes," Reinheckel said. "Wyrmvater was once a most lively place. It used to be called 'Zwergdorf', after our little friends from the mountains. We were an important stopping point on the way to Altdorf and Nuln, and more than a little of the dwarfs' gold and silver found its way into the town coffers."

"What happened?" Silja asked. She had decided to help Thulmann go over the town records. Examining old documents was something she'd had a great deal of practice at in her function as Igor Markoff's chief investigator and agent. Thulmann had readily agreed; two pairs of eyes would do the work faster than one and the quicker they made their study, the sooner they might ferret out the location of Kleib's skaven lair.

"The dwarfs decided they could get a better price in Bretonnia?" Lajos suggested, drawing a scowl from Reinheckel and a stern look from Thulmann. Like Silja, the strigany had decided to accompany the witch hunter, mostly because he found the prospect of spending time with any of his other travelling companions rather unhealthy.

Reinheckel paced across the record room. It was a long, narrow chamber, its walls filled with shelves, its floor littered with piles of books and rolls of parchment. A few long tables stretched across the centre of the room, their surfaces strewn with a scattering of dusty volumes. An old, thin man in black robes turned away from one of the tables as they entered, bowing deferentially to Reinheckel. The old man went to one of the tables, retrieving a large, leather-bound book.

"May I present Curate Andein," Reinheckel said. "In addition to his duties at our small chapel to Lord Sigmar, he also helps to maintain the histories of Wyrmvater."

Thulmann fixed Andein with a fierce look. "I trust he keeps his books better than he keeps his chapel."

The first place Thulmann had paid a visit to had been Wyrmvater's chapel. He had been incensed to find the icons within the sanctuary dusty and cobwebs clinging to the wooden beams above the nave.

The old man cowered before Thulmann's smouldering anger. "Forgive me, templar, I am but acting curate here. Our priest was taken from us by a sickness six months ago and the holy temple has not seen fit to send someone to replace him yet. I helped Father Schmidt in his services so it was decided that I should minister until his replacement arrives."

Lajos raised his eyebrow as he heard the old man address Thulmann, but kept silent. The last thing he needed was to get involved. Besides, the old man's story had caused some of the templar's anger to pass.

"That is worthy of you, but the temple should be maintained to a nobler standard," Thulmann said. "It is the house of Sigmar. It should be kept as such."

Reinheckel coughed loudly, trying to draw attention back to himself and defuse the tense situation. He took the volume Andein had selected, opening it and displaying it for Thulmann's inspection. "This book was commissioned near-on six hundred years ago by one of my predecessors," Reinheckel said. "It is a detailed history of our town, at least until that point." He extended his hand, indicating the other books strewn across the tables. "All of these are histories of the town. Some are official records, others are diaries and journals. Wyrmvater was quite well versed in the craft of letters at one time," he added with a note of pride. "The rest are accounting ledgers, figures on harvest yields, expenditures from the town treasury. I rather thought such mercantile concerns would be of little interest to a witch hunter."

The burgomeister began to flip through the book he had retrieved, smiling as he reached the page he sought. He set the book down on the table, standing back for the witch hunter and his companion to examine the open page. Snarling back at them was an old woodcut of a fanged reptilian face, horns ringing its brow.

"The dragon Skorn," Reinheckel pronounced. "It never was agreed upon why the old wyrm emerged from his mountain. Some said it was the dwarfs, who dug their mines too near the dragon's lair and that the smell of raw gold caused him to stir. Others claimed it was the will of the gods, that the dragon was set loose to punish the land for its greed and avarice. There were even rumours it was the work of the Great Enchanter, that it was his fell magics that broke its slumber. Whatever the reason, he came with wrath and ruin, laying waste to the countryside. The dwarfs retreated into their strongholds, trying to wait out the wyrm, leaving men to fend for themselves. Skorn wiped many towns and villages from the map, for none it seemed could stand against the dragon. Then, one day, there came a warrior, a knight from Altdorf. People tried not to laugh when he said he would kill the dragon, for how could he prevail where so many others had found death? Yet the knight's intention was sincere and he left Wyrmvater to find his way into Skorn's mountain and bring doom to the monster."

"None can say what powers guarded the knight," Reinheckel continued, turning the page, exposing another woodcut. This one showed a riot of images, from a jagged, craggy mountain peak to a lone warrior striking at a writhing dragon with his sword. The largest and centremost figure was the same knight standing beside a well, washing blood from his armour. "But surely more than skill and luck were needed to accomplish what he did that day. Into Skorn's lair he went, one man against a beast that had killed thousands. That it was the man who would walk away from that mighty battle was a miracle none would have dared hope. The knight staggered back into our town, weary from his great ordeal, weak from his wounds. His armour steamed with Skorn's searing blood and the townsfolk rushed to wash it from him. But as they drew bucket after bucket from the well, casting the water across the knight's battered body, the dragon's blood was splashed across the town square, draining back down into the well. It was found later that the dragon's blood had polluted the water, rendering it unfit to drink. It was sealed and a statue of Skorn and the knight was placed above it."

Thulmann had wondered at the strange brickwork base that supported the statue Reinheckel described. It had struck him as peculiar that a piece of sculpture that was fine enough to be a Calioisto or even a von Geier should endure such a crude and unsightly pedestal. Now he had his answer.

"The knight took the name of von Drakenburg for his great feat and was awarded lands to the north by the Count of Reikland for his heroism. Zwergdorf honoured that day too, rechristening itself Wyrmvater after the knight's valour and courage." Reinheckel sighed, closing the book. "Sadly, even with the dragon gone, the land still suffered. It took many years for men to resettle the places Skorn had destroyed. The dwarfs stayed in their mountains, their shame at hiding in their holes while men fought their terrible foe outweighing even their lust for trade and profit. Without the dwarfs, the old trade road fell into disuse and Wyrmvater was slowly forgotten."

"The dragon's mountain," Thulmann said, tapping the drawing. "Do you know where it is?"

“Of course,” the burgomeister replied. “It is a place shunned and avoided by my people even unto this day. A day’s travel to the north. Really more a pile of rock than a proper mountain.”

“You think what we are after might be in the dragon’s mountain?” Silja asked.

“It is possible,” Thulmann replied. “A dragon’s hole would be quite large, just the sort of place,” he looked at Reinheckel and paused, “lust the sort of place that might serve a rabble of heretic scum as a refuge; save them the bother of digging their own.” Thulmann glanced at the other books scattered across the table. “Still, we are ill served pouncing upon the first thing we see. We still need to peruse the histories Herr Reinheckel was so kind to prepare for us. There may be something even more promising in their pages.” Thulmann settled into a chair and pulled one of the books towards him, fishing in his pocket for a pair of pince nez glasses before beginning what promised to be a long day. Silja sat across the table from the witch hunter and began consulting the book Reinheckel had shown to them.

“I shall leave you to your studies,” Reinheckel said as he withdrew from the room. “Good hunting.”

“Innkeeper! Another stein all around!” Streng’s voice roared across the Splintered Shield’s taproom. He made a show of draining the last dregs from the lead stein clutched in his fist and set the vessel down on the table with a sharp bang.

“Keep that up and I’ll be winning our wager,” the ferret-faced Driest said from across the table, taking a measured swallow from his own stein. “Their ale is strong for a backwoods piss-pit like this.”

“I’ve had stronger,” Streng grunted. “Got a good kick to it, I’ll allow that. They probably got a taste for this stuff from the dwarfs. Not that it matters, I’ll still drink you under the table.” The mercenary laughed appreciatively as Schieller’s young daughter came walking to their table, a wooden platter supporting three steins held in her hands. Streng snatched all three vessels from her, sliding two across the table to his companions and taking a long pull from the other. The girl retreated back across the taproom.

“Keep them coming, innkeeper!” Streng bellowed, “and hire some older barmaids!” The mercenary laughed again. At the far end of the table, Gernheim shook his scarred head. Streng fixed the Carroburger with a sullen stare. “Something bothering you?”

Gernheim scowled back at Streng, clenching his fist. The Carroburger had been captured by goblins during the rampage of Azhag the Slaughterer’s horde in the northern reaches of the Empire. In addition to his facial mutilations, the goblins had cut out the man’s tongue, a disability that Streng seemed to find amusing.

“He doesn’t think you’ll win our little wager either,” Driest answered.

“Then the gobbos butchered his wits as well as his face,” Streng said, taking another pull from his tankard. The rich dark ale slopped down his face, dripping from his beard. Driest smiled and carefully took another measured sip from his own. The only one with befuddled senses at their table was Thulmann’s man. He seemed oblivious to the fact that he was already three steins ahead of Driest and working on a fourth.

“So... so... so.” Streng blinked his eyes as if trying to capture an errant thought. “What’s the deal with yer gaffer, ole Krieger there? Seems a hard bastard.”

“He pays well enough,” Driest answered, “and the work isn’t exactly unenjoyable.” A sadistic smirk worked its way onto Driest’s face. “But I don’t have to tell you about that.”

“Krieger’s thick with Zerndorff, ain’t ’e?” Streng grumbled. “Can’t see where that’d leave much time for field work.”

Driest took another measured swallow from his drink, scratching at his narrow nose. “Oh, you’d be surprised the sorts of things we get up to sometimes.”

“Would I now?”

Gernheim reached a huge paw to his comrade's shoulder, but Driest shook him off. The sharpshooter leaned forwards across the table, his face only inches from Streng's, his ale-laced breath washing over the mercenary's features, oblivious to the clarity and attentiveness in Streng's eyes.

"You do fine work." Krieger's gloved hand stroked the black wolfskin hanging on the wooden wall. It was a large specimen of its breed, expertly skinned and cured. He could understand why the tanner would have chosen to keep such an example of his trade for himself.

The tanner remained seated in his chair, his wife standing behind him, her arms resting protectively on his shoulders. "Th-thank you, your lordship."

Krieger stepped away from the wall and paced slowly around the small common room of the tanner's home. "Tell me, Herr Kipps, perhaps you have even more impressive examples of your trade to show me?"

"You mean like bears?" the tanner asked.

The gaunt face of Haussner turned from his inspection of an oak cabinet to glare at Kipps. "No, not like bears, you fool. It is unwise to be insolent to the servants of Lord Sigmar's sacred will." The witch hunter stalked towards Kipps, stabbing a finger at him as if it was a dagger. "We are interested in anything out of the ordinary that might have been brought to you by one of the hunters or foresters of this village; something foul and obscene, the shape of a beast granted the unholy semblance of a man."

"We don't have anything like that in these parts," Kipps declared, a tremor in his voice.

"Are you certain?" Krieger demanded. "Sometimes unwise, unlearned men encounter such abominations and prevail against them, but not understanding the true nature of what they have slain they think it to be like any other beast. Sometimes such men may try to keep a trophy of their victory."

Haussner stalked back across the room, this time descending on a large trunk resting against the wall. Kipps watched nervously as the witch hunter flipped the trunk open and began pawing through its contents.

"I tell you I've seen no such thing as you describe," Kipps insisted, "and if it please the gods, I never shall. No one in these parts has seen such things."

"Indeed?" sneered Krieger, drawing closer to the tanner and his wife. "Across the length and breadth of our glorious Empire the deep woods are infested with such monstrosities, their envy of man drawing them time and again to plague the remote outposts of civilisation. I have seen such creatures many times, from the woods of Middenland to the forests of Sylvania. Yet you tell me there are none here? That no one in all Wyrmvater has told stories of mutant beasts in the dark woods?"

At the word "mutant", Kipps' wife gave a weak moan of fright, clutching her husband's shoulders still more tightly. The tanner tried to keep his expression neutral, but Krieger did not fail to notice the flicker of apprehension he had seen there. The tanner did know something, something he preferred not to tell a witch hunter. Peasants, Krieger thought, their superstitious dread of the creatures of Old Night befuddling what passed for reason in their simple minds. Even in the presence of men experienced and skilled in combating such monsters, the peasant would let his fear of them keep his tongue still. It had been Krieger's experience that the quickest way to get a peasant talking was to show him that there were things much more fearsome than the ghoulish denizens of darkness.

"I am a reasonable man, Herr Kipps," Krieger said, "but I fear that you begin to try my patie..."

Krieger was interrupted by the harsh, snarled oath of Haussner. Even Ehrhardt, his armoured bulk looming against the door of the tanner's home, was startled by Haussner's invective. The gaunt witch hunter rose from the trunk he'd been pawing through, a jumble of blue fabric clenched in his claw-like hand.

“Lying gutter swine!” Haussner snarled. “You dare spit your blasphemies into the ears of Sigmar! But no deceit can prevail against Him! Behold the evidence of your perfidy!” Haussner waved the bundle of fabric beneath the noses of Kipps and his wife. Ehrhardt could see that it was a pair of dresses, the dresses of a young girl. Haussner crushed them between his fingers as if strangling a viper.

“You informed us you were alone here, Herr Kipps,” Krieger said, his voice cold and unforgiving. “Just yourself and your wife. I don’t think these are quite her size. Tell me, who else lives here?”

The tanner and his wife were pale with horror, unable to take their eyes from the tiny garments Haussner held. When Kipps could speak, it was in a dry croak. “I don’t know what those are,” he said. “I told the truth, my lord, there is no one else here.”

“More lies!” Haussner roared. The back of his thin hand cracked against Kipps’ face with such force that the man was spilled to the floor. The man’s wife wailed in panic, launching herself at Haussner. The witch hunter planted his fist in her midsection, doubling her over in a coughing, wheezing wreck. He took a step towards Kipps as the man started to rise, but found himself suddenly lifted from the floor when a cold steel hand closed around his arm.

“That’s enough, Haussner,” Ehrhardt growled at the man. Haussner tried to twist out of the knight’s grasp even as his hands tried to tear the axe from his belt.

“Get your hands off me, you heathen trash!” Haussner snarled. “These swine have dared speak false to an appointed instrument of Lord Sigmar and I will have the truth from their lying lips! Release me, you scum!”

With a twist of his powerful frame, the Black Guardsman slammed Haussner face-first into the floor. The sharp slap of Haussner’s head bouncing against the floorboards echoed through the room. Krieger watched the awesome display of strength in shocked silence, Kipps and his wife similarly awed. Ehrhardt rose from the stunned, insensible fanatic, walking slowly towards the door.

“Slip your dog back on his leash, Krieger,” Ehrhardt’s deep voice rumbled. “For today at least, your ‘investigation’ is over.”

That night, around the largest table the dining room of the Splintered Shield could offer, Thulmann conferred with his associates. It was a heated exchange that soon had the innkeeper and his family keeping as far from the diners as they could. Haussner angrily related the incident at the tanner’s, demanding that Ehrhardt be restrained and confined until charges could be brought against him. The skeletal witch hunter was convinced that the knight was nothing less than an agent of the ruinous powers, inflicted upon them to undermine their holy work. Silja was the first to rise to the Black Guardsman’s defence, causing Haussner to shift the focus of his verbal attack on her. Under his venomous tongue, an infuriated Silja left the table, storming upstairs to her own rooms.

With the patience of an Arabyan sphinx, Ehrhardt bore Haussner’s lashing tongue and then slowly explained why he had acted in such extreme terms. He reminded Thulmann that he wanted to retain as much as possible the goodwill of both the people of Wyrmvater and his fellow witch hunters. As a result of this injunction, Ehrhardt had perhaps allowed Krieger and Haussner to press too far with their overbearing questioning of the town’s citizens, but when intimidation had crossed into brutality, he had drawn the line. A few choice observations on Haussner’s unbalanced state of mind brought a fresh stream of fury spitting past the gaunt witch hunter’s lips, a tirade that ended only when the fuming Haussner quit the table, marching off to the stables to enjoy the “pious company of true believers” and be rid of the odious presence of heathen heretics.

Throughout the scene, Krieger had remained largely silent, not speaking a word to either defend or support Haussner. Thulmann demanded an accounting of Krieger’s overbearing tactics. Krieger’s reply that fear was the fastest way to get the townsfolk to talk, that they had no time to waste soft-stepping around dull-witted peasants, rang false in Thulmann’s ears. Krieger was deliberately trying

to undermine Thulmann's efforts to generate goodwill in the town. What puzzled him was why his fellow witch hunter should be set upon such a course.

Thulmann and Silja's study of the town records had yielded better fruit. The histories and legends of the region suggested quite a few likely locations. The underfolk were a lazy race, never forsaking the opportunity to spare themselves hard work if it could be avoided. If there was a skaven lair in the area, then it was more than likely it had started out life as something else before the ratkin claimed it for their own. The town records had contained references to goblin caves, ruined watchtowers, troll holes and more than a scattering of deserted villages. Above all, there was the prospect of the old dragon lair, a cavernous pit clawed in the belly of a mountain, just the sort of place a skaven would happily make into a stronghold. Krieger digested this information carefully, making suggestions about one avenue of investigation or another. At length it was decided that they would make further, more restrained, inquiries on the morrow and then make preparations to check out whatever location seemed the most promising.

After the discussion broke apart, Thulmann tracked down Streng, finding the mercenary lounging at one of the tables in the taproom.

The witch hunter sat down beside his henchman. "Tell me everything you were able to learn," Thulmann said, his voice lowered.

Streng leaned back in his chair, a lead stein clenched in his fist. "I'm afraid it isn't much," Streng replied. "That Driest can't hold his ale too good, and that dummy Gernheim holds it a bit too well. Kept trying to get Driest to shut up every time he started to say something too interesting." Streng sucked at his teeth, spitting a bit of gristle from his dinner onto the floor. "I did manage to learn that your pal Krieger might not be quite the loyal son Zerndorff thinks he is. Seems he's been doing the odd favour for some of the other big-wigs in the temple now and again, strictly under the table and without Zerndorff knowing anything."

"Krieger's an opportunist," Thulmann stated. "I already knew as much. His only loyalty is to his own ambition."

"But did you know he met with Arch-lector Esmer just before we left Altdorf?"

"Now that is interesting," Thulmann agreed, wondering what Krieger and the soon-to-be grand theologian had discussed. "Did Driest say anything else?"

"Not about Krieger, anyway. Gernheim got a bit too intrusive. Seems he could see I wasn't as drunk as I let on, even if Driest was oblivious." Streng took a swallow from his stein and laughed. "I'll have to play our little game again, for real next time. That reminds me, you owe me five silver shillings." The mercenary extended his hand towards Thulmann, waiting while the witch hunter dug the coins from his purse and set them in his palm. The witch hunter rose to leave, but Streng motioned for him to stay.

"Learned a few things about your other playmate as well," the thug stated. "When Driest stopped talking about Krieger, I thought it might be smart to turn things around and see what he knew about Haussner."

"I am well acquainted with that fanatic's career," Thulmann said.

Streng nodded his head. "Yes, but do you know anything about his past? Did you know for instance that his name used to be *von* Haussner, as in Count von Haussner? Used to have a big estate somewhere up near the Middle Mountains. Then, one day, he learned where the countess was spending her free time. He had his servants accuse her and her lover of witchcraft, took it so far that both were burned in fact. It was only after they were dead that his sister-in-law finally confessed that it was she, not the countess who had been sleeping around on her husband. Haussner's wife was guilty only of helping her sister cover up the affair. Seems that bit of information really rattled Haussner's cage. The sister-in-law had a little accident coming down a flight of stairs and afterwards the count denounced his title and donated all of his lands and wealth to your temple. As a reward for his piety, the temple elders appointed Haussner a templar in the Order of Sigmar."

Thulmann sat in silence for a moment, absorbing Haussner's sordid history. That Haussner was a deranged fanatic he already knew, but Streng now raised the very likely possibility that the man was insane as well. It also went a long way to explaining the unreasoning hatred Haussner exhibited towards women. "We'll have to keep a closer eye on Brother Peder," Thulmann said. "It sounds as if his mind walks a very fine line. I don't want it falling off while Silja's around."

The witch hunter rose to his feet, heading upstairs to retire, leaving Streng to his alcoholic indulgences. Tonight, at least, he was in no mind to reprimand the mercenary for his vices.

An hour later, a restless Streng was pacing across the hallway, nursing a bottle of port. He lifted his head when he heard a door creak open on the landing above and smiled as he saw Silja Markoff emerge from her room. The mercenary gave her a lewd wink when she looked in his direction. The woman ignored him, turning and pacing down the hall to Thulmann's room. Streng laughed and shook his head, taking another swallow from his bottle as he slowly made his way back towards the taproom. He seemed to recall a small keg of beer Schieller had left out in the open, and was rather keen to see if his memory was sound. Thulmann would be too occupied to reprimand him for taking advantage of their host's hospitality.

The mercenary had just reached the stairs when a scream wailed down the hallway, a cry of shock and horror. Streng spun around, running down the corridor. The voice had been Silja's and the scream had come from Thulmann's room.

## CHAPTER NINE

Shadow filled the witch hunter's room as Silja opened the door and slipped inside. She could hear Thulmann's heavy breathing rising from the bed, worn out by the dual toils of scouring Wyrmvater's records and of restraining the excesses of his fellow templars. Dealing with the likes of Haussner might wear anybody out.

Silja felt a moment of guilt as she listened to the sound of Thulmann sleeping. The witch hunter did not rest easily. He must be wholly exhausted. She reached behind her for the door, intending to steal back into the hallway. Her hand froze on the brass latch.

Something moved inside the room, and scurried across the floor. The sound caused her eyes to stray towards the window. There was a shape perched there, something small and grotesque, with a fat body and a grossly swollen head. She could not see its face, but she had the impression it was snarling. The creature clutched a large sack. As Silja watched, the creature shook the bag, forcing something to fall from it to the floor with a sharp slap. Whatever it was squeaked in agitation, beady red eyes glaring in the darkness.

The sight of the strange shape had stunned Silja for a moment, but she soon found her voice, and screamed a warning she hoped would be heard in every room in the Splintered Shield. The apparition withdrew, dropping down from its perch on the sill. At the same time, Silja heard Thulmann rolling over in his bed, looking for the weapons she knew he'd have set on the sideboard. The scurrying sound intensified as the echoes of her scream died away.

"Mathias! There's something here!" Silja cried out and then cursed herself. In diverting her attention to her lover, she'd lost sight of whatever menace the strange creature at the window had left behind. Her eyes scoured the darkness, trying to find some sign of it again. She thought she saw black shapes hurrying about the room, scrambling under the legs of chairs and along the bases of the walls.

"Up here. Get off the floor!" Thulmann shouted. The witch hunter was standing at the edge of the bed, a pistol in his hand. With his other he reached towards Silja. Silja did not hesitate, springing towards Thulmann's outstretched hand. As she leapt to safety, she felt something flash past her leg, and fancied she could hear the snap of jaws closing around the empty air behind her. Thulmann pulled her up beside him, wrapping his arm around her in a protective gesture.

The scurrying claws scratched across the floor all around them, sometimes punctuated by shrill squeaks and whines. Silja felt her fear mounting. It was certain from the sound that the prowler had set more than one of the things loose in the room.

"What are they?" Silja whispered into Thulmann's ear, realising now that any noise might draw the attention of the unseen lurkers.

Thulmann continued to scan the darkness, head turning at every sound, his pistol at the ready. "Rats," he whispered back. "I saw one as I grabbed the guns."

"Rats?" Silja almost laughed at the ridiculousness of the thought. They had stood side by side against the daemonic filth of Baron von Gotz, against the undead wrath of Sibbechai, now they cowered like frightened children before simple rats.

The witch hunter's grip only tightened around her waist as he heard the incredulous note in her voice. "These are not like any rats you have ever seen before," Thulmann whispered, and the concern in his voice removed any doubt in Silja's mind that the things scurrying around the room were anything to underestimate.



Silja hurriedly pulled one of the heavy blankets from Thulmann's bed and hurled it in the direction of the scurrying sounds. Angry squeals told her that at least some of the rats had fallen foul of her improvised weapon. Then something large and hairy flung itself onto the bed, hissing and spitting at them, red eyes gleaming in the dark. Thulmann dived upon the thing, pinning it beneath his hand and smashing it with the butt of a pistol.

Silja could see the struggling shapes pinned beneath the blanket she had thrown. Nearer at hand, however, was the mangled thing struggling beneath Thulmann's grip. It was nearly the size of a fox, yet its shape was certainly that of a rat. Much of its fur had sloughed away, exposing a pale, blistered skin and ropes of green pulsating veins. An evil black froth bubbled from its fanged jaws, while trickles of pus dripped from its eyes. With the light to guide him, Thulmann set the butt of his pistol smashing down into the over-sized vermin's skull, crushing it like an egg. The witch hunter rose from his grisly labour and then flung himself at the trapped vermin on the floor, stomping them within their prison of wool and thread.

Thulmann was breathing hard before the struggling rats grew still. One of the crippled vermin tried to scuttle away. The witch hunter turned on it, kicking the mangled carcass across the room. He spun around, hurrying back to Silja. "Did they touch you?" he demanded, despair in his voice, his eyes scanning her for any trace of injury.

"I'm fine," Silja protested, trying to pull away.

"You are certain you are all right?" Thulmann whispered. When Silja nodded, Thulmann stepped down from his perch, turning over the carcass of the rat he had killed with the barrel of his pistol. "I think you should find that even a small bite from these diseased fangs would prove as deadly as a dragon's kiss." The witch hunter flopped the thing onto its back, exposing its wasted belly. A long scar ran down its length, the injury sealed by a crude cross-stitch of what looked like sinew. "And I think they were designed that way."

Silja dropped down beside him, careful to keep her feet clear of any of the rat blood spattered on the floor. "When I came in, I saw someone — something — at the window. It had a large sack in its hands. I saw it drop one of the rats into the room, that was when I screamed."

The rattle of armour caused them to turn back towards the doorway. Still tightening the straps on his chest plate, Captain-Justicar Ehrhardt lumbered into the room, his intense gaze sweeping the chamber. "What did I miss?" the Black Guardsman demanded.

"Only a bit of pest extermination," Thulmann said and then returned his attention to Silja. "This creature you saw, was it a skaven?"

Silja was quiet for a moment, conjuring up the image of the strange shape she had seen at the window. That weird apparition still seemed somehow unreal, even with its handiwork scattered all around her. "No," she said at last. "I don't think so. It was smaller and fatter. Its head was malformed in some way, but I'm certain it had a face."

"Goblins?" Ehrhardt asked. Thulmann shook his head.

"I don't think so," the witch hunter said. "Surgically altered giant rats infested with a nice cocktail of disease seems a bit sophisticated for goblin-work." He stepped around the bed, pulling clothes from the chair he had thrown them onto before retiring. "Disease. Malformed mutants. A keen interest in seeing me dead." Thulmann ticked off each point by raising a finger as he made it. "Sounds as if we might be getting close, close enough to worry an old acquaintance of mine." Thulmann shook his head, gesturing at the splattered rats. "Although I had thought Dr Weichs had a higher opinion of me than this."

"You think Weichs is here?" Ehrhardt demanded, a growl in his voice. The infamous plague doktor had unleashed the Stir blight on Wurtbad, slaughtering thousands, forcing the priests of Morr to dig vast plague pits outside the city. As a Black Guardsman, Ehrhardt took such ruthless trespass in the domain of Morr quite personally.

"It is a very distinct possibility," Thulmann said. "I suggest we go outside and see if we can't pick up my late caller's trail and see where that takes us."

A few minutes later found armour donned and weapons readied. There was just a chance that the would-be assassin's trail might lead back to Weichs, and Thulmann had no intention of letting that chance slip through his fingers.

Rushing down the stairs, the witch hunter found his path impeded by a strange tableau. Streng, arms folded across his chest, was sitting on Lajos Dozsa's back. As he saw his employer descending, the mercenary rose, grabbing the back of Lajos' nightshirt and hauling the merchant to his feet.

"I heard someone scream," Streng said. "Is everything well?"

"Well enough," Thulmann replied. "No thanks to your besotted carcass."

"I was on my way up to help," Streng protested, "but I tripped over this scum tearing down the stairs as if Khaine was on his heels." The mercenary gave the nightshirt a savage tug, forcing a whine of protest from Lajos. "I knew you'd want words with him, so I thought I'd make sure he didn't go anywhere."

"Did you now?" Thulmann asked.

"There weren't any more screams, so one way or another I figured you were past my help." Streng tightened his hold on Lajos' shirt, bringing a yelp of pain from the man.

"Is that necessary?" Lajos hissed. Streng only grinned back at him.

"Where did you think you were going, strigany?" Thulmann demanded. "Let me answer that for you," he continued before Lajos could reply. "You heard the scream as well and saw an opportunity to separate us from your dubious company."

"I was afraid something had happened to you," Lajos protested. Thulmann looked unconvinced, so the merchant hurried to explain. "Do I honestly look like I planned an escape?" Lajos pulled at the waist of his nightshirt, indicating his lack of preparation. "You are the only one protecting me from that lunatic you brought with you from Altdorf. I'm sure he'd have me dancing from a tree as quick as say 'good morrow' given half a chance."

Mention of Haussner caused Thulmann's eyes to narrow with a sudden realisation. He'd been too wrapped up in the moment, too focused on the recent attempt on his life. He hadn't considered the absence of Haussner and Krieger until Lajos reminded him of it. Surely his fellow witch hunters could not have failed to hear Silja scream, or miss the commotion that followed? Thulmann had even seen Schieller peering inquisitively from behind his cracked door, frightened curiosity on his face. There might be no love lost between them, but the other templars would at least have sent one of their minions to see what had happened.

That is, if they were still in the Splintered Shield.

"Where are Brother Kristoph and Brother Peder?" Streng wondered aloud.

"The tanner!" Ehrhardt cursed, smashing his gauntlet into an armoured palm.

"I fear Brother Ehrhardt has the right of it," Thulmann said. "I should have realised Krieger gave ground a bit too easily on that front." He was silent for a moment, weighing the trouble Krieger and Haussner might cause against his hopes for picking up the assassin's trail. It did not take him long to reach the uncomfortable decision that his fellow witch hunters were the more immediate danger. "Streng, my would-be killer came and went by means of the window. See if you can't find some sort of track for us to follow later. Brother Ehrhardt, please lead the way to the tanner's. Lets see if we can't put an end to whatever misery those two are stirring up before it goes too far."

"What about me?" Lajos asked. Five sets of unsympathetic eyes turned on him. "Surely you don't expect me to go gallivanting around town dressed like this?"

"Unless you want someone to carry you," Thulmann stated, pushing past the merchant.

As soon as they set foot outside the inn, Thulmann knew it was too late. Any hopes he might have had that he could contain Haussner's overzealous fanaticism were dashed the moment he heard the

man's raised voice shouting into the night. He wasn't the only one, either. Every window in the town was lit up, anxious faces filling many, all eyes turned in the direction of Wyrmvater's square. Thulmann cursed again and set off at a run towards the square.

The scene unfolding in the square confirmed all of Thulmann's fears. Ropes had been flung across the wings of the dragon statue at the centre of the square and the nooses that dangled from the end of each rope had been tied around the necks of two battered and bleeding figures. Thulmann decided that they could only be the tanner Kipps and his wife. But his eyes did not linger too long on the sorry sight, drawn instead to the heap of broken furniture and straw that had been assembled a few yards from the statue. Two of Haussner's flagellants stood beside the makeshift pyre while two others were tying a small, struggling shape to the framework of a ladder. Orchestrating the entire scene, fairly shrieking a litany from the *Deus Sigmar* into the night, was Haussner. It took Thulmann a few moments to spot Krieger and his henchmen. Unlike the fanatic Haussner, they seemed to be avoiding the limelight, keeping to the shadows cast by the town hall.

"What in the name of Sigmar are you doing?" Thulmann growled as he stormed towards Haussner. The fanatic turned on him, the *Deus Sigmar* clutched in his clawed hands, the fires of his zeal filling his eyes.

"Not all of us are so remiss as to forget our duties and our oaths simply because their execution seems distasteful," Haussner declared. He closed the *Deus Sigmar* and stabbed a talon at the wretched figures of Kipps and his wife. "These heretics dared to lie to holy servants of Sigmar today. I would not allow such a slight against the temple to stand. From their forked tongues, I harvested the truth!" Haussner spun around, swiping his hand in the direction of the flagellants with the ladder. Thulmann could see that the tiny shape they were binding was a terrified little girl, no more than eight summers old. Haussner gestured and he saw more. One of the flagellants pulled up the hem of the girl's dress, exposing the black, gleaming hoof that replaced one of her feet. Thulmann heard Silja gasp in horror as the child's mutation was exposed. His own feelings were no less sickened.

"These heretics will hang for sheltering such filth! But first their lying tongues will be cut from their miserable heads that they may speak no further blasphemies against Lord Sigmar." One of Haussner's minions stalked towards Kipps, a pair of brutal-looking metal tongs gripped in his hands. "And we will purge this village of its mutant taint!" Haussner roared. "By the method proscribed by Sigmar's holy law. By burning them!" At Haussner's gesture, the men with the torches set the pyre ablaze. Thulmann realised the jumble of wood must have been treated with oil or pitch, as the flames quickly took hold. The girl, lashed to the wooden ladder began to scream as the flagellants lifted her and started to carry her towards the fire.

"Stop this, Haussner," Thulmann snarled, grabbing the fanatic's shoulder. Ahead of him, Ehrhardt interposed his imposing armoured bulk between the ladder carriers and the flames. Even the crazed mendicant-monks realised that the sword clutched in the Black Guardsman's hands was not an idle threat.

"Those are strange words coming from a witch hunter." Thulmann turned his head to see that Krieger had emerged from the shadows to lend his support to Haussner's brutality. "Brother Peder is engaged in one of our order's most important duties — the extermination of mutants and those who would offer them sanctuary. A witch hunter of your reputation, Brother Mathias, has instituted such executions many times over, surely."

Thulmann could feel Silja's shock like a knife twisting in his guts. It was one thing for her to accept the things he had been forced to do on an abstract, intellectual level. It was another to be there, to see the horror and monstrosity of it.

"Not like this," Thulmann growled. He thought again of that small child in Silbermund, the one who had been treated for a leg injury by Weichs and his abominable medicines. She too had been young and innocent, yet the taint of Chaos had infested her flesh. Thulmann had ordered her destruction, knowing that there was no other way. But he'd ordered the child rendered insensible

first, ensuring she would not know what happened. It was a far cry from the calculated brutality of Haussner's methods. "Never like this."

"The creature is a mutant and must be destroyed," Haussner spat. "You know this! Call off that heathen thug and let the will of Lord Sigmar be done."

"Mathias, don't let him!" It pained Thulmann to hear the agony in Silja's voice, the terror that edged her words. It was not the horror of the situation, but the horror that the man she loved would stand aside and let it happen.

"And the others will be found!" Haussner shrieked. "In whatever hole they have hidden themselves, in whatever pit they have buried their abominable flesh, they will be found."

Thulmann shook his head. "I can't talk to this fanatic," he said. "Krieger, I would have words with you."

"If you think that would serve any purpose," Krieger replied, "but I warn you that I place a higher price on my soul than the charms of a..." the witch hunter looked in Silja's direction, his face twisting into a sneer, "...lady."

Thulmann bit down on his anger. Krieger was baiting him, trying to force him to lose control. He would not allow Krieger to take over the situation, to let him start playing the tune. Thulmann led Krieger some distance from the others.

"We can't let Brother Peder do this," Thulmann said, his voice lowered so that his words would not carry to Haussner. "He jeopardises our entire investigation with his fanaticism. There is more at stake here than burning one wretched mutant."

"He is only doing his duty," Krieger replied. "I thought you would be able to appreciate that. Besides, it is hardly one mutant. Brother Peder was most thorough in his interrogation of the heretics. He has discovered that there are several families in Wyrmvater hiding mutants in their attics and cellars."

Thulmann quickly digested the information, drawing from it a possibility he hoped would make Krieger at least see reason. "Don't you see what that means? It means that something around here is polluting these people. It could be warpstone poisoning. Even a small trace of warpstone in the ground or water might work its way into the crops, and if there is warpstone..."

"Then our skaven lair might be nearby as well," Krieger concluded. "A viable theory, Brother Mathias."

"Zerndorff sent us here to find *Das Buch die Unholden*," Thulmann reminded Krieger, "not to scour some Reikland backwater of mutants. I don't think our next Lord Protector will be terribly pleased if we let his prize escape."

Krieger smiled at Thulmann, nodding his head. "Well played, Brother Mathias. You do indeed put things in their proper order." The smile broadened. "In truth, I couldn't care less about Brother Peder's mutants. I encouraged him only because I felt you were becoming a good deal too friendly with the peasants. It occurred to me that you might use that influence—"

"Ridiculous," Thulmann snapped. Krieger's mind might be a morass of treachery and intrigue, but Thulmann found the suggestion that his own methods were similarly duplicitous revolting.

"It is now," Krieger admitted. "Now we will all be in the same boat. After Brother Peder's display tonight, the peasants won't care who wears the black, they will all be afraid. Just as they should be."

"What about Brother Peder?" Thulmann demanded.

"He will do as I ask," Krieger said confidently. "I helped him with his... domestic... concerns once. He'll do as I say. We can have the mutant and its parents locked away and burn them after we've found the book and have no further use for Wyrmvater or the 'goodwill' of its people."

Thulmann watched in disgust as Krieger stalked back towards Haussner to give the fanatic his orders. He wondered if deep down Krieger cared about anything or anyone beyond their ability to

further his ambitions. He also wondered just how far Krieger would allow those ambitions to take him.

“Idiot!” the old man snarled, his scrawny hand swatting across the brow of the misshapen creature beside him in the darkened alleyway. The mutated halfling cringed from the blow, slinking away from his furious master. Doktor Weichs turned his attention back to the town square and the black-garbed figure that was the focus of his wrath. The witch hunter should have been dead. The rats Lobo had set loose in Thulmann’s room were infested with one of the most virulent strains of plague that Weichs had ever come across in his studies. Yet there he stood, consulting his fanatical brethren.

Perhaps they were even talking about him. The thought chilled Weichs to the bone, but he couldn’t dismiss the possibility. Now that he had tipped his hand and tried to kill the witch hunter, Thulmann would be even more determined to hunt him down. He was already much too close for comfort and Weichs didn’t want to think of Thulmann getting any closer.

It was time to convince Skilk to take a paw in matters. Thulmann might have escaped the trap Weichs had set for him, but the plague doktor didn’t think he would fare so well against the skaven.

## CHAPTER TEN

Thulmann watched the dawn slowly gather beyond the frosted glass of the window. He felt a wave of sudden fatigue grip him, as his restless body registered the passing of night and any chance for slumber. The witch hunter yawned, rubbing at his eyes. There had been many sleepless nights. He would suffer no worse for adding another to their number. There was much his mind still needed to sort through.

Without Krieger, he was certain the standoff in the plaza could only have ended in blood. Haussner was beyond appreciating that by engaging in his crusade to purge Wyrmvater of whatever mutants it might harbour, he had put the more important mission to uncover the skaven warren and recover *Das Buch die Unholden* in jeopardy.

If Haussner's unreasoning fanaticism was a dark omen on their chances for success, then Krieger's calculating ambition was an even blacker one. He could have stopped Haussner at any time, but hadn't, more troubled by what he perceived as Thulmann's growing influence with the townspeople than he was by the prospect of losing their aid. Krieger would brook no rival and Thulmann wondered just how much of the credit if they succeeded in capturing *Das Buch die Unholden* would be shared.

Shared? The realisation suddenly hit Thulmann, the true rationale behind Krieger's gambit. He wouldn't share anything. By interfering with Haussner, by stopping the fanatic's brutal and untimely execution of his duty, Thulmann had played right into Krieger's hands. Thulmann could almost hear Krieger making his report to Zerndorff, giving voice to carefully worded accusations and insinuations. There were few charges so damning to a witch hunter as those of heresy.

Of more immediate concern, however, was the effect the violent scene had had on the people of Wyrmvater. Nearly the entire town had watched, drawn from their beds by Haussner's strident voice. Thulmann had seen the anxious, fearful look Reinheckel and his militiamen had given the witch hunters as they led Kipps and his family to the cells. He had seen the hate boiling in the eyes of the townsfolk, the unspoken curses on their lips, as they watched the witch hunters slowly make their way back to the Splintered Shield.

The witch hunter rose from his chair, walking across the room to where his weapons belt hung from a nail in the wall. Thulmann wrapped it around his waist, drawing it tight. He cast an envious look towards the bed. If he could find sleep as easily as the woman did, perhaps he might be a contented man. With everything that had happened, there had been no question of letting Silja stay alone in her room. Who could say that their misshapen visitor might not return? No, he wanted Silja somewhere he could watch her and make sure she would come to no harm.

Thulmann carefully opened the door, closing it softly behind him. He stalked down the stairs, towards the common room of the inn to greet the figure he had seen through the window. He heard the heavy oak door below open and close and boots stamping against the wood floor as their owner tried to coerce warmth back into his limbs. Streng's grizzled frame loomed just within the entryway.

"Well?" Thulmann demanded. Streng stopped blowing on his cold hands to regard his master.

"Found the tracks right enough," the mercenary stated. "Little things, not quite like a child's and too wide for a goblin's. Possibly a halfling. Round and round the town, down just about every alley and pig-run this muck-hole has to offer. Got me turned around so often I can't tell you where he started from, much less where he went."

Thulmann sighed, rubbing again at his tired eyes. "Hardly the best of tidings, friend Streng. I had hoped that murderous mongrel might lead us back to its master. Fortunately, I think Herr Doktor Weichs will present us with another opportunity when he tries again."

"Unless he tucks his tail between his legs and runs off again," Streng replied, his voice a low growl. "If we lose that bastard I'm going to carve Haussner like a Pflugzeit goose. If it wasn't for that idiot we might have caught this scum and tracked it back to Weichs!"

The witch hunter placed a gloved hand on Streng's shoulder. "Be at ease. There will be another opportunity. Weichs will try again, all we have to do is be ready for him when he does."

"How can you be so sure?" Streng challenged. "We've been one step behind that filth for nearly a year. How can you be certain he'll stick around this time?"

Thulmann's voice grew grave as he answered. "Because I think things have changed. The good doktor can't run anymore. We've got him cornered at last... and that makes him more dangerous than ever."

Weichs cautiously walked through the vast, subterranean cavern. The ragged, gnawed walls of the cave curved upwards into the gloom. Small iron cages hung from the walls at intervals, a sickly green glow spilling through their bars and illuminating the cavern. The scientist could see the diabolical shine of warpstone in the walls of the pit and could feel the malevolent power of the substance in the air. Scattered about the cavern were picks and hammers, and a few larger tools for stripping the warpstone from the earth, huge devices with drills and claws, like monstrous beasts of steel and bronze.

Small gangs of scrawny skaven, wretched slaves of the Skrittar, were hacking away at the walls, mining the warpstone for their masters. The scientist kept his distance from these half-mad dregs. Starved and crazed, Weichs knew such creatures might dash past the whips of their masters to gorge themselves on his flesh. The thought caused him to shudder: the most brilliant mind among all humanity reduced to a meal for the detritus of skaven society.

Given a choice, he would never have descended into the mines, but Grey Seer Skilk had ignored Weichs' plea to see it. After his failure to kill the witch hunter in Wyrmvater, Weichs knew that he didn't have time to waste waiting for Skilk. He had to have the help of the skaven now, not when it suited the grey seer.

Weichs found Skilk near the very centre of the cavern, where a large crevasse bisected the cave floor, creating a narrow crack that stabbed its way into the black depths of the earth. A stone altar had been erected on the flattest section of the floor. Eight massive iron spikes, as tall as a man and pounded deep into the rock were arrayed around the altar. A riotous array of bones, an assortment of animal, human and inhuman remains hung from the spikes.

Weichs recognised the ugly characters that had been daubed onto each bone, it was the same ancient picture-script that figured in much of the profane lore contained within *Das Buch die Unholden*. The scientist knew these characters only too well, for they were the very ones revealed to him in the ritual he had translated for Skilk. He tried not to think upon what else the ritual required.

Skilk was standing behind the altar, overseeing a pair of lesser Skrittar as the under-priests painted characters onto still more bones. Skilk turned his horned head as he smelled Weichs approaching. He gestured, motioning for one of the half a dozen armoured stormvermin surrounding him to fetch the human.

"All smell like books," Skilk chittered. The skin-covered *Das Buch die Unholden* rested atop the altar and Skilk patted it with a black paw. "Kripsnik say soon," the grey seer hissed, avarice dripping from his muzzle. "Skilk like Kripsnik speak much!"

Weichs found himself shuddering. The skaven, and the grey seers in particular, were horrible things, abominations that offended the senses of a man at the deepest, most primal level. How much more hideous then, to contemplate the prospect of evoking the loathsome spectre of one of their breed decades in the grave?

Weichs forced himself to set aside his disgust at what Skilk intended to do and forced his mind back to the more immediate problem of Thulmann and the witch hunters. “Grey Seer, we have a problem,” he said. “The witch hunter from Wurtbad has followed us here. He’s in Wyrmvater!”

Skilk lashed his tail in amusement, one of the under-seers joining in with a chattering laugh. “Doktor-man thinks Skilk a fool? Skilk know hunter-man near long time. Hunter-man not stay long.” The skaven laughed again, this time the scratchy, inhuman mirth spreading even to the armoured bodyguard.

“Don’t underestimate him!” Weichs protested. “I know this man. He is dangerous!”

Skilk’s lips parted in a bestial snarl. Before Weichs could react, the grey seer lunged forward and a black paw closed around his throat. The skaven priest pressed Weichs’ body against the altar, his back arching over its pitted, stained surface. He could see the crazed, feral light in Skilk’s eyes; the ugly twinkle of madness and obsession.

“Doktor-man thinks Skilk not dangerous?” Skilk hissed. “Not fear hunter-man! Fear Skilk! Fear not Kripsnik! Doktor-man fears much!”

The grey seer released his hold on Weichs, almost flinging the terrified scientist from him. Skilk hobbled his way back towards the under-seers. “Hunter-man die soon,” Skilk promised. “Hunter-man not found doktor-man.” Skilk turned his attention from Weichs, returning to his supervision of the other grey seers.

Weichs rubbed at his throat, trying to massage the pain away. Skilk’s talons had torn the skin, causing tiny rivulets of blood to trickle down his neck. The old man pulled himself away from the altar, hurriedly making his way back across the cavern.

He had been too fixated on the witch hunter to consider whether Thulmann might be the least of his worries. What if the ritual he had translated for Skilk failed? What if he had made a mistake? What if the damnable book had deceived him? Worse, what if it did everything Skilk wanted it to do?

Perhaps Weichs had been a bit hasty in trying to get rid of the witch hunter. Perhaps the greater danger hanging over his head was not Thulmann but Skilk.

“Of course the people are upset, but it will pass. Give them time and they will understand how Kipps put them all in danger by hiding his unfortunate progeny among them. The taint of mutation simply cannot be abided.”

Burgomeister Reinheckel paused to take another sip from the beer stein Schieller had set before him on the table. The man smiled appreciatively as he finished, wiping foam from his moustache. Thulmann sat across the table from the burgomeister, not entirely reassured by his words.

On Thulmann’s left, Kristoph Krieger seemed unmoved by anything the burgomeister said. As far as he was concerned, these were peasants, and nothing they had to say was worthy of deep consideration. Thulmann could see that Reinheckel was growing more and more irritated by Krieger’s indifference, but at least Krieger hadn’t made things worse by inviting Haussner to the sit-down.

“It is a sorry fact that the forces of Chaos so often afflict the most innocent,” Thulmann replied. “The corruption takes sanctuary in the love and pity of good, decent men. That is one of the greatest strengths of the Dark Gods.” The witch hunter shook his head. “The duty of a templar is to protect the people of Sigmar’s holy empire, and our duty is never more onerous than in situations such as this, when we must stand against our own wishes. Mercy is a temptation that has loosed many a daemon upon the land.”

Reinheckel nodded his head grimly. “Believe me, Brother Mathias, I do understand. I understand you have no choice in the matter. You must do what is good for us all.”

“Knowing why something must be done does not make it any easier,” Thulmann cautioned, “but the ruinous powers must be opposed, wherever they might manifest.”



The burgomeister took another sip from his stein. "One of our woodsmen, a fellow named Naschy, says he saw some strange things near an old ruined shrine about a half-day's ride from town, and thought you should be told."

"Why the deuce do you bother us with this prattle about mutant-whelps and heretic tanners when you've more important news?" Krieger snapped, causing Reinheckel to recoil from him. "What sort of 'things' did this peasant-wretch claim to see?"

"He heard them before he saw anything," Reinheckel said, "shrill, scratching noises, like the hissing of beasts but somehow different, as if there was something of speech within all the chirps and squeaks. Then he saw them, four or five ghastly things creeping around the old ruins. He says they were covered in fur, but walked upright like men: gruesome mixtures of man and animal. Naschy was frozen to the spot in horror but fortunately, the monsters did not see him."

"What happened then?" Krieger asked.

"Naschy watched them for a while. They seemed to be collecting something, gathering weeds from around the stones. After a time, the monsters withdrew, retreating into a big hole in the ground. Naschy said it looked like a big badger burrow."

"An interesting account to be certain," Thulmann said. "It might be worth looking into. You know where this place is?"

"No, at least I have never been there myself," Reinheckel said, "but I can fetch Naschy and have him guide you to the spot."

"Then do so," Krieger said, "before we lose any more of the day to empty chatter."

"Please, burgomeister, if you would send for Naschy," Thulmann said. "If there is anything behind his story, we should look into it without delay."

"Of course, Brother Mathias," Reinheckel said, rising from his chair. "I will have Naschy waiting for you at the town hall within the hour. Good day, Brother Mathias, Brother Kristoph." Thulmann watched the town official withdraw from the inn and turned to regard Krieger.

"You might try to be at least somewhat pleasant to these people," he said. "After Haussner's display last night we hardly need to do anything else to antagonise them."

"I leave grovelling to peasants to those with the stomach for it," Krieger retorted. "These backwater pigsties are a blight on the Empire, a breeding ground for the sort of ignorance and superstition that keeps our land under the influence of Old Night."

"They are people," Thulmann protested, "citizens of the Empire, no different from those in Altdorf or Nuln or any of the great cities."

"You think so?" Krieger shook his head. "I know different. My family has a very long history, a very long and proud tradition of serving the temple. For many generations my forefathers pursued Dieter Heydrich, the necromancer. That fiend's shadow still haunts parts of the Empire. He was born in such a backwoods as Wyrmvater."

Thulmann was silent for a moment, fixing Krieger with an intense look. "I am well aware of Dieter Heydrich's atrocities. I also know that the great cities can produce monsters every bit as terrible." He found his mind returning to the streets of Bechafen, turning up the little lane leading to his house where Erasmus Kleib waited for him with his wife and daughter.

Krieger chose to say nothing, sipping instead at his wine. "Does it strike you as terribly convenient? The burgomeister's little story I mean?"

"On that, at least, we can agree," Thulmann replied. "It's suspicious that this Naschy should only come forward the morning after Brother Peder's little display. One might say the timing is a bit off to be entirely coincidence."

"A trap then?"

"Possibly," Thulmann said, considering the possibility, "but the question is, a trap set by whom?"

"You suspect Weichs?"

“Or his skaven masters,” Thulmann added. “If their lair is near here, they would have agents keeping tabs on Wyrmvater. Naschy may be one of them.”

“So what do you propose we do, Brother Mathias?” Krieger took a final sip from his glass, turning it upside down and setting it on the table. “It would be a pity to ignore so obvious an invitation.”

Thulmann smiled at his fellow witch hunter. “Then we agree upon something else,” he said.

The witch hunters left Wyrmvater’s town hall, arranging to meet with Naschy at the town gate once they had gathered their gear and mobilised their followers. As soon as they were back at the Splintered Shield, Thulmann began making his own arrangements. With Krieger and Haussner bellowing out orders to their men, Thulmann discussed preparations with his own entourage, meeting with them in the new room he had been given by Schieller.

“We’ve had a bit of luck,” Thulmann told them. “One of the locals claims to have seen strange creatures lurking around some old ruins in the woods. From his description, they sound very much like skaven.”

“Rather fortuitous,” Ehrhardt commented.

“Brother Kristoph and myself feel it is,” Thulmann agreed. “Too much so, but it is also an opportunity we can’t pass up.”

“What if it is a trap, Mathias?” Silja protested. Thulmann felt the concern in her voice. It gave him pause for a moment. He never gave much thought to his own welfare when riding out to confront Sigmar’s foes. Now, for the first time he did. Not for himself, but for how his fate might affect Silja. The witch hunter waved aside the distraction. This was a chance to track down Weichs and the grey seer, to recover *Das Buch die Unholden* before it could be used to plunge the countryside into plague and madness. There were more important things at risk than himself. More important even than Silja.

“If it is a trap, we go into it expecting deceit,” Thulmann said. “That might be enough to turn the tables on anyone waiting to work any mischief.”

“You don’t make that sound terribly convincing,” Lajos observed. The fat merchant had his hat in his hand again, torturing it out of shape as his nervousness increased.

“It is our best chance to find Weichs,” Thulmann repeated. “He’s close, I can sense it, and if he’s here, the grey seer and the book will be too.”

“Besides, strigany, if anything happens to you, I’ve watched the priests enough to plant you decently.” Everyone in the room stared at Ehrhardt. Had the Black Guardsman actually made a joke?

It was Streng who finally broke the awkward silence. “Well, if it gets us closer to that mutilating bastard Weichs, you can count me in,” the mercenary swore.

“Actually, I have something more important to occupy your time,” Thulmann said. “If we really do find a skaven lair in the woods, it will take more men than we have here to attend to it, even if we can count upon the aid of the townsfolk. I need you to ride south to Falkenstein. There is a garrison there. Present these orders to the commander and then lead him back here.” Thulmann reached into his tunic and produced a scroll. He handed the document to Streng, who stared at it with distaste. “It is a hard ride and there is no one I trust better to make it in good time,” Thulmann stated. Streng scowled as he accepted the scroll.

“You just remember to save a piece of that maggot-bait for me,” Streng snarled. “No burning Weichs ’til I have a chance at him.” The mercenary pushed past Thulmann. They could hear him stomping his way down the stairs as he made for the stables.

“Well, I suppose we should be on our way too,” Silja announced, rising from her seat at the edge of the bed. Thulmann shook his head.

“Not this time,” he said. “This time you will do as I say and stay put. Lajos will stay behind and look after you.”

“I hardly need looking after,” Silja retorted. “I can hold my own, Mathias. I don’t need to be treated like some fragile waif.”

“This is apt to be quite dangerous, like bearding a wyvern in its cave, if my suspicions are correct,” Thulmann said. “I’ll have a hard enough time trying to keep my neck safe. If I’m distracted by trying to keep you safe as well, it is quite likely I’ll get us both killed. I know you are a capable and courageous woman, but if you think that would keep me from worrying about you, then you must think me a very shallow rogue indeed.” He took a step towards her, closing his hands over hers. “Please, Silja, I need you to stay here. I need to know you are safe.”

Silja looked into Thulmann’s desperate, pleading eyes and slowly nodded her head. She knew he was right. If it really was a trap then the witch hunter would be too concerned with her safety to guard his own.

“I leave her in your care, Lajos,” Thulmann said. “Make certain nothing happens to her.” The witch hunter turned, embracing Silja. “Don’t worry, Sigmar will watch over us. We will not fail.” He kissed her passionately and then slowly pulled away.

“He’ll be back,” she said, more to herself than anyone. “He has to come back.” She cast a sidewise look at Lajos. “Come along, I want to watch them go.” When Lajos made no move to follow her, she frowned down at the little man. “Mathias told you to keep an eye on me. I don’t think you should disappoint him.”

The strigany grumbled to himself as he followed Silja from the room. “Mathias said a good many things,” he muttered. “Feh! A pox on all witch hunters and their women!”

The streets of Wyrmvater were crowded with townsfolk watching as Thulmann led his small group of riders from the settlement, Haussner’s dismounted flagellants bringing up the rear. Their mood was sombre — no shouts of encouragement or wishes of good fortune and no garlands tossed to the departing heroes. No, the faces of those who watched the witch hunters go were as stern as stone, rigid and unmoving. There was an air of unspoken resentment around the onlookers, a suggestion of slowly smouldering hostility. Silja shook her head. That was Haussner’s work, poisoning the town against Thulmann with his unreasoning fanaticism. Without Haussner’s draconian tactics, Silja was certain Thulmann would have made the people see that what he was doing was as much to protect them as anyone. Thulmann would have made them see that he was on their side.

As Silja searched the faces of the crowd for some sign of understanding or sympathy, she found her eyes drawn to a particular countenance. An old man, almost rail-thin with a wild shock of white hair had emerged from a particularly dark alleyway just as the last of Haussner’s flagellants passed through Wyrmvater’s timber gate. There was something about the old man that instantly struck her as familiar, a furtive quality that awoke her suspicion at once. She turned away from the gate and began to move her way through the crowd, trying to keep sight of the old man as she wended her way through the press of bodies. She could hear Lajos grumbling behind her as the little merchant tried to keep up with her.

The old man took notice of her approach when she was only halfway to him. He pulled his heavy brown coat tighter around his shoulders and began to stalk away. As he turned, Silja had a good look at his profile and knew, knew without question, she had seen that face before. Years spent in the service of her father, the Lord High Justice of Wurtbad, had given Silja an eye for detail and a bear-trap mind that seldom let any of those details slip from her memory. She had seen this man before, and in Wurtbad. Silja felt a wave of red hate pulse through her body as the realisation set in. There was only one person they might expect to find in Wyrmvater who had lately been in Wurtbad.

“Herr Doktor Weichs!” Silja called out. Instinctively the old man turned around as his name was called. His narrow eyes grew wide with alarm as he realised what he had done. Abandoning all

pretence at discreet escape, the plague doktor spun around and took to his heels, shoving shepherds and farmers from his path.

“It is Weichs!” Silja shouted, drawing the sword from her belt and tearing after the fleeing physician. A string of thick strigany curses sounded behind her as Lajos huffed along after her. “Hurry! We have to catch him!” If they could capture Weichs, there might be no need for Thulmann to risk riding out into a possible trap. The plague doktor would be able to give the witch hunters all the information they needed. There was more than simply bringing justice to the infamous fiend; there was a chance to save the life of the man she loved.

Silja was just behind Weichs when the old man turned a corner, dashing down a wide stone path that wound its way towards the northern edge of the town.

Silja smiled. Weichs had made a wrong move; there was no gate in Wyrmvater’s north wall.

“Come on Lajos!” she called. “We have him now!” The cry seemed to lend speed to the old man’s legs, the plague doktor sprinting several yards ahead as he heard Silja shout. The woman redoubled her efforts, determined not to lose sight of the villain.

Panting, his insides feeling as if they were on fire, Lajos Dozsa turned the corner, clutching at the stonework for support. He could see Silja running down the path, her elderly quarry a short distance beyond her. The merchant sucked down several deep breaths, bracing himself for another huge effort.

“Lajos! We nearly have him!” Silja called again.

“How nice,” Lajos wheezed as he pushed away from the stonework and staggered after the woman. “Just what I always wanted, a psychotic heretic of my very own.”

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

The stone path twisted its way past the hovels and storehouses of Wyrmvater, winding its way towards the timber walls, where the buildings dwindled, giving way to animal pens and vegetable gardens. Weichs darted into one of them, scattering swine before him as he struggled to keep his lead on Silja. The woman smiled at the useless effort. The plague doktor was far from physically fit, there was no chance he could outlast his pursuer. All he was doing was dragging out the inevitable.

Or perhaps not. As Silja leapt into the swine yard, she saw the old man turn yet again, and this time she could see there was definite purpose in his direction. Weichs was trying to reach a ramshackle-looking mill. Silja's lip curled into a snarl. After all this man had done to her city, after the hideous deeds Thulmann and Streng said he had done, she wasn't going to let anything stand between the scum and the justice he so deserved.

Silja sprinted after the fleeing man, trying to intercept him. Cabbages were crushed under her boots, squawking chickens kicked into the air as she scrambled across gardens and crashed through fences. Weichs dragged on his last reserves of strength and lunged towards the timber door of the mill.

Silja saw the villain's desperate gambit, smiling as she judged the distance between the old man and the door. She would reach it first, and then Weichs would be hers. She lunged through the slop of another pigpen, the last obstacle between herself and the windmill. As she did so, one of the panicking swine charged into her legs. A coloured curse that would have reddened the face of a Sartosan pirate spilled from Silja's mouth as she toppled headfirst into the stinking mud.

The woman scrambled back to her feet, not even hesitating to wipe the mire dripping from her hair down into her face. She could see how dearly the accident had cost her. What had been certain moments ago was certain no more. Weichs might very well reach the sanctuary of the mill.

Weichs gasped in terror as the muddy figure of Silja Markoff rose from the pigpen and lunged over the waist-high stockade of sticks that formed the wall of the pen. He felt the fear hammering against his heart, the breath burning in his throat. Even as the woman charged across the small radish patch that grew in the very shadow of the mill, the scientist felt a surge of victory. The door was close. He sneered at his pursuer and dived the last few feet that separated him from safety. The old man's weight pushed the portal open. His lean hands closed around the frame of the door and he leaned into it as he drove the timber panel shut behind him.

He was unable to close the door, however, the toe of a black boot was wedged between the frame and the jamb. Weichs put his full weight against the door, trying to force it closed, but found it being pushed back. Slowly, steadily, the door was opening. The plague doktor abandoned the uneven contest, leaping back and allowing the door to crash inward. He cringed at the awful apparition that stood in the doorway. Silja's countenance was caked in black, dripping mud, her features hidden behind clumps of damp earth, but he could see her eyes, smouldering hateful embers shining from beneath the mask of mud.

Weichs backed away, dragging a small dagger from his belt. It was Silja's turn to sneer as she tightened her hold on the sword in her hand. Youth, strength, reach and skill, all of these were staunchly stacked in her favour. The plague doktor was outmatched, and she could see in his eyes that he knew it. She watched him look around for some avenue of escape, but there was nothing. Sacks of grain and processed flour, the immense mass of the mill wheel, a frightened donkey lashed

to its turn post, and a large wooden sifter were the only things within the mill beyond Weichs and his adversary.

“This is intolerable!” Weichs declared, trying to force a note of authority into his voice. “Why do you pursue me? I am a respected elder of this community. I shall report this outrage to the burgomeister!”

Silja’s voice was equally cold. “You are a human maggot, Weichs, and you will burn in hell!” She took a step towards the old man, causing him to retreat deeper into the gloom of the mill. “Fortunately for you Mathias needs you alive. Otherwise I’d sink this blade in your gut here and now!”

Weichs continued to back away, eyes darting into every corner of the mill, still hunting a way to escape. The plague doktor stopped when he found himself backed against the immense millstone. He glowered defiantly at the woman. “So you are the witch hunter’s slut? What makes you think I’m going anywhere with you?”

The point of Silja’s sword twinkled in the gloom as she pointed it at the man’s throat. “Because I say you are,” she hissed.

“We’ll see about that,” Weichs sneered back, a sardonic smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “Lobo! Kill the bitch!”

Before Silja could react, something sprang at her from the shadows. The impact bashed the woman into the wall of the mill, rattling the wood frame and knocking the sword from her grip. She felt powerful fingers clawing at her body and could smell the diseased breath of the creature fouling the air. A grotesque face leered at her with manic ferocity. Here, Silja knew, was the disgusting assassin Weichs had sent to kill Thulmann. Now the creature was determined to do the same to her.

Weichs stepped hurriedly away from the millstone as the heavy rollers began to turn. Already agitated by the raised, angry voices, the eruption of violence had completely disordered the little donkey. Braying and snorting, the animal tried to flee the fight, running rapidly in the clockwise path allowed it by its tether. The scientist wiped flour dust from his clothes as the residue of grain on the stone was crushed beneath the rollers. Then his gaze fell to the floor, settling upon Silja’s abandoned sword. A malevolent gleam came into his eyes as he stooped and retrieved the weapon.

Weichs stepped towards the struggle. Silja strove to keep Lobo’s clutching fingers from her throat, even as the mutant halfling’s flailing feet smashed into her midsection and the idiot mouth snapped at her with crooked teeth. The plague doktor smiled down at her, raising the sword.

“Such hate when all I want to do is make the world a better place for my fellow man,” he sighed. “I suppose that has ever been the price of genius.”

“You are no genius!” Silja spat. “You are a monster!”

Weichs shook his head. “No, that thing trying so very hard to strangle you,” he gestured at Lobo’s twisted form. “That is a monster. I... I am a visionary!”

The plague doktor thrust down at Silja with his blade, but as he did so the woman finally managed to gain a firm grip on Lobo’s shirt, twisting the fabric in her fist until the garment was tight around the mutated body. With a savage snarl, she ripped the halfling off her, kicking him away and sending him crashing into a pile of grain sacks. At the same time, the sword stabbed downward, but Weichs was no swordsman, and he’d failed to anticipate his target rolling from the path of his blade.

Weichs pulled his arm back, slashing with the edge of the sword as Silja rolled into a crouch. The murderous steel swept through the air just above her head, dragging strands of hair away with it. Silja did not allow him a second chance. Her hand scraped across the floor and in one fluid motion sent a cloud of dust and flour rushing into his face.

Silja rushed the blinded physician, smashing her fist into his face before he could recover, her other hand closing around the hilt of the sword, trying to pry it from Weichs’ fingers. The scientist struggled in Silja’s grip, but he could feel his hold on the weapon slipping. The contest had shifted once again, this time against him.

Silja had just succeeded in wresting the sword from Weichs' hand when a noxious weight smashed into her back, tiny arms wrapping around her throat. She could feel the creature's full weight strangling her as it hung against her back, its idiot, drooling mouth biting her scalp.

"No hurt the master!" Lobo shrieked into her ear. Silja could feel the mutant's weight crushing her windpipe. Reluctantly she released her hold on Weichs, trying to clutch at the murderous halfling, hoping to relieve some of the pressure on her throat.

This time Weichs did not gloat and did not try to lend a hand to his rescuer. The scientist dabbed at the blood trickling from his mouth where Silja had struck him and dashed out of the door of the mill. Silja thought she heard someone cry out in pain a moment later, but with Lobo growling in her ear, she could not be certain.

Silja staggered across the mill, trying to smash Lobo into the walls and the support beams, anything that might dislodge the strangler. Black dots began to dance before her eyes, every gasp of breath being drawn down into her lungs becoming a battle in its own right. Then, suddenly, amazingly, Lobo screamed in pain, the pressure on her throat vanishing at once as the halfling released her and crashed to the floor. Silja fell to her knees, sucking in great breaths as she tried to recover from the assault. Almost in a daze, she saw Lobo writhing on the floor, a huge gash ripped from his shoulder. She lifted her gaze to the beam she had last been trying to batter the murderous fiend against. An iron hook, perhaps for holding the tether of the mill's donkey, jutted from the beam. She could see blood and a ragged strip of flesh dripping from it.

Silja forced herself to her feet, looking around for her weapon. There was still a chance that she could catch Weichs. As she reached down to recover her weapon, however, the misshapen halfling lunged at her for a third time. The edge of her blade raked Lobo's body, nearly severing one of the mutant's legs, but the murderous weight of the halfling slammed into her without losing its impetus, knocking her back. Silja crashed against the millstone, the snarling halfling atop her.

"Kill! The master says kill!" Lobo crawled up Silja's body, spitting blood as he groped for her neck. Silja drove the hilt of her sword into the lumpy face, crushing the already concave cheekbone. Fragments of tooth dripped from Lobo's mouth, but still the clutching hands reached for her throat. Silja twisted her head, trying to keep away from the ruined, slobbering mouth. As she did so, her eyes grew wide with a new horror.

The frightened donkey still raced around the millstone, turning the heavy rollers as it did so. Now Silja found herself staring at one of the oncoming rollers, watching as it swiftly made another circuit of the millstone. With a strength born of stark terror, she rolled her body, forcing the halfling beneath her. She smashed Lobo's bulbous head against the stone, almost cracking his skull as she tried to force the monster to release his grip. At last the clutching hands slackened and Silja was able to pull away. She held the still struggling mutant against the millstone as the rollers completed their circuit, ducking as the drive shaft passed over her. Lobo gave voice to a shrill shriek before the roller crushed his skull like an egg. Silja turned when she felt his body go limp, having no desire to see what the roller had left behind.

Silja put her hand to the back of her head, feeling the damp ooze of blood seep through her fingers where Lobo's teeth had worried at her scalp. She staggered towards the entrance of the mill, thoughts of pursuing Weichs quickly diminishing. After her battle with the mutant, even Weichs would be able to get the best of her in a fair fight, and now she knew that the plague doktor was not likely to fight fair.

Outside the mill, Silja found Lajos leaning against a water trough, a makeshift bandage wrapped around his forearm. The merchant looked up from tending his wound, not quite able to hide his shock when he saw Silja's miserable condition.

"He got away," Lajos said. "I tried to stop him but he had a knife. He cut me, see?" He held up his bandaged arm to be certain Silja could see it.

Silja shook her head and then started to laugh.

The ruins of the old shrine were scattered amidst a stand of ancient trees. “Shrine” seemed a bit too grand a word to encompass the broken suggestions of walls and the toppled debris of columns that lurched up from the undergrowth at every side.

Naschy came to a halt beside the cracked stump of a granite column. The woodsman turned around, bowing deferentially to the mounted templars. “This is the place,” he said. “I saw the monsters over there.” He pointed with his finger, indicating a jumble of stone blocks and the fragmentary remains of a stairway that rose into the nothingness of the collapsed upper floors of the temple.

Krieger turned in his saddle, addressing his men. “Dismount and spread out. Look for any sign of them, and keep your wits about you.” Driest and Gernheim dropped from their horses, drawing their weapons as they gained their feet. Ehrhardt followed their example, while Haussner’s flagellant monks began to tear at the overgrowth clothing some of the fallen stonework, looking for any clues that might be hidden in the weeds.

The area doesn’t look despoiled enough for there to be any skaven about/ Thulmann observed. “If there was a warren of any size near here, most of the foliage would have been stripped bare to keep the vermin fed.”

“It may be a side entrance, an escape route from the main complex,” Krieger replied. “The ratkin are quite careful to leave no sign of themselves when they need to.” The witch hunter tapped the side of his nose. “Besides, something doesn’t smell right about this place.”

Thulmann swept his gaze across the piles of stone and weed-choked debris. “Perhaps the lingering influence of whatever god was once worshipped here. In the old days, men paid homage to many curious things. We have no evidence that what we seek is here.”

A sharp, wailing cry reverberated through the ruins. One of the flagellants was writhing on the ground, clutching the bleeding stump of his left arm. Snarling above him, crouched on the side of a fallen column, blood dripping from the notched sword in its paws, was a shape of madness and nightmare. Lean and wiry, its furry body clothed in a crude armoured harness, the skaven pounced on the maimed man, burying its chisel-like fangs in the flagellant’s throat. A moment later the monster’s head snapped back and its body was thrown to the ground, a smoking hole punched through its forehead.

“You wanted evidence?” Krieger roared as he holstered the spent pistol. “There is your evidence!” Thulmann drew his own pistols, watching as skaven poured from concealed holes hidden among the rubble. “Abide not the filth of Chaos!” Haussner shouted, axe gripped tightly in his hands. “Suffer it not to defile your land! Tolerate it not, whatever guise it might wear.” The fanatic urged his horse forward, charging into the swarming monsters at full gallop, swinging his axe in a red arc through the slaving, snarling ratmen. The remaining flagellants hurried after their leader, roaring their devotion to Sigmar as they fearlessly charged into the press of inhuman beasts.

The sounds of battle crashed through the ruins. Everywhere Thulmann turned he could see the loathsome skaven. Gernheim had his back to the remains of a wall, the ex-soldier’s sword dark with foul skaven blood and the ground littered with twitching bodies. Ehrhardt stood alone atop the stump of a pillar, chopping down with his sword as the ratmen scrambled to reach him.

Thulmann drew his sword, but as he tried to turn his horse towards the thickest of the fighting, he found Krieger’s hand closing around the reins.

“Leave them! We’ll come back with the soldiers you sent for!” Krieger shouted. Thulmann turned his head back to the melee, watching in disgust as Driest, his ammunition spent, was dragged down and hacked to pieces by a dozen chattering ratmen.

Thulmann stared in disbelief at his fellow templar. Did Krieger really mean to abandon his comrades, to slink from the field of battle like some frightened cur? “Let me go, Krieger,” Thulmann snarled.

“Leave them!” Krieger repeated. “It is more important that we escape and guide the army back here! Use your head, man!”



“You go,” Thulmann growled, ripping the reins free from Krieger’s hand. “I’ll be certain to mention your bravery to Zerndorff if I survive.” Without another word, Thulmann dug his spurs into his steed and charged into battle.

Squealing ratmen were crushed beneath the impact of his horse, their scrawny bodies cracked beneath its hooves. The silvered edge of his sword was soon black with skaven blood as he lashed out again and again. The chittering monsters slashed at him with crooked swords and stabbed at him with rusty spears. Thulmann struggled to control his screaming horse as a skaven spear thrust into its flank, narrowly missing Thulmann’s leg. The animal reared up, its flailing hooves cracking skaven skulls as the monsters pressed their advantage.

Then, suddenly, the assault seemed to falter. Thulmann could see skaven being thrown back, pummelled by the impact of another charge. It was with shock that he saw Krieger appear at his side, the templar’s sword stabbing downward into the verminous throng. The unexpected attack seemed to break the fragile spirit of the ratmen. They began to scramble back towards the ruins and their concealed burrows, shrieking and chittering as they ran.

“I shouldn’t like unkind stories being told about me in Altdorf,” Krieger said, wiping blood from his sabre. Thulmann opened his mouth to reply, but an abrupt change in the air stilled his words. There was a perceptible chill in the atmosphere, and a nauseating sensation, like spectral insects crawling across bare flesh. Even the light filtering down through the trees seemed to dim as if repulsed by some unholy force.

The skaven sensed the crawling change in the air too, stopping their frantic retreat. They turned in a savage, slaving mob, gathering around one of the broken walls. Thulmann could see another figure there, a pallid shape standing atop the remnant stairs. Great horns spread from the sides of the creature’s skull, massive ram-like tusks that framed its snarling, rat-like face. Ragged grey robes clothed it, and around the creature’s neck, Thulmann could see a patchwork collar of fur, the talisman of the Skrittar. The white-furred monster was not the same as the sorcerer-priest he had encountered in Wurtbad, but it was certainly of the same breed. If it was here, then the creature Thulmann hunted would not be far away.

The grey seer glared at the pack of skaven gathered at the base of the stairway and turned its smouldering gaze towards their foes. The monster chittered something in its own ghastly language and gestured with the long wooden staff it carried. The stench of ozone scratched through the air as a crackling tendril of black lightning leapt from the tip of the staff and smashed into the bloodied figure of a flagellant. The mendicant cried out in mortal agony as the sorcerous power seared his flesh, boiling his innards with the intensity of its fury. After a moment, the black lightning vanished and the smoking carcass of the flagellant toppled to the ground.

“We don’t have the men to fight that thing!” Krieger shouted. “We need to retreat while we can.”

Thulmann nodded in agreement, struggling to turn the head of his protesting horse. The maimed animal resisted his urges to move it, sinking down on its knees as blood gushed from its wounds. The witch hunter pulled himself from his saddle before the expiring animal collapsed on its side.

The dying animal must have drawn the grey seer’s attention. Thulmann could hear it spit-squeaking in its language as it shouted down to its minions. Thulmann could well imagine the substance of its hisses as he saw black lightning gather around its staff once more. “Behold the might of the Horned Rat,” it was saying. Thulmann braced himself for the annihilating touch of the skaven’s sorcery. The smell of ozone grew in the air.

Then there was a crack like the groaning of a mountain, echoing through the forest. Thulmann opened his eyes, shocked to still be alive. Atop the stairway, the grey seer was chittering and spitting in its obscene language, gesturing madly with its claws. Something had disrupted its spellcraft.

That something stood only a few feet in front of Thulmann. Hands clasped across his chest, head bowed, Thulmann thought he could see a faint golden aura shining around Peder Haussner.

Thulmann could hear the solemn, repetitive words of a prayer from the *Deus Sigmar* emerging from the fanatic's lips. Had it been Sigmar's divine grace that had broken the grey seer's magic?

*"My devotion is my shield. My faith is my hammer. The light of Sigmar shines through me and before me no darkness will prevail"* Haussner began to walk slowly towards the broken wall and the stairway. There was something unreal, almost trance-like about the way he moved, the unfaltering regularity of his steps. The rekindled courage of the ratkin railed against this display and the pack began to give voice to all manner of craven squeals. >

The grey seer atop the steps swung around, snarling at the reticent mob. Then it turned its attention back to Haussner, screaming its rage at the defiant templar. The tip of the monster's staff began to crackle with black lightning again. With a roar, the grey seer thrust the staff forward, sending a crackling blast of warp-lightning searing down at Haussner. This time Thulmann could see the deadly sorcery break, shredded to the four winds as it seemed to smash against some invisible barrier surrounding Haussner. As the black lightning crashed against this unseen barrier, Haussner came to a halt. For a moment, the fanatic was silent and then the words of his prayer rose once more, louder and more strident than before.

*"He is the rock upon which the unclean will be broken. He is the tempest..."*

The grey seer's bullying valour faltered before this second display of Haussner's faith. The skaven massed below it sensed their leader's doubt, fear spreading like wildfire through them. The frightened squeals grew into a maddening din and the monsters began to scatter, scurrying back towards their boltholes and burrows. The grey seer shouted and shrieked at its minions, furiously demanding their return. The sorcerer raised his staff in one hand and sent it smashing against the edge of the step upon which it stood. The horned ratman started to scramble back down the steps, intent on joining the flight of its kin, but the tremulous spell it had evoked had done more than it had anticipated; the fell energy had also weakened the remains of the wall. As the grey seer's hurried steps rattled the unsteady ruins further, they came tumbling down around him. The skaven gave voice to a single shriek of terror before it was crushed beneath the heavy stone blocks.

Thulmann could see Ehrhardt and one of Haussner's flagellants running towards one of the burrows as squealing skaven scurried down them. Before they could reach it, the ground shook and a cloud of dust erupted from the hole. Moments later, the other burrows vomited brown clouds of dirt and soil. It was scant consolation to know that the skaven had probably killed many of their own when they had collapsed their tunnels.

The witch hunter rose, surveying the carnage all around him. Four of Haussner's men were dead, as was the sharpshooter Driest. Gernheim was sporting a deep gash in his leg and arm, but otherwise seemed to have suffered no injuries. Captain-Justicar Ehrhardt appeared unharmed, his black armour proving invulnerable to the crude, rusted blades and rude swordsmanship of the ratkin.

"Shall we pursue those abominations, Brother Mathias?" Haussner asked as he approached Thulmann, apparently oblivious to the miraculous energies that had passed through his body only moments before.

"No," Thulmann replied, trying to keep any trace of awe from his voice. "It would take us days to clear enough rubble to get into their tunnels." He turned his head, looking directly at Krieger. "From past experience I can say we will need more men if we are going to scour an entire warren."

"Then what do you propose we do?" Krieger asked.

"We go back to Wyrmvater," Thulmann answered, "but first I want a search made of these bodies. Unless I miss my guess, I don't think we will find our friend Naschy among them."

"You still think he was a part of this?" Ehrhardt's voice was a deep, forbidding growl.

"It would be an interesting question to pose to him," Thulmann said, "especially if we find him in Wyrmvater instead of here."

Streng was jolted by the agonised shriek of his horse as he galloped through the fields beyond Wyrmvater. The animal reared back and crashed to its side. Streng felt the wind knocked out of him

as he struck the ground, the impact stunning him. When he was able to suck breath back into his body, the first thing he observed was the dull throbbing pain in his leg. The second was the arrow sticking from his horse's throat.

Streng's mind raced as his eyes scoured the landscape. The arrow had certainly come from the woods on his left; it was the only cover from which an archer could have concealed himself and still struck his horse from that direction. He turned his attention to the right, scanning the terrain for something that might afford him shelter. The thug smiled as he sighted a jumbled pile of boulders a few yards from the edge of the woods. Next to the walls of Brass Keep, it was the best he could ask for.

Slowly, painfully, Streng dragged his leg from beneath his dead horse. The real pain didn't set in until his foot was free and then a shockwave of throbbing misery exploded through his body. A quick inspection confirmed his fear — his ankle was broken. Streng rolled onto his side, reaching towards his saddle and then cursed again. His ankle hadn't been the only thing crushed beneath his horse, his crossbow had been as well. He shook his head in disgust.

Loud voices rose from the woods. Streng peered over the carcass of his dead mount, watching as three figures emerged from the treeline, bows clutched in their hands.

"I thought you were going to clean up?" Lajos sat in the chair in Silja's room, changing the bandage wrapped around his arm.

"Not with you watching," Silja said. She checked her pistol again and slid it into the holster fastened to her belt. The little merchant seemed to wilt with disappointment, returning his attention to the ugly gash running down his forearm.

"Hurry up," Silja said. "Don't you want to catch that scum?"

"Me?" A shocked expression filled the merchant's face. "I'm no warrior. I am perfectly content to leave that sort of stupidity to people like you and Thulmann."

"I noticed," Silja growled. "At least you could help us look." Their first stop after losing Weichs at the mill had been Wyrmvater's town hall to report the skirmish to Reinheckel. The burgomeister had listened with grave concern as Silja described the fight and the escape of the heretic physician. Reinheckel had promised to round up the town militia and help Silja uncover the dangerous outlaw. He would check with the gate guards whether the fugitive had passed through their posts and report his findings to Silja. He suggested that Silja might use the time to get clean and rest before the hunt. She would have welcomed the chance, but in truth she found the delay insufferable. She needed to be active, needed to be out there trying to find this madman. After coming so close and having him slip through her fingers, she felt a gnawing guilt chewing at her gut. How was Thulmann able to endure this for so long?

"I'm quite happy to stay right here," Lajos said. "That maniac already had some of my blood, and that's all he's going to get. Besides, I don't get along too well with your burgomeister."

"Are you a man or a m—" Silja stopped in mid-sentence, her words arrested by the sharp click that had sounded from the hallway. She thought at first that she had been hearing things, but Lajos had turned his head towards the door too. Silja walked over to the door, and tested it. Someone had locked them in.

"I guess you are staying too," Lajos said, but there was a troubled note in his voice. Silja walked to the window and stared out at the streets of Wyrmvater.

"Something is going on out there," she said. There was a steady stream of people making their way through the streets, all in the same direction. The only place of any importance in that quarter of the town was the Sigmarite chapel. "It looks like they are all going to temple. There isn't any sort of Reiklander holy day today, is there?"

"It wouldn't matter anyway" Lajos quipped, walking away from the window. "They don't have a priest here." The strigany dropped back down into his chair. Silja followed him across the room.

“What do you mean they don’t have a priest?” she demanded. Lajos frowned, realising that he might have said too much. He tried to shrug off the question but Silja would not be put off.

“All right,” he at last relented. “When I was here years ago they said their priest had died, they had an altar boy or something filling in for him. Well, the altar boy is still filling in.”

Silja stood staring at the merchant, digesting what he had just told him. She turned and walked towards the door, drawing her pistol. Lajos leapt from his chair, darting over and grabbing her hand before she could fire.

“What do you think you are doing!” he gasped.

“Something strange is going on here,” Silja replied. “I intend to find out what.”

Lajos raised his hands, urging Silja to remain calm. “All the more reason to stay put. Thulmann’s the witch hunter, let him figure out what’s going on.”

“I might have expected a strigany to say something like that,” Silja hissed. Lajos glared back at her, colour filling his cheeks.

“Oh, that’s right!” he snarled. “All strigany are thieves and liars! We grovel before daemon idols and help vampires steal babies in the night! We’re all money-grubbing villains who would sell our own mothers to a goblin’s harem and wouldn’t give a crust of bread to a starving child unless we saw a way to profit from it!” Lajos stormed back to his chair, his body trembling with fury.

Silja walked over to the seated merchant, setting her hand on his shoulder. “I’m sorry for what I said,” she told him. Lajos smiled sadly, patting her hand.

“You go through your whole life with people hating you and despising you not because of who you are, but who they have decided you are,” Lajos said. “They call you thief and idolater, the lapdog of monsters and the helpmate of daemons. You’d think eventually you’d get used to it, but you never do.”

Lajos sighed and turned his head back to the door. “You still want to get out of here?”

“I have to,” Silja said. “I have to do something.” Lajos nodded his understanding, pushing himself back out of his chair.

“Well, let’s see about getting that door open,” he said, “but put away that hand cannon. Somebody wants to keep us here and if they hear that thing go off, they’ll know we’re loose.” The merchant reached into his sleeve, his hand returning with a slender piece of twisted metal. Silja had seen enough lockpicks in her time to recognise one when she saw it. Lajos saw the recognition in her eyes. “Sometimes, when people tell you that you are something long enough, you decide that you are.” He made his way to the door, thrusting the pick into the lock of the door. After a few moments of fiddling, Silja heard the mechanism click.

Lajos gripped the knob, slowly pulling the door open. A quick inspection of the hallway determined that there was no guard. He closed the door again and turned to face Silja. “Now that it’s open, where are we going?”

Silja walked over to the door, opening it and stepping into the hall. “I want to see what’s so interesting at the chapel,” she said. She turned and began to creep her way towards the stairs.

Lajos rolled his eyes. “I should have left it locked,” he grumbled.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

“I still say we should get out of here.” Lajos cast another apprehensive look in the direction of Wyrmvater’s small chapel. A steady stream of people was still filing into the building. Old and young, women and children, it seemed the entire town was heading into the house of worship.

Well, except for the two militiamen haunting the Splintered Shield’s taproom, Silja reflected. After Lajos had opened the door, the two had cautiously made their way downstairs. Not knowing who had locked them in, or why, Silja decided that the best idea might be to slip out the side entrance of the inn rather than the front. Their route had very nearly caused them to walk straight into the two swordsmen, only Silja’s quick reaction allowing them to drop back behind the corridor wall before one of the guards saw them.

They were guards; the turn of the conversation Silja overheard removed any doubt of that. They’d been left behind to ensure that Lajos didn’t go anywhere while the witch hunter was gone. It seemed the burgomeister was quite concerned that he wouldn’t get his chance at the plump strigany merchant. The gruesome speculation about what Reinheckel would do to Lajos caused all the colour to drain from his face. Lajos had scurried along the corridor, finding a shuttered window he decided that he could squeeze through. Silja hurried to keep up with the man as he made his escape.

“We should go someplace safe and wait for Thulmann to get back,” Lajos stated. Only threats had kept him from deserting Silja and leaving Wyrmvater on his own. Silja felt a pang of guilt as she reminded him how angry Mathias would be if Lajos let anything happen to her, deliberately pitting his fear of the witch hunter against his terror of Reinheckel’s revenge.

“I want a look inside,” Silja said. “I have to know what is going on.” She watched as the last people on the street withdrew into the chapel. There was something unsettling about the way they had lurched and stumbled their way up the chapel steps. She could not dismiss their gaits as the ravages of injury or old age. “Come on. Every Sigmarite temple I’ve ever seen has had a separate priest’s entrance. We’ll try that.”

“And then what? We go in and find the entire town howling prayers to the Prince of Pleasure? What will you do then, arrest everybody?” Lajos shook his head. “I would have been better off sticking with that fanatic fruitcake Haussner!”

“I just want to see what’s going on,” Silja insisted. “We find out what these people are doing, then we go find Mathias and tell him and let him decide what to do.”

Lajos twisted his hat in his hands, staring at his feet. At last he sighed and nodded. “All right, I know I’ll regret it, but we’ll try it your way.”

The priest’s entrance was a small oak door set into the side of the stone-walled chapel, almost directly opposite the main entrance. With the entire mass of the chapel lying between themselves and any last-minute arrivals, Silja felt there was little risk of being spotted. The door was locked, but once again Lajos displayed the skill that common folk belief endowed every strigany. As the merchant pushed the door inwards, voices emerged from the shadowy interior of the chapel. Silja felt her skin crawl as the sound reached her ears. The voices were raised in some manner of song, but it wasn’t any that Silja had ever heard. The intonations didn’t even sound human, and the words of the hymn certainly did not belong to even the most ancient and debased forms of Reikspiel.

"I suppose that explains why the walls are so thick," Lajos commented. Despite the flippancy of his words, Silja could see that his hands were trembling. Seeing the merchant's anxiety firmed Silja's own resolve.

"Come along," Silja ordered, stepping into the narrow hallway, sword in hand. There was a heavy, almost animal smell to the hallway. The doors of storerooms, the vestry and the priest's cell opened into the hallway. The hissing, snarling voices of the congregation emanated from around the turn of the corridor. The volume intensified as Lajos closed the door and joined Silja in the hallway.

"Where do we...?" The strigany's question died on his lips as heavy footsteps sounded from beneath their very feet. Silja and Lajos stared at the floor as the steps continued, following their unseen path. They could hear what sounded like a trapdoor creaking open from behind the door of the priest's cell. The heavy footsteps continued. This time there was no question that they came from the priest's cell.

Silja grabbed Lajos by the arm, pulling him to the vestry. She pushed the strigany into the room and scrambled in behind him, closing the door after her so that only the most slender crack remained. She peered through it into the hallway, waiting for whoever was in the priest's cell to emerge.

Lady Markoff Silja tried to ignore Lajos' whisper, focusing her attention on the hallway. She could hear the occupants of the cell moving around. It was hard to judge exactly how many there were. What was more puzzling however was her conviction that they had heard the steps begin underneath the chapel. It was not impossible that a Sigmarite chapel might have a crypt or a reliquary vault beneath it, but why would such a chamber emerge into a side room rather than near the altar?

"Lady Markoff!" Lajos' voice was louder and more insistent. Silja turned her head to snap at him and quiet the merchant. As she did so, she was struck by an even more pungent sample of the bestial musk that permeated the chapel. Lajos was standing near the rows of wooden racks that held the vestments and priestly robes. There was a look of horror on his face. Silja quickly saw why.

The robes were not the white and black of ordained Sigmarites. They were not woven from cloth. Instead the racks held row upon row of mangy, ill-smelling furs. Silja cast one last look into the hallway and closed the door completely. Her interest aroused, she walked across the vestry, joining Lajos beside the reeking garments. Conquering her disgust, she reached out and lifted one of the furs.

Her loathing was rekindled as the garment flopped open in her hands and its shape was revealed to her. She dropped the disgusting thing to the floor, but was still unable to tear her eyes away from it. It was crafted from the furs of dozens, perhaps even hundreds of rats, the verminous hides stitched together to form a vile approximation of an immense rodent shape. From the back, a rope of dried pig intestine curled, ghastly in its semblance to a giant rat tail.

Silja looked back at the racks horrified by what she was seeing. The furs were all like the one she had examined, hundreds of grotesque vermin vestments. She almost leapt out of her skin when Lajos grabbed her arm.

"Can... can we go now?" Lajos asked, his voice cracking. Silja nodded, struck mute by the sheer scope of the weirdness they had discovered. It was insane. What possible reason could there be to craft one such hideous raiment, much less hundreds of them? And why hide such a loathsome secret in the vestry of a chapel?

"Yes," Silja finally said. "We'll go get Mathias. He'll know what to do."

"I am afraid that we can't have you leaving us so soon."

A man stood in the doorway of the vestry, a big brutal looking man with a bushy beard and smouldering eyes. He had managed to slip into the vestry while Silja and Lajos' attention was fixed on the grotesque rat-cloaks. He held a broad-bladed axe in his hairy hands, looking as if he dearly wanted to put it to use. But what struck Silja the most was the fact that she recognised him. Only

hours before she had seen this man in the streets of Wyrmvater. He was Naschy, the man who had ridden out to guide Thulmann to the ruined shrine.

“Try to stop us,” Silja snarled at the axeman, gesturing at him with her sword. “I promise to leave enough of you in one piece to tell me what happened to Mathias.”

Naschy grinned back at her. For a moment Silja thought the woodsman was going to meet her challenge, but he simply put a hand against the door behind him. “I’d stop worrying about the templar and start worrying about yourself.” Naschy pushed the door open, revealing what was outside in the hallway. Lajos cried out in terror and Silja felt her grip on her sword falter.

“And we meet again, my dear.” Doktor Freiherr Weichs touched his bruised face before allowing his visage to twist into a triumphant sneer. He looked down at the feral shapes surrounding him. “I was quite excited when my friends caught your scent in here, but, alas, it seems they have their own plans for you.” Weichs’ expression became grave and even his voice seemed to tremble as he spoke. “If that doesn’t frighten you, let me assure you that it should.”

The night was well along when the remnants of the witch hunters’ entourage limped back behind the timber walls of Wyrmvater. “Limped” was a precise term, Thulmann reflected. Following the skaven attack in the ruins, the only horse that had not run off or been killed was Kristoph Krieger’s, and the rival witch hunter had resolutely resisted all attempts to share his steed. Thulmann felt his already not inconsiderable dislike for the man swell with every mile that scarred the soles of his boots.

Reinheckel greeted them at the gates of the town, and Thulmann quickly told the burgomeister about the fight in the ruins. Leaving Reinheckel to organise his men to track down Naschy, if the man was stupid enough to return, Thulmann’s weary party returned to the Splintered Shield.

The witch hunter made his way slowly up the stairs, his mind turning over everything that had happened. There was something wrong, something that worried at the edge of his mind, dancing from his grasp every time he tried to seize it and make sense of it.

Thulmann paused outside Silja’s room. The woman must be sound asleep not to have stirred at the noise of their return. He considered leaving her alone, but decided that Silja would be slow in forgiving him if he delayed in letting her know he was all right. He rapped against the portal, waited for a response and then tried again.

After receiving no reply, Thulmann tried the door. He was surprised to find it open, but even more surprised to find the room empty. Out of habit, he stepped inside, eyes scouring the room for any hint of something amiss. They soon settled on the faint ruddy stains on the bedding and floor.

“Silja!” Thulmann called out. He tore open the wardrobe, half expecting more plague rats to spill out and set upon him with their diseased fangs, but there was nothing inside except for Silja’s riding clothes.

“Silja!” he roared. He’d been a fool to let her out of his sight. He should have known Weichs would not give up. It was like Anya all over again. He could almost feel his heart wither as that long ago tragedy stabbed through him.

“Silja!” Thulmann cried tearing through the woman’s room and rushing into the hallway. He found Ehrhardt, his armoured breastplate still fastened around his hulking chest running towards him.

“Brother Mathias, what is ill?”

“Lady Markoff, have you seen her?” Thulmann demanded, grabbing the Black Guardsman’s arm with a grip that whitened his knuckles. The witch hunter turned his head as he heard bodies rushing up the stairs. Krieger and Haussner stared at him, drawn by his cry of alarm.

“We have bigger problems. Take a look outside,” Krieger said. Thulmann released Ehrhardt and turned towards the window. The Black Guardsman followed his gaze.

“It looks like the entire town is out there,” Ehrhardt muttered, “and they don’t look happy.”

Mobs of townsfolk, armed with everything from farm tools to old dwarf axes and swords, were prowling through the streets, closing on the inn from all sides. As Thulmann watched, a voice called out and the mob came to a halt. Two figures emerged from the ragged masses.

"Looks like we found Naschy faster than you expected," Thulmann commented, drawing a scowl from Krieger.

"Why don't you go out and collect him for me?" Krieger retorted. It was obvious that Naschy was far more than a lone renegade, that the skaven had more than a single traitor among the populace of Wyrmvater.

The treacherous guide poised arrogantly, hands on his hips. There was a smirk beneath his beard. He shouted at the men inside the inn. "I don't know how you escaped, but you won't do so again." Naschy pointed to the angry mob of townsfolk. "We have you surrounded, outlanders. Surrender or be destroyed!"

The guide's body suddenly shuddered as thunder sounded from the inn. A smoking hole erupted from his breast. Even before the echo of the shot could register, a second bullet slammed into Naschy's face. The guide howled in agony, dropping to the cobbles as his body spasmed and life oozed from his frame.

Thulmann glanced at Krieger across the barrel of his smoking pistol. "Mine struck first."

Krieger holstered his own smoking weapon. "Mine was a head shot."

Outside, Naschy's sudden and brutal death had caused townsmen armed with crossbows to stalk to the front of the mob. Krieger slammed the inn door shut an instant before several bolts slammed into it.

"Any ideas?" he asked Thulmann. "I don't think a brace of pistols is going to keep them off for long."

"The first ones through that door won't live to boast about it," Ehrhardt swore. The knight had recovered his sword and his helmet from the room above. He might have presented an amusing sight, his torso and head encased in steel, his limbs clothed in his quilted surcoat, but Thulmann knew there was nothing amusing about a Black Guardsman preparing for battle. A look through the inn's window, however, dimmed some of his confidence.

"They won't need to," Thulmann warned. Outside many of the townspeople had started lighting torches. They had no intention of assaulting the inn. They would simply burn them out.

"Let them get their fire started," Krieger advised. "Once the smoke gets going it'll provide us some cover from their archers. At least a few of us might stand a chance of getting away."

Thulmann nodded sombrely. It was a thin chance, but better than throwing their lives away in a reckless, headlong charge, or staying put and getting roasted. He drew his unspent pistol and recovered his sword.

The torch-bearing peasants were beginning to gather. Thulmann could hear them shouting and yelling as they tried to work up their courage for the attack. Then they fell silent. Thulmann could see a dark, spindly figure emerge from the shadows beside the town bakery. There was something repulsively familiar about that shape. The figure spoke with the torch men and then indicated a wheelbarrow being rolled out from the alleyway. The torch carriers handed their brands to others in the mob and converged on the wheelbarrow, fetching up what looked to be small pots or bottles.

Then the spindly figure turned towards the inn and Thulmann saw his face. Hate flooded the witch hunter's body. He fired his unspent pistol, but the distance was too great, the shot striking one of the townsmen in the shoulder instead of the lean, elderly visage of his intended target. The stricken man cried out, dropping the pot he held. The vessel shattered on the stone road, spilling a thin grey vapour into the air. The mob parted to either side of the vapour. The man who had dropped the pot was unable to escape the fumes, crumpling soundlessly to the road.

"Weichs!" Thulmann screamed, pulling powder and shot from his belt in a frenzy to re-arm his weapons. After so many months, after all the horror and the atrocities he had witnessed this man perpetrate, he finally laid eyes on the monster once more. The plague doktor was just beyond his



reach, but Thulmann wouldn't let him slip away again. He couldn't, not after everything he had done, not after...

Silja was dead. The possibility he had refused to even consider now seared through his soul as hideous, abominable truth. The blood traces in her room, the treachery of Wyrmvater, it all added up to the same thing. Silja was dead and Weichs was responsible.

Ehrhardt grabbed Thulmann's arm as the witch hunter dashed towards the door. He struggled to restrain Thulmann, to keep him from the suicidal charge he was planning. The witch hunter tried to pull away, turning to strike the knight with the butt of his pistol. At the last instant he realised what he was doing and arrested the blow.

"You can't get him that way, Mathias," Ehrhardt said.

"I have to try," Thulmann growled, struggling to pull away.

"Here they come!" Krieger shouted. Thulmann freed himself from Ehrhardt's grip, but the knight's words had soothed some of the red fury in his soul.

Thulmann watched as the pot carriers sprinted towards the inn. He aimed one of his hastily reloaded pistols and brought one of the runners down. As before, the pot disintegrated as it struck the ground, spilling a grey fume from its ruptured frame. One of the other runners was caught in the vapour, dropping as he inhaled the grey wisps. Two men were down, but there were many more, too many to stop.

"I think we were better off when they just wanted to burn us alive," Thulmann said.

Doktor Freiherr Weichs watched as the pot carriers converged on the Splintered Shield. Pistol shots from within the inn had claimed a few of them, but they were casualties Wyrmvater could easily afford. There were more than enough left to deliver their noxious cargo. The inn would soon be filled with the grey fumes, a concoction Weichs had spent many months perfecting. He used it to subdue unruly subjects when he needed them compliant and pliable. He'd never considered that his sleep-inducing vapour might have any sort of military application.

Weichs grinned as he watched the pot carriers hurl their weapons at the inn. As he had instructed them, each man tried for a different window, so the saturation of the fumes within the structure would be maximised. Five, then ten, then still more of the clay pots went crashing through the windows of the inn. Soon grey mist was billowing behind the windows, obscuring any hint of what might be within.

The plague doktor began to tick away the seconds, mentally, as they passed. A full grown man might take perhaps a minute to succumb, depending on how much of the fume he had inhaled. He'd give the witch hunters at least five times that long. It didn't pay to underestimate such men. Skilk had learned that in Wurtbad.

Thinking of the grey seer soured Weichs' sense of triumph. The skaven sorcerer-priest was growing more deranged and erratic with every passing day. As the time for its great ritual drew closer, Skilk seemed to withdraw ever further into a paranoid realm of its own imagination. And what if that great ritual failed? What if after all it had put him through, the damnable *Das Buch die Unholden* had deceived him after all?

Weichs looked back at the inn. There was an Arabyan proverb about making use of an enemy's enemy. It was dangerous to contemplate, but not considering it might be more dangerous still.

The plague doktor watched in amazement as the front door of the inn crashed open. A huge figure, his chest enclosed in black armour, staggered from the Splintered Shield. In one arm he carried a massive sword, under the other he bore the insensible body of a man Weichs knew only too well. Blind panic swelled up within him. It was impossible for anyone still to be mobile after such a lengthy exposure to the fumes. Then he paid closer attention to the slow, clumsy steps of the armoured giant. Weichs bellowed an order to the crossbowmen.

"Hold your fire!" Weichs screeched. The bowmen cast questioning looks at him, but obeyed just the same. Weichs had taken pains to take these men alive; he didn't want all that work undone at so

late an hour. He felt the mob release a sigh of relief as the huge warrior at last stumbled and fell, admitting defeat at last.

“Now, Mathias Thulmann,” Weichs hissed. “You are mine.”

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Awareness slowly struggled to overcome the blackness swirling inside Thulmann's mind. His head felt as if a goblin was inside it pounding on a drum. And why did it sound like someone kept calling his name? He found he was unable to move his arms or legs. Something was restraining him, something that felt uncomfortably like ropes drawn tight around his body. He tried to open his eyes but found them heavy. It was an effort to force them to obey.

"Mathias?"

Thulmann finally forced his eyes open. The first thing he saw was Silja's face. It was filthy with dirt and grime, her hair caked with dried blood, eyes bloodshot either from emotion or fatigue. She had never looked more beautiful to him. He groaned with relief as he saw her, feeling a great darkness lift from his soul. He forced a reassuring smile onto his face, trying to hide the concern that had been tormenting him.

"Well, at least you're in one piece," he said, looking Silja up and down. Her clothing was torn, her body bruised and battered. Heavy ropes bound her legs together, more ropes lashed her arms to her sides, and still more fastened her to the straight-backed chair in which she sat. Thulmann tried to move again and concluded that he was similarly restrained.

"I told you I'd look out for her."

Thulmann shifted his gaze, finding Lajos tied in a chair beside Silja. The strigany sported a black eye but otherwise looked none the worse for wear.

"You're doing a great job, Lajos," Thulmann said. "I'll be sure to have you do it again." The attempt at humour brought a faint smile to Silja's face.

"Are you all right?" she asked. "When they brought you in we thought you were dead."

Thulmann considered the question. His lungs felt odd, as if they were coated in fuzz and there was a coppery taste in his mouth. He'd taken more than a few breaths of the plague doktor's concoction, they all had. He tried not to think about the many examples of Weichs' diabolic craft that he had seen during his long hunt, tried not to consider the changes the madman's gas might be causing inside him. "I'm fine," he said. "Best sleep I've had in years. I really should thank Weichs. Right before I light his pyre."

Thulmann glanced around him. Now that most of the drowsiness had drained from him, he took a more interested look at their surroundings. The room they were in was quite familiar; they were inside Wyrmvater's town hall. He found that Krieger, Haussner and the flagellants were tied to chairs in a row behind him. To either side he found the still slumbering figures of Gernheim and Ehrhardt. Their captors had used chains instead of ropes on the Black Guardsman. It seemed they were taking no chances with the knight.

Thulmann turned to face Silja again. "Weichs got you too?" he asked. Silja nodded her head.

"After you left, I spotted Weichs in the crowd. We chased him but he got away. When we got back to the inn, someone locked us in the room. Lajos made short work of the lock," the comment caused the strigany to stare sheepishly at his feet, "and we noticed something strange going on at the chapel. Mathias... it wasn't just Weichs! There were... things... monsters!"

"Skaven?" Thulmann's voice was sharp, a sick feeling growing inside him. "Underfolk?"

Before Silja could answer, the door to the room opened. Thulmann twisted his head around to see who had entered. He saw a grinning Reinheckel, his robes of state swirling around him.

Several militia men and Curate Andein, now wearing the white robes of a Sigmarite priest, milled around behind the burgomeister. The strange headpiece he wore, looking like a fur hat with ram horns fastened to its sides, was anything but a talisman of ordained Sigmar worship.

"That would be telling, now, wouldn't it?" Reinheckel said. The burgomeister walked around the rows of chairs, resting his hand on Thulmann's chair. "Tell me, witch-smeller, how do you find the hospitality of Wyrmvater now? Is everything satisfactory, m'lord?" Reinheckel laughed at his own joke, provoking awkward chuckles from his men. "We even held onto your woman and this strigany weasel for you. Wasn't that considerate?" Reinheckel began to pace once more, coming up behind Silja's chair. She shuddered as the burgomeister leaned over her shoulder, still facing Thulmann. "Though I must admit I'm rather tempted to keep her for myself." He patted her cheek, laughing as Silja jerked away from his touch. Reinheckel stepped back and sighed.

"You realise of course that assaulting a templar is a crime against the Temple of Sigmar," Thulmann said. "That makes it heresy, punishable by several forms of death. All of them unpleasant."

Reinheckel laughed again and this time the amusement of his soldiers wasn't forced. Even the old priest with the sinister headdress laughed.

"I think you will find, Herr Thulmann, that we are most religious here in Wyrmvater." Reinheckel walked slowly back towards the door. "Most religious indeed. In fact, we were about to renew our sacrament to our lord. You might find it interesting." He snapped his fingers, causing the militia men to fix their attention on him.

"Take them to the temple."

Cold, lifeless eyes stared at Streng, frozen in an expression of surprise and accusation. The knife wound running across the corpse's belly had bled the life from the man some time ago, but all the same he had been a long time in dying. Streng had no regrets; he didn't care a jot for what the dead bastard had thought about him during his lingering death. He only wished the scum hadn't been able to crawl so far after Streng had gutted him. He was out past the rocks and well within sight of his friends, and their arrows.

The attack had come shortly after the onset of night. The ambushers had been quiet for several hours, only firing if it looked like Streng might try to break from cover. Then, without warning or reason, the bowmen had set a sustained volley clattering against the rocks. Streng knew that they were trying to keep his head down for some reason. He also knew that if they had a friend creeping up to flush him out, he would hardly do so with arrows whistling around his ears. The ex-soldier took note of the direction of the bowfire and braced himself for the coming assault.

For all their murderous intentions, the men who had ambushed him were amateurs. Streng was ready for the backstabbing assassin, springing upon him before he even rounded the boulder. A bit of gory knife-work and Streng dropped back into cover before the lurking archers could recover from their surprise.

Streng listened while the man he had killed cried out in agony, begging the archers to carry word back to his wife and children. *Too bad, you murderous shit*, Streng thought. *If things had played out your way, it'd be my blood soaking into the ground.*

The archers maintained their vigil through the night. With just two of them, though, Streng guessed they wouldn't try sneaking up on him again. Still, he wished he'd been able to strip the hunting bow from the dead one's body just to make sure. Exactly what they would try, Streng wasn't sure, and as the hours stretched, his anxiety began to increase. It seemed almost as if they were playing for time.

A few hours after dawn, Streng had his answer. A group of scruffy-looking men appeared on the road, heading towards Streng's dead horse. The remaining ambushers hailed the trio, waving them over to their position in the meadow. Streng swore loudly. Even if they were amateurs, now there were enough of them to do the job properly.

Streng rubbed at his eyes, trying to fight the sleep tugging at him. The bastards in the meadow had probably slept in turns during the night. The mercenary spat into the dirt and turned his attention back to the dead man. The body was close, so damnably close. He could see the tightly strung hunting bow looped over the body's shoulder, the quiver of arrows hanging from his back. With that weapon in his hands, he might just be able to make his enemies pay a heavy price if they thought to storm his refuge.

The thug looked back across the meadow at his attackers. For the moment they were busy explaining the situation to the newcomers. He looked back at the corpse, judging the distance.

"Why the hell not?" he grunted, launching himself from his refuge and towards the corpse. He heard the ambushers cry out in alarm as he broke cover; another instant and their arrows would be flying. Streng's flesh crawled in anticipation of an arrow striking home. The mercenary dived before reaching the dead man, rolling him onto his side, using the corpse as a gruesome shield. He felt the body shudder as an arrow struck it. He held it fast, wrapping his arms around its waist and began to crawl backward towards his refuge, taking it slowly to keep the body between himself and the archers.

Streng heard his attackers cry out again. He gritted his teeth and swore. If they decided to charge him now, there wasn't a thing he could do about it.

After half a minute of desperate, agonising effort, Streng dragged himself and his shield back behind the boulders. The mercenary breathed a sigh of relief, hurriedly pulling the quiver from the corpse. Then he froze. Why were those bastards still shouting?

No, they weren't shouting. They were screaming, screaming like the damned.

Streng risked peering from behind the boulders. Someone, no something, was attacking the assassins. Something Streng hoped never to set eyes on again.

It might have borne more resemblance to Gregor Klausner if there had been any suggestion of life in the ghostly pallor of its flesh, if the feral expression spread across its face had borne the faintest suggestion of humanity, if it hadn't torn the arm off one of the attackers clean from the socket and wasn't now using it to cudgel the others. The fingers of its lean, almost skeletal hands ended in claws, black talons that were swiftly painted crimson as they tore the throat out of one of the hunters.

*Vampire.* It was a word that struck terror on an almost primal level, offending the very core of the human psyche. Yet it was the merest echo of the true horror evoked by the appearance of one of their fell kind. Streng felt it fully as he watched Gregor butcher his way through Kipps and his friends. He broke from his cover, running for the woods, injury and fatigue replaced by stark terror.

He'd faced vampires before, but never alone. Streng prided himself on being a man who placed his trust in no one, be they god or man. Now, for the first time, he appreciated just how much confidence and faith he invested in Thulmann, how much fortitude he drew from the man. Somehow, Thulmann seemed the equal to whatever nightmare the ruinous powers spat from the abyss. There was something about the witch hunter that seemed to assure the triumph of light over darkness.

Streng knew he had no such quality. Alone, before such unholy evil, all he could do was run.

Run, and perhaps pray. If he could remember any of the words.

Gregor stared in disgust at the carnage strewn across the meadow, the debris of five human beings. He looked down at his hands, the fingers splayed like talons, the skin caked in wet, dripping blood. A hideous urge swelled up inside him. He bent his head towards his hands, mouth open, his tongue licking expectantly at his lips.

With a shudder, Gregor recovered himself, hastily wiping his bloody hands on his clothes, furiously trying to get the residue of the massacre from his flesh. The hunger pounded inside his veins, urging him to fall on the wet, ragged corpses scattered about his feet. He sobbed in despair.

How could the gods allow such an abomination to walk the land? How could they suffer such a thing to live?

The sound of slow, condescending applause caused the vampire to turn his head. He could see the amused, mocking look on Carandini's face as the necromancer walked towards him. The sorcerer paused to cast an appraising glance at Gregor's victims. "Nicely done, and in daylight no less. I must say I'm impressed. You really are full of surprises, Herr Klausner."

"I care nothing for your praise," Gregor snarled. "I only want to die."

The necromancer wiped a stray lock of his greasy hair from his face. "So you have said. It is a rather tired refrain. Well, if you've had a nice rest, I suggest you get back to work."

Gregor crossed his arms, glaring at the necromancer. "No."

Carandini regarded the vampire with a look of exaggerated disbelief. "I don't believe I heard that correctly."

"I said no," Gregor repeated. "I won't be a part of this anymore. I won't take any more lives."

Carandini smiled and shrugged his shoulders. "Have it your way," he said. He turned his face upwards, shielding his eyes with his hand. "Tell me, how are you enjoying the sun this bright morning? Does it burn? Does it make your skin itch? It will do far worse to you as time goes on, as your humanity withers away and the taint of the vampire consumes everything that is left. Eventually the sun will wither your flesh like salt on a slug. You'll be a thing of the night, body and soul."

Gregor looked down, feeling a great weight pressing down upon him. Carandini always knew just what to say, what to do to crush his spirit, to cow his defiance. "I only want to die."

"As you are?" Carandini scoffed, "as an unholy blood-worm, feeding on the living to maintain the semblance of life in your unclean shell? You already know how fleeting such a 'death' may be." The necromancer shifted his gaze to the distant tree line. Something flew out from the darkness of the woods, something black and winged, cawing and croaking as it flew. The reek of rot and decay impacted against Gregor's senses as the thing circled the necromancer.

The horrible thing landed on Carandini's shoulder. It had been a crow... once. Its black feathers were crusted with decay, and the eyes in its skull were tiny, blind dots oozing pus. Carandini called the horrible carrion crow his "eyes". He'd created several of the hideous things since they had left the banks of the River Reik, employing a spell he had "borrowed" from the grimoire of a necromancer named Simius Gantt, the infamous Crow Master of Mordheim. Now the abominable corpse-thing pressed its beak to Carandini's ear, as if trading words with its master.

"Our friend tells me there is still no sign of the witch hunter," Carandini reported with a sigh. "It seems we must content ourselves with his lackey" They had come upon the standoff between Streng and his ambushers during the night, driven to the place by the vision Carandini had evoked from Nehb-ka-Menthu's spirit. Carandini had decided to wait, to see if Streng's master would arrive to rescue his henchman. Only when it looked as if things would favour the men from Wyrmvater had he at last given Gregor the order to intervene.

Gregor looked at the dark, brooding treeline into which Streng had retreated. To his unclean vision, the darkness seemed warm and inviting. He struggled to resist its lure, just as he had fought back the unholy thirst and every other filthy abnormality the poison in his body sent screaming through his mind.

"The sooner you go and fetch him, the sooner we can start seeing about curing you," Carandini said, prodding the vampire with his oily words. Gregor faced the necromancer, nodding his head slowly and then turned and stalked off into the forest's inviting shadows.

With every step, he could feel a little more of him rotting away, oozing from him like the corrupt fluids from the carrion crow.

Gregor wondered how much of himself there was left to save.

They were laid out in a row, thrown into the first line of pews facing the sanctuary of the chapel. Bound hand and foot, the witch hunters and their associates had been carried into the temple like sacks of grain. After depositing their burdens, their captors had withdrawn, busying themselves with the ghastly transformation that was occurring all through the chapel. A large group of Wyrmvater's citizens were hurrying around the chapel, strange burdens in their hands. As Thulmann watched, they began setting their burdens against the walls, fixing them in place on small hooks. Thulmann felt sick as he saw the things — stretched skins upon which the scratch-dash script and icons of the underfolk had been daubed in crimson ink. The fact that some of the hides still bore hair or displayed facial features left the witch hunter no illusions what had served the degenerates as parchment.

Thulmann felt his revulsion increase as Andein emerged from the rear of the chapel, a ghastly idol held reverently to his breast. The witch hunter didn't like to consider from what the vile thing had been cobbled together, it was revolting enough for him to realise what it was meant to represent. The devotion with which the curate bore his burden became all the more abominable. Thulmann had uncovered many a cult of perverted, diseased madmen, but he had never expected to see this, never dreamed that men could allow their minds and souls to decay so far.

How could any human being bow his knee before the infernal horror of the vermin god? How could any man make obeisance to the corrupt father of the skaven? What sane mind gave their soul to the gnawing hunger of the Horned Rat?

Isolated madmen, driven by their own greed and lust for power, tempted to betray their own race by the promises of the scheming underfolk, this was something Thulmann could accept, something he had seen before. But here was an entire community, an entire society that had given itself to the cult of the Horned Rat.

As Thulmann watched, Andein set the ghastly effigy of his daemon god on the altar, prostrating himself before it. Such was their contempt for Sigmar, the cultists hadn't even bothered to remove any of the talismans of his worship, content to let the holy hammer rest in its customary place even as the fanged eidolon grinned across the sanctuary.

The congregation of heretics finished dressing the temple to suit their profane sacrament, paying no heed to the enraged shouts of Haussner and his flagellants. They were certain of the power and providence of their scurrying god, having long ago abandoned any fear of Lord Sigmar, much less his devoted servants. As the townsfolk strode back towards the pews, they retrieved hideous furred garments, loathsome rat-skin cloaks. When they put them on, Thulmann felt his revulsion rise. They looked like shabby, horrible imitations of skaven, men transforming themselves into parodies of rats even as the skaven race was a twisted shadow of man himself. Each garment sported strange cuts, cuts that exposed the sickly, diseased malformations that infested nearly every one of the town-folk, the corrupt taint of mutation. The mutants flaunted their abnormalities, revelling in the horror of their flesh. Many put the mutations of the little girl Haussner had tried to burn to shame in their repugnance.

Bruno Reinheckel forced his way through the congregation, one of the rat-hide cloaks draped around his shoulders. The burgomeister sneered down at his prisoners.

"You should feel privileged," Reinheckel said. "We've given you the place of honour, right up front near the altar. Normally my family and I sit here."

"Heretic filth!" Haussner spat. "You dare defile a shrine of Lord Sigmar with this abomination? Sigmar will rot your flesh for this blasphemy!"

Reinheckel smiled at the fanatic's outburst, turning to display his back to his prisoners. A long cut in the rat-hide cloak displayed the lumpy, bubo-ridden skin that clothed Reinheckel's body. "The Horned One already has," the burgomeister declared, "but in Wyrmvater we do not revile the touch of the gods, we do not cringe at the gifts they see fit to bestow upon the flesh. We accept them. We honour them."

“You honour madness,” Krieger hissed. “By Sigmar’s hammer, I’ve uncovered the most diseased, depraved madmen in my day, seen the most unholy of cults, but you’ve managed to distinguish yourself. Your town outshines even the lowest of them.”

The burgomeister shook his head, laughing. Then he straightened, striking Krieger across the mouth. “I think I’ve borne enough of your insults, Altdorfer. I know that my community has.”

Krieger glared at the smirking Reinheckel, hate smouldering in his eyes. Somehow, someway, he’d pay the peasant back for his temerity.

Thulmann’s gaze was drawn back to the altar. The curate had returned, bearing with him a large bronze bell. Horrible designs and symbols were engraved into its surface and from its midsection, the sculpted visage of a rat with antler-like horns stared at him.

“How, Reinheckel?” Thulmann asked. “How does an entire community become so debased as to worship such obscenity?”

The burgomeister moved away from Krieger, looking down at Thulmann. “Wyrmvater has a long and distinguished history,” he began. “You read some of it for yourself in those books I allowed you to see, but you didn’t find all of Wyrmvater’s history there. No, not all of our history. You didn’t read about what it was like when civil war gripped the Empire, when Imperial crowns graced the heads of nobility in Altdorf and Marienburg and Middenheim. In those days it was not the depredation of the orc or the wolf we had to fear, it was the hand of our fellow man that threatened Wyrmvater. Companies of soldiers would set upon Wyrmvater, taking what they wanted, killing what they did not. It mattered little to them whether they wore the colours of Reikland and the emperor in Altdorf. They came with sword and pike, to steal food for their bellies, blankets for their steeds and leather for their feet. Year after year, this town was despoiled, forced to toil all year in the fields only to starve in the winter. Cries for help did nothing, none would raise their hand against the soldiers. The baron who exacted a tithe from this town stayed behind his castle walls, content to ignore our plight so long as there was enough left for him to claim as tribute. The people turned to the gods, praying to them for mercy.”

Reinheckel spun, stabbing a finger at the fanged idol resting on the altar. “One of the gods answered the prayers of my forefathers, witch hunter. The Horned One sent his holy children to strike down the pillagers, to deliver our town from its misery and suffering, to free us from the corrupt tyranny of a corrupt land. All that was asked of the town was its devotion and tribute to feed his sacred children. Wyrmvater had given both before, but never to its own benefit. The Horned One was not the baron, not your petty Sigmar. He did not promise things with words, but with deeds. The Horned One would protect us from orc and wolf, and those men foolish enough to think us easy prey. The Horned One has never strayed from his compact with us.”

“All it cost you was your souls,” Thulmann said, “your souls and your humanity” Reinheckel laughed.

“More wisdom from your weakling god, templar? Where is Sigmar now? Why does he not brave this temple that was once his to deliver his servants? I shall tell you: because he dares not, because he cowers before the might and glory of the Horned One!”

“The Horned Rat cares little for its ‘sacred children’. How much less must it regard men stupid enough to offer it their prayers? It has promised the skaven will inherit the world, not the deluded madmen of some Reikland backwater!”

Reinheckel snarled in outrage, drawing the knife from his belt. He moved to lunge at Thulmann, but was kept from his attack by Andein’s restraining hand.

“It is not for us to destroy these infidels,” the fallen curate admonished Reinheckel. “Their fate is the prophet’s to decide.”

The curate turned away, retrieving the heavy bell he had brought into the sanctuary. Thulmann felt his mind cringe as the curate struck it, sending a noxious, brassy note reverberating through the chapel. Andein allowed the last echoes of the note to fade and then struck it again, still harder than before. Twelve times, the priest struck the bell, each time the notes sounding louder and more



strident. Thulmann thought his skull would crack by the time the curate finally struck the twelfth note. By then Lajos was already moaning in agony, one of the flagellants had started to froth at the mouth and Haussner had lost consciousness. Then, as the echoes of the twelfth note began to fade, a thirteenth note sounded. Not from the curate or his bell, but from deep beneath the sanctuary. Thulmann saw a section of the floor sink, vanishing into darkness. The verminous reek flooded into the chapel, threatening to smother him with its overwhelming stench. The people of Wyrmvater began to hiss and squeal in excitement and adoration, attempting a perverse rendition of the skaven language. Thulmann shook his head at their delusion. The ringing of the bell was no sacred ritual, it was a warning to their inhuman masters, a sign that all was safe in the sanctuary and that the underfolk might emerge from their burrows.

A black, furry head poked its way from the hole in the floor, sniffing the air with its rodent-like snout. The ratman crawled its way into the chapel. Half a dozen of its kin followed, spears and halberds gripped in hand-like paws. They adopted wary, guarded poses, casting nervous glances not only at the congregation and their prisoners, but also at the hole from which they had emerged. After a moment, something else followed the stormvermin into the chapel, something with horns curling from the sides of its rat-like skull. The grey seer's eyes actually glowed with a greenish light, one black furred paw stroking the hairy collar worn around the thing's neck.

Thulmann cursed as he recognised the creature and realised what a fool he had been. It was the grey seer from Wurtbad, the monster named Skilk. Erasmus Kleib had told his nephew where the monster might be found, only too happy to set Thulmann on its trail. But the sorcerer had neglected to tell him one very important detail. The skaven warren wasn't near Wyrmvater. It was *under* it.

The grey seer hobbled from the hole, supporting himself on a wooden staff tipped by an iron icon. The cultists began to howl in adoration as their "prophet" stepped down from the sanctuary. Skilk paid them no notice, his eyes fixed in the direction of the prisoners. Even with the energies of refined warpstone racing through his body, enflaming his mind, Skilk remembered the witch hunter. A skaven never forgot an enemy, no matter how briefly their paths crossed.

The ratman grinned hungrily, lashing its tail as it drank in Thulmann's scent. "Hunter-man find much?" Skilk chittered, hobbling forward. There was spittle dripping from its chisel-like fangs, an air of ravenous menace on its rancid breath. Silja cried out in loathing as the monster came close. "Hunter-meat find words?" The grey seer chittered again, its inhuman laughter crawling across the prisoners. Thulmann felt the full extent of his defeat when the skaven pulled a skin-bound object from beneath his tattered robe. *Das Buch die Unholden*, the tome they had come so far and risked so much to find. Skilk drank in the smell of the witch hunter's defeat, savouring the sensation.

"Words tell much," it chittered again. "Make Skilk master-Skrittär." The grey seer stroked the fur collar around his neck again. "Soon make Skilk master-seerlord! Make Skilk master-skaven!" Skilk's body trembled as he announced his insane ambition, as the manic emotion flooded through him. The grey seer turned, squeaking commands to his stormvermin guards. The muscular ratkin scurried forward.

"Feast much when Skilk made seerlord. Hunter-meat taste nice!"

Thulmann struggled as skaven paws closed around the ropes binding him, pulling him from the pew. Other skaven grabbed Krieger and Silja, dragging them towards the dark hole in the chapel floor.

Reinheckel sneered as the witch hunters were dragged away. The burgomeister emerged from the congregation, walking towards Grey Seer Skilk. The skaven's lips curled back as the man's scent filled his senses, displaying his sharp fangs.

"Revered and holy one, your most unworthy servant prays you find this humble offering satisfactory..." the burgomeister said.

Reinheckel got no further in his explanation. The grey seer had grown weary of his slave's temerity, of his audacity in daring to speak to his master. Almost faster than Thulmann's eyes could follow, Skilk lunged at Reinheckel, sinking his jaws into the man's throat. Skilk shook his head

furiously as he worried the wound, the burgomeister gagging and choking beneath the skaven's fangs. The cult howled in horror, but made no move to aid their dying leader. After a moment, the crazed grey seer released his grip, letting Reinheckel crash to the floor, his body sputtering as life fled from it. Skilk raised his bloodied paws to his muzzle, licking the black fur with his pink tongue.

"Take hunter-meat to larder," the grey seer hissed, savouring the taste of Reinheckel's blood. "Soon feast much." The warpstone-laced insanity in Skilk's eyes appeared to intensify. "Feast much after making ritual. After Skilk make seerlord!"

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Hot, clammy darkness enveloped them, the stink of decaying meat and the perpetual reek of skaven fur all but smothering them. In the past, Thulmann had invaded the lairs of daemons and the feeding grounds of ghouls. The skaven larder was worse than any of them. A dank burrow had been chewed from the earth deep below Wyrmvater, the cave littered with the mouldering provisions of the underfolk. Barrels and sacks of grain were strewn about in chaotic disarray, some of them sporting growths of white fungus. Carcasses in varying states of decay and dismemberment hung from iron hooks set into the ceiling. Beast, man and even their fellow ratkin, the skaven seemed indifferent to what source they claimed their meat from, at least, usually.

Thulmann looked up as the hulking stormvermin who had been set as guard over them prowled amongst the provisions, taking the opportunity to steal the odd handful of rotting corn or to nibble on one of the hanging carcasses. The ratman's master, Grey Seer Skilk, appeared to have a special end in mind for the witch hunter and his companions, something he prayed to Sigmar would be quick at least, although he knew any mercy from them would be unlikely.

"Do you think we have a chance?" The voice was soft, barely a whisper. Thulmann could only just make out Silja's outline in the darkness, but he could see that her body was trembling.

"Have faith in Lord Sigmar," Thulmann replied. "Faith and courage are what separate us from these vermin. If it is our hour, then at least we can deny this scum the satisfaction of seeing our fear."

The skaven guard was suddenly looming over Thulmann in the darkness. The monster's paw slashed across the witch hunter's face. "Hunter-meat be quiet!"

Long hours passed in the pit of horror, slowly wearing away at them all. Lajos Dozsa, never the bravest of individuals had started sobbing and moaning, much to the amusement of their captor. The incessant prayers of Haussner and his men were less entertaining for the guard, but even after repeated abuse, Haussner persisted. At last the vindictive ratman let the fanatics alone, trying his best to ignore them. Beside him, Silja contrived to squirm closer to Thulmann, at last managing to touch his side with her fingers. They both found even so slight a contact comforting.

When the heavy iron door to the larder was opened, the cave was suddenly engulfed in the green glow of the warpstone braziers that lit the tunnel outside. After the darkness, even the weird green light was blinding. Thulmann could hear footsteps entering the larder. It seemed their hour had come. He braced himself to hear the scratchy, gnawing voice of Skilk.

Instead, he was surprised to hear a human voice speaking. The tones were too hatefully familiar to him, however, to draw any hope from it. He should have expected as much. Theirs had been a long game of cat-and-rat. Now that the game was at an end, why shouldn't the winner come to gloat?

"I see you have managed to hold onto them all," the snide voice of Doktor Freiherr Weichs stated as he paced through the larder. As his eyes grew used to the green light of the corridor, Thulmann could see that the physician had a scented pomander crushed to his nose.

"Doktor-man bad," the skaven guard hissed. "Leave! Skaven meat! Not doktor-man meat!"

Weichs smiled indulgently at the guard, trying to hide the fear the ratkin made him feel. "That is not quite true," he said. "In recognition of my great contribution, Skilk... Grey Seer Skilk... has been kind enough to make a gift to me of one of the prisoners." Weichs turned away from the guard,

letting his gaze sweep across the bound figures strewn across the floor. His eyes settled on Thulmann. "I need more subjects for my experiments, after all."

The guard whined, but Weichs had evoked the dreaded name of Grey Seer Skilk and it was not about to risk provoking its master. Weichs walked towards Thulmann, the guard creeping along beside him, as if suspicious that Weichs might try to steal some of the provisions while he was in the larder.

"Well, well, well," Weichs laughed as he stared down at Thulmann. "We come to the finale at last. Tell me, did you think it would end this way all those months ago when you started your senseless persecution of my work?"

Thulmann glared up at the smirking plague doktor. "Your work is an abomination, and you are worse."

Weichs shrugged his shoulders. "Still, there are worse things than Doktor Weichs in this world," he said, shifting his gaze towards the guard beside him.

"You'll forgive me if I don't share that sentiment," Thulmann spat. Weichs sighed and shook his head.

"All I am doing is trying to better mankind, to make the body of man stronger, more resistant to the inimical forces that pollute our world. There are some who dream much nastier dreams, I assure you." There was something strange in the plague doktor's tone, something that fought its way through Thulmann's disgust and loathing. Almost against his will, he found himself considering what Weichs was saying, the meaning he was trying to convey. Weichs looked down at him, and there was something expectant, almost desperate in his eyes. It was not the look of a man basking in the glow of victory but one cringing in the shadow of fear.

Weichs shook his head again as Thulmann remained silent. "That was always the problem with witch hunters," he said. "They never know when to prioritise." Thulmann nodded his head ever so slightly. They were all dead anyway, what was there left to lose.

"Doktor-man talked enough," the skaven guard snapped. It had struggled to follow the conversation, but its command of Reik-spiel had not been up to the task. "Doktor-man fetch subject. Leave!" Weichs turned and smiled at the monster.

"Oh, I am quite finished here," he said. He dropped the pomander from his hand, the skaven's attention shifting as its eyes were drawn to the sudden movement. In that instant, the plague doktor's other hand was driving a dagger into the ratman's side, stabbing deep into its heart. The skaven squeaked in pain and crumpled into a twitching pile on the floor. Weichs turned to Thulmann.

"You'll forgive me if I don't applaud," Thulmann said, displaying his bound hands. "I was rooting for the skaven anyway."

Weichs knelt beside the witch hunter, holding his bloodied knife to the ropes. "I find your lack of trust disconcerting. Perhaps I should leave you to enjoy Skilk's dinner table."

"Which you would have no problems doing," Thulmann said, "if you didn't need us for something." He stared hard into Weichs' elderly visage. "What is it you want of me, heretic?"

The strength seemed to drain out of the plague doktor. When he spoke, it was with a voice as timid as that of a child. "I want you to kill him for me, templar. I want you to kill Skilk."

Thulmann's mind raced. Weichs was turning on his patron, on this inhuman beast that had protected and supported him. "Why?"

"Skilk is preparing for his great ritual, the spell I translated for him from that abominable book he took with him from Wurtbad. Tonight he will try to work the magic, try to summon the spirit of his dead mentor. Through that communion Skilk hopes to learn the secrets of beyond and use them to gain mastery over the entire skaven race. If the spell fails, I will pay the price for that failure. Somehow, I am even more frightened that it will succeed."

"We'll need weapons," said Ehrhardt who, like everyone else, had been listening to the conversation with undivided attention.

“Just outside, in the corridor,” Weichs said. “I told the skaven I wanted to examine them. They were all too occupied with preparing Skilk’s ritual to question me too closely.”

“All right,” Thulmann agreed. “We’ll kill your rat for you.” Weichs made no move to cut the ropes.

“One other thing,” the scientist said. “I am not fool enough to save myself from Skilk only to die on a witch hunter’s pyre. I want your oath, your solemn oath, that I will go free. Neither you nor any of your witch hunter friends will seek to restrain me, bring me to trial or cause me harm. You kill Skilk and then we all go our own ways.”

Thulmann glared at the plague doktor. The words tasted like wormwood, but he knew he must say them. It was their only chance. “On my honour, Weichs, when this is settled I will not try to stop you.” The words brought a roar of protest from Haussner, a protest that was quickly silenced by Krieger’s harsh reprimand.

“Swear it, by Sigmar,” Weichs insisted. Thulmann ground his teeth. He really hadn’t wanted to draw his god’s attention to his humiliation. Spitting the words from his mouth, he told Weichs what he wanted to hear. Grinning, Weichs cut away the ropes from Thulmann’s hands and then rose and crept back towards the door.

“What about my feet?” the witch hunter demanded as he massaged feeling back into his limbs.

“I leave you to attend to those,” Weichs said. “It is not that I do not trust you, but I’ll feel better knowing you are busy freeing your friends rather than haunting my trail. I’ve left a map with your gear. Follow it precisely and it will lead you to the cavern where Skilk is conducting his ritual. Don’t be late.”

With that, the plague doktor slipped away into the green light of the corridor. Thulmann began pulling at the ropes binding his legs, cursing under his breath.

“A devil’s bargain, but it had to be done,” Krieger said. “I will not speak ill of this to Zerndorff.”

“I have graver considerations to occupy me, Brother Kristoph,” Thulmann said, managing to free one of his feet. “You put whatever you like in your report to Zerndorff... if any of us are still alive to take it to him.”

Monolithic walls of stone encompassed the cavern that sprawled before them, surfaces pitted and scarred where they had been gnawed by pick and hammer over countless centuries. Iron cages were set into the walls, smouldering chunks of warpstone casting their sickly green glow across the underworld. Smaller lights gleamed from the faces of the walls, warpstone deposits the skaven had yet to plunder exuding their corrupt radiance.

“What was that Weichs said about being late?” Krieger pointed into the cavern with the barrel of his pistol. Thulmann followed his fellow templar’s lead. They had seen no sign of life since entering the cavern. Even the bloated rats that normally infested any lair of the skaven were not to be found. Picks and hammers were strewn haphazardly around the diggings, forges and smelters standing silent and cold. There was a crawling, malignant force about the place, something different even from the stifling stink of the skaven warren, something that seemed to repulse him on the most primitive, primal level, urging him to keep away just as it had the rats.

Ahead, illuminated by the glowing fumes billowing from a dozen iron braziers, Thulmann could make out a large gathering of figures. Most were skaven, their naked tails lashing nervously behind their slouched bodies. Strewn around them, transfixed on pikes of steel, were human figures. Perhaps Wyrmvater had earned such a massacre for their diseased worship of the Horned Rat, but their butchered ruins were dreadful to behold. They had learned the true nature of their inhuman “benefactors”, too late.

Beyond the mob of ratkin, the black expanse of the crevasse snaked its way through the centre of the cavern. Great digging machines stood on one side of the crack, neglected and forlorn. On the near side of the crevasse stood a great stone altar, pitted and scarred by the passage of time. Around this was an array of tall iron stakes, a jumble of painted bones hanging from them by ropes of sinew

and chains of steel. Thulmann could see more bones stacked on the altar, a hideously malformed skull with great ram horns grinning from atop the pile. Surrounding the altar were a dozen robed skaven, each of them sporting the grotesque horns that marked them as disciples of the Horned Rat, a collar of fur surrounding their necks marking them as members of the Skrittar. These chanted and hissed, banging the ground with their staffs.

Skilk stood behind the altar. Even across the distance that separated them, Thulmann could feel the grey seer's aura of triumph and exultation. The skaven's eyes were afire with expectation, ambition drooling from his muzzle. Skilk held *Das Buch die Unholden* in his paws, gripping it as if it was some sacred talisman. Weichs stood to one side of the grey seer, his face even paler than it had been during his visit to the larder. The plague doktor's mouth was moving as he read from a bundle of papers he held, but what he read was smothered by the sound of the chanting Skrittar priests.

"Looks like they persuaded the good doktor to participate after all," Silja observed, venom in her voice. Thulmann looked over at her and nodded.

"Just be thankful he didn't tell them about us," the witch hunter said. "Skilk must have almost every skaven in the warren down here."

"And you honestly expect to kill them all?" asked Captain-Justicar. Ehrhardt. The Black Guardsman was again fully armoured, the steel of his helm making his voice sound cold and inhuman.

"Not all of them," Thulmann confessed, "just Skilk. We kill him, we can at least hold our heads high when we get to the gardens of Morr." There had been some discussion about trying to escape the skaven warren after Weichs had released them, to get to the surface and come back with an entire garrison of Reiksguard. Krieger had been a rather vocal proponent of such a tactic, finding heartfelt support from Lajos. He wished he could have shared such optimism, for Silja's sake, but he could not allow the illusion to linger. Thulmann and Ehrhardt were under no illusion as to how slim any chance at gaining the surface was. The memory of Wurtbad and the warren beneath its streets was too fresh in their memories to forget the confusing labyrinth even a small skaven stronghold made.

Thulmann turned from the other witch hunters, placing a hand on Silja's shoulder. Driest's Hochland rifle was among the weapons recovered by Weichs. Thulmann had appropriated the weapon for Silja's use. With Streng gone, the woman was the best marksman among them. They had both heard the extravagant claims Driest made about the range his weapon could cover, but now was not the time to put such claims to the test. "We will distract them. If you get a decent shot at him, take it. You may not get a second chance. I am counting on you." Silja started to reply but Thulmann put his fingers to her lips. Leaving her side on what would soon be a battlefield was hard enough. "I know you will try your best."

Thulmann unlimbered his pistols, handing them to Lajos. He looked down at the strigany merchant. "I am putting her in your care again, Lajos. Keep the vermin off her as long as you can." The witch hunter glared at Lajos. The man seemed to be only half listening to him. Thulmann cuffed the man's ear. "Did you hear me?"

Lajos rubbed at his bruise, staring meekly up at the witch hunter. "I... I'm sorry but I could have sworn I heard someone shouting over there. Shouting in strigany!"

Thulmann grabbed the merchant's arm. "What were they saying?" he demanded.

"Something about making an offering. Offering the 'blood of corruption', whatever that might be."

Screams rose from the centre of the cavern, sharp, shrill and human. Two of the grey seers had stopped chanting, scurrying forward to seize a human cultist who had not yet been slain. Even across the distance, Thulmann could tell it was the mutant daughter of Kipps.

Breath came to Streng in hot, stinging gasps. The mercenary's leg throbbed with stabbing pain, protesting in no uncertain terms his fear-fuelled flight from his refuge among the rocks. Streng ground his teeth together, trying to keep his agony silent, trying to keep it from betraying his position.

Crouching among the brambles of a half-dead stand of bushes, Streng tried to collect his thoughts, tried to fight past the fear flooding his mind. If he could not control his panic, he would die. He had to think, had to figure out how he was going to escape, how he was going to elude the inhuman thing stalking him through the shadowy woods.

Every plan he started to formulate quickly collapsed as his mind recalled the ferocity and power of the vampire, as his mind's eye saw Gregor Klaussner standing triumphant above the mangled bodies of the Wyrnvater assassins. Streng chided himself for his terror. Thulmann would not have allowed his fear to control him. The witch hunter would have found a way to prevail against the vampire, to turn panicked retreat into victory, but Streng was not Thulmann.

The mercenary tightened his grip on his knife. There was an uncanny silence in the woods; no bird song, no scurrying of squirrels through the brush, not even the soft rustle of a winter breeze. It was as if the entire world was holding its breath, trying like Streng to remain silent, waiting for some awful thing to pass.

Then the silence was shattered by the harsh, ugly croak of a crow in the branches of a nearby birch tree. Streng fell onto his rump as the sound pounded against his strained senses. He picked himself up angrily, staring murder at the stupid bird that had so unnerved him. Fury turned to fright as the dead, rotting thing stared back at him with white, lifeless eyes. The thrill of terror raced through his veins.

He had been found.

Streng turned to run, to force his battered frame to new effort. If the filthy carrion crow had found him, how much longer before the horror that it served would too? He certainly didn't want to linger and find out. He pushed his way back through the brambles, fighting his way clear of their clawing, clutching thorns. Then he froze, colour draining from his body. It was already too late.

"Gregor," Streng rasped through lips gone numb with fright. The vampire stared back at him, eyes the colour of old blood, talonlike hands still crusted with gore from his massacre of the assassins. Gregor's pale visage pulled back in a toothy smile, the oversized fangs of the vampire gleaming in the sparse light beneath the trees.

"Come with me," the vampire said, the stink of the grave in his voice. Gregor extended one of his pallid hands towards Streng, beckoning to him. Streng felt the vampire's will reaching out, clouding his thoughts and smothering his defiance. It would be so easy to just obey.

With a roar, Streng launched himself at the vampire, slamming his knife into Gregor's chest. He'd never allowed himself to be dominated by anyone, not his drunkard father, not the bullying road wardens in his native Stirland, not even the officers in the Count of Ostland's army. Even the gods didn't command his life. He was his own man and he wasn't going to submit to some grave-cheating parasite. The thug's knife dug deep into Gregor's breast, tearing the vampire's unclean flesh, crunching through its rancid ribs.

Gregor snarled, flinging Streng aside with a swipe of his hand. The mercenary slammed into the ground, stunned as all the air fled his body on impact. It was like being kicked by an ox, such was the impossible power within the vampire's withered limbs.

The vampire reached into his chest, pulling Streng's blade from the deep wound the mercenary had dug there. Streng groaned in disgust — he'd missed the monster's heart by mere inches. Gregor lifted the weapon to his face, studying it for a moment before hurling it away in anger. The wound in the vampire's chest wept a sickly thick liquid that was unlike the blood of a mortal man. If the injury impaired the vampire, there was no sign of his pain as he strode towards Streng.

"I don't want to hurt you, Streng," Gregor said. "I need you to help me. I need Thulmann to help me."

Streng struggled to rise from the ground. It felt as if a rib might have cracked when he'd landed, filling his entire side with burning pain. "Sure," he wheezed, "let me get my knife back and I'll help you." The vampire snarled, pouncing on the injured man, smashing him back to the earth. Streng gagged as Gregor's decayed breath smothered him.

"Sell-sword scum!" Gregor hissed. "You owe me! You and your master allowed me to become this... this... obscenity. Now you will help me. You will redeem me."

The mercenary smashed his fist into the vampire's face, breaking Gregor's nose. "Piss off!" he growled, bringing his other fist cracking against Gregor's cheek. The vampire roared back, seizing Streng's wrist and wrenching it with a savage twist of his hand. The vampire's other hand smacked against Streng's face, breaking teeth and tearing skin. The thug cried out in pain, rolling his head and spitting blood and bone into the grass.

Gregor stared down at his prone victim, watching as the bright glowing warmth trickled from Streng's torn face and bleeding mouth, throwing rich vibrant light into the cold, chill grey of his vision. The vampire could feel the hunger thundering through his veins, the primal urge clawing at his mind. In response to the hunger, he could feel the fangs in his mouth shifting, elongating, and anticipating the swift strike to come. The vampire reared back, opening his mouth in a hungry hiss.

Streng saw Gregor's mouth open, the dagger-like fangs pointing down at him, ready to rip and tear at his throat, ready to drain the life from him. The mercenary struggled to free himself from Gregor's grip, but it was like a rabbit struggling in the jaws of a wolf. Desperately, his good hand groped along the grass, trying to find a stone, a rock, anything that he might use to defend himself. Eyes locked on the murderous, bloody orbs burning within Gregor's face, Streng's questing fingers at last closed around something slender, round and wooden. When he had struck the ground, the quiver he had stolen from the dead assassin had ruptured, spilling broken arrow shafts all around him.

Even as Streng's fingers closed around the arrow, the vampire's head shot downward with the speed of a striking cobra. Streng shuddered, expecting the sharp, diseased bite of the vampire as his throat was torn open and the living corpse drained his life away.

Streng froze as the vampire paused, its deadly fangs only inches from his skin. Suddenly, Gregor recoiled, a look of mortal horror and disgust on the vampire's pale features. A groan of terror rasped from the vampire's body at what he had nearly done, at what he had almost let himself do. He was a man. His mind was his own. He was not Sibbechai. He was not some foul thing of the night. So long as he maintained control, so long as he denied the unclean urges of the corruption within him, he was still Gregor Klausner, not the vampiric fiend the necrarch had damned him to become.

Streng saw the guilt and confusion on Gregor's face. He did not know what strange thoughts tortured the vampire, nor why the monster had relented at the last instant. Nor did he care. He was an old soldier, a veteran of many battles. He knew a prize opportunity when he saw one, and he seized it before it had a chance to escape from him. With a bestial roar, Streng forced himself upwards, using every muscle in his body to drive the arrow into Gregor's chest. He sank the wooden shaft into the still dripping knife wound, twisting his improvised weapon so that it dug deep into the vampire's left breast, skewering the unclean heart.

A wail of anguish shrieked from the vampire's lips as Streng's weapon was driven home. The wracking death rattle trembled through Gregor's body as he collapsed to the ground. Streng pushed the suddenly weak and powerless monster aside, leaving it to thrash out its death agonies on the grass beside him. Streng delivered a savage knee to Gregor's skull when he had struggled back to his feet, the arm the vampire had twisted cradled gingerly against his chest.

"Consider yourself helped," Streng spat at the expiring abomination. He watched Gregor writhe in agony a few moments longer and then started to hobble back through the woods. He still needed to reach the baron and get Thulmann the troops he would need to purge the skaven lair.



More importantly, after coming inches from death, after being tossed about like a rag doll by an undead horror fresh from the grave, Streng needed a drink, perhaps even two.

\* \* \*

Skilk was poised behind the altar, daubing his black paws into the tiny body strewn across the ground before him. Red droplets fell from the monster's hands as he reached to the bones lying on the altar, gingerly painting the symbols Skilk saw depicted in *Das Buch die Unholden* on them.

Thulmann whispered a prayer to Sigmar and charged towards the skaven. If they could strike while the grey seers were occupied, while they were unable to call upon the hellish sorceries of their daemon god, they might have a chance. But it was a forlorn hope, even if the skaven did not hear the witch hunters approaching, their keen noses caught the scent of their new foes.

The first ratman to close upon Thulmann found itself slashed from shoulder to groin. The witch hunter pushed the shrieking thing from his path, engaging the second as it leapt towards him, opening its throat. He saw a pair of armoured stormvermin hurled back, their bodies broken and twisted as they flew through the air. He was not surprised to see Ehrhardt's armoured bulk beside him, skaven blood already drenching his blade. Haussner and his fanatics crashed into the main body of the melee, striking out wildly with axe and flail. Krieger and Gernheim were closer at hand, fighting to repel the onslaught of skaven warriors swarming towards them.

Thulmann judged the distance between him and the altar, judged how many skaven were between himself and Skilk. It was not a comforting estimate, not the sort of chances any but a follower of Ranald would care to entertain. Silja and the rifle were their only real hope.

Screams and squeals of agony scratched at the edge of his hearing, the smell of blood, excrement and death pawed at his nose, but Skilk refused to lose his focus. None of it mattered. The ritual was nearly complete. That was what mattered. The door would soon open. Kripsnik's spirit would be forced back into the world: a creature that had crossed the barrier, stood in the presence of the Horned Rat and been privy to a god's secret councils. Such a being would be Skilk's to use, to bend to his will.

The world would change; the skaven would rise from their burrows and consume the weak meat-races of the surface. The underfolk would inherit the dominion promised to them by their god, led not by the squabbling lords of decay, but by one divine underlord, by Grey Seer Skilk, the Prophet of the Horned Rat.

Skilk could feel the power swirling around him; feel the dark energies of the ritual being drawn down from the beyond. He could feel the cavern being infused with power, could see the glyphs it had painted onto the bones glowing with black energy. Skilk could almost hear the barrier between worlds being torn open as the line between life and death was breached.

Then sharp, hot pain exploded within Skilk's brain. The grey seer struggled to remain standing, but strength was draining from him too quickly. Skilk's muzzle snapped open to snarl his protest to the heavens, but all that emerged was a froth of black blood. The skaven crumpled and fell, toppling against the side of the altar, scattering the bones of his long-dead mentor.

The report from the Hochland rifle echoed above the roar of battle thundering from the walls. It seemed to resonate forever, creating an unworldly din. The swirling melee faltered as alarm and confusion filled the combatants. Beady skaven eyes looked around the cavern, trying to find the source of the clamour. Then every eye was drawn towards the altar. Skilk's form lay crumpled against the stone surface, apparently struck down by the gods themselves. The skaven squealed in dismay, stunned that their dread leader should be dead.

Thulmann saw their nervous hesitation, offering up a prayer of gratitude to Sigmar. Silja's aim had been true. The evil of Grey Seer Skilk was no more. Whatever else happened, they would know

that they had won. The witch hunter raised his sword above his head, glaring at the skaven that only moments before had been so eager to spill his blood.

“No quarter! No mercy!” he cried, leaping back into the attack. “For Sigmar!” He heard the cry repeated across the cavern as Haussner returned to the fray and as Krieger split the skull of a snaggle-toothed brute still looking in the direction of its slain master.

Thunder roared from nearby and one of the skaven was hurled back, a hole blasted through its face. Thunder roared again and then Silja was at Thulmann’s side, smashing the butt of a pistol into the snout of a stormvermin.

“You should have stayed put,” Thulmann gasped as he parried the blade of a slaving ratman.

“I thought you might be thankful for the help,” Silja replied, slashing open the belly of a mace-wielding skaven with her sword.

“I am more thankful for your aim,” Thulmann said. “We die well knowing that scum precedes us.”

Silja might have replied, but at that instant a thrill of horror swept through the skaven. For the second time, the monsters abandoned the attack. This time, however, the cause was not one to celebrate.

“But he’s dead,” she shuddered. “I killed him!”

The skaven whined in abject terror, dropping to their bellies, their every muscle twitching in fright. They had smelled the death scent, the scent that never lied. Grey Seer Skilk was dead. Yet now, Grey Seer Skilk stood beside the altar, lip curled in a snarl. In his forehead, a smoking hole still drooled a greasy mixture of blood and brain. It was impossible for Skilk still to be alive.

Part of Skilk marvelled at his survival, but why should he? Had Skilk not been exalted by the Horned Rat himself? Was Skilk not its favoured prophet and apostle? Why should Skilk be surprised when the Horned Rat interceded to preserve its own?

The grey seer turned his eyes towards the melee, searching for the one who had thought to slay him. There were agonies beyond contemplation for that creature, the breeder human with the jezzail. She had thought to destroy the greatest mind the Horned Rat had ever vested into one of his children. Worse, she had disrupted the ritual, denying Skilk the secrets it could have torn from the spirit of Kripsnik.

Skilk’s eyes narrowed as he spotted Silja. The sorcerer-priest began to draw the heavy winds of magic into its verminous frame, weaving the ethereal forces into an extension of its murderous will.

The grey seer’s body was wracked by violent spasms as the sorcerous energies flowed into it. Skilk felt a mind that was not his own hissing within his brain. The skaven could feel its evil, malicious presence, mocking Skilk as it consumed the energies the ratman gathered. Skilk tried to cut off his conjuration, tried to stop the flow of magic, but it was too late. Something else was in control.

Skilk cast his eyes down, meeting the empty grinning stare of Kripsnik’s painted skull. Understanding thundered through the skaven’s brain. The ritual had not been a failure. The ritual had been a success, but the soul of Kripsnik had not been content to infest the tired old bones it had worn in life. Kripsnik had demanded a fresher vessel to inhabit.

The presence within Skilk’s mind exploded into scratching laughter as the grave mistake Skilk had made was finally realised. Kripsnik had been more powerful than Skilk in life. In death, the lord of Skrittar’s power had grown even greater.

Skilk opened his jaws, shrieking his defiance into the uncaring darkness at the fickle favour of his capricious deity.

Thulmann watched in amazement as Skilk began to draw sorcerous energy into his wretched body. The witch hunter slashed at the nearest skaven, trying to fight his way through them, trying vainly to

reach the resurrected grey seer before he could unleash his deadly magic. Even as he stabbed and slashed at his foes, Thulmann knew he would be too late.

Then Skilk started to scream, a sound so filled with agony and horror and the despair of the damned, that even Thulmann felt himself go numb as he heard it. He saw the screaming grey seer's body wracked by spasms, his bones twisting and writhing beneath his skin. Then a jagged, bleeding crack began to spread from the bullet wound in his forehead, snaking down across the grey seer's face, widening as it descended towards its toes. Black stinking blood sprayed from the ghastly stigmata as it widened. Skilk's scream ended in a wet gurgle as his jaws fell apart, hanging limp and ruined from the debris of his face.

Blacker than sin and midnight, two great horns began to rise from the gory ruin of Skilk's head. Straight as lances and twisted like unicorn ivory, the horns rose and rose, until they were nearly as tall as a man. Beneath the horns, a mammoth head thrust its way from the disintegrating rubble of Skilk's body. It was a great rotting visage, mangy fur strung taut across the long-snouted face of an enormous rat. Chiselled fangs the size of swords hung from the abomination's muzzle, while cold, merciless eyes twinkled within the depths of its skull.

Shoulders as broad as the length of a draught horse followed the diabolic head, powerful arms reaching upwards in exultation as they emerged from the puddled refuse of Skilk's carcass. Strange glowing runes were scratched into the pox-ridden skin, large chunks of radiant warpstone pounded deep into its flesh. Torcs and amulets swung from black chains sunk into the beast's chest, exuding their own malefic energies. From the waist down, the apparition was covered in coarse grey fur, its crooked legs ending in monstrous cloven hooves. A scaly tail, yards long and thick as a python, squirmed behind the brute as it howled its malevolence across the cavern.

Vermin lord! A daemon of the great dark, an emissary of the obscene Horned Rat himself! Such things had been recorded seldom by scholars, and even then passed on as perverse myths. Even in his sickest nightmares, Thulmann had never allowed himself to imagine such a malignity. He wondered if even Skilk had imagined the horror he was summoning into the world.

The daemon howled again, stepping out of the gory husk of Skilk as a lothario might step from his discarded breeches. As its cloven hoof crunched against the rock floor, the stone steamed and slithering, rat-like shadows scattered from where it stepped, vanishing into grey vapour as they scurried away from the vermin lord. All within the cavern stood transfixed by the awful presence the daemon exuded, unable to move or even cry out before its aura of dread. The skaven seemed caught between abject terror and grovelling devotion, recognising in this horror the handiwork of their terrible god.

The choice between flight and slavery was decided for them when the hulking beast stretched its clawed hand and closed its talons around the spindly shape of one of the Skrittar. It lifted the squeaking grey seer from the ground and, like a child cracking nuts in his fist, crushed the horned ratman into a black paste.

The shrieking, whining skaven gave no thought to Thulmann and his comrades, scrambling around them as they fled before the malign power of the daemon. The witch hunters were of no mind to stop them. It was all they could do to control their own terror, to stand their ground before the towering daemon. The vermin lord's laughter scratched and echoed through the cavern as it watched the skaven flee before it. Consigned to the darkness beyond, betrayed into death by the paws of its own kind, Kripsnik exulted in his brutal dominion over the ratmen.

Thulmann looked around. The only ones still standing within the cavern were himself and the survivors of his group. Haussner's flagellants were down, victims of the struggle against the skaven.

Lajos was nowhere to be seen, lost in the tide of battle. Haussner sported a grievous wound that split one side of his face and carried on into the remains of his shoulder. Krieger favoured his left leg, the other wrapped tightly in a hastily improvised bandage. Of their group, only himself, Silja and the indefatigable Ehrhardt seemed largely without impairment.

Kripsnik cocked his head in their direction, staring down at them, eyes gleaming with horrific intelligence and wicked mirth. Thulmann was struck again by the size of the daemon, easily three times as tall as any man. The vermin lord seemed to sense their despair, its mammoth jaws opening in a sneer. It spoke, its words clawing the minds of those who heard it, profaning the very souls that endured its susurrations. "Nice meat not flee. Kripsnik rend filth for Horned One."

Thulmann felt what valour lingered within him wither as the vermin lord strode towards them, its every step sending tiny ghost rats scurrying into nothingness. There was nothing he could do, nothing any man could do before such horror.

"The voice of the daemon is heard in our land!" The outburst rose from Haussner's ruined lips. The zealot held the *Deus Sigmar* in his mangled left hand, his axe in his right. The crazed light of fanaticism shone in his wild-eyed stare. "It shall not be allowed to endure. It shall not profane the dominion of Lord Sigmar with its obscenity."

Haussner charged towards the daemon, armed with nothing more than his axe and his determination. The vermin lord regarded the witch hunter with something that might have been disbelief and lashed out at him with its claw. Haussner was ripped open by the massive talon, split from belly to breast. The fanatic crashed to the ground, wallowing in his own gore.

Somehow, Haussner's crazed charge electrified Thulmann. If a deluded fanatic's faith could be so great, how could he demand less of his own resolve? Better to die a martyr, fighting to the last breath against the ruinous powers, than to flee before them and shame Sigmar with his cowardice. Thulmann tightened his grip on his sword and with an inarticulate roar, charged towards the slaving daemon. Still contemplating the wreck it had made of Haussner, the daemon did not react to Thulmann's attack until the witch hunter's sword slashed into its furry leg, digging deep through its unclean substance. Before his blessed blade, Kripsnik's skin bubbled and smoked, the stink of sulphur adding to the cavern's reek.

The vermin lord snarled in pain, turning its massive body towards Thulmann. The witch hunter braced himself for death as he saw the daemon fix him with its eyes. He imagined the ripping talons of the monster tearing him to ribbons, but the blow never came. Thulmann had not been the only one to be shamed into action by Haussner's death. He saw Ehrhardt's armoured form, dwarfed by the mass of the daemon, chopping at the horror with his enormous sword. Gernheim, too, slashed and cut at the daemon, ignoring the spear-shaft a skaven had thrust into his side as he unleashed his mute fury on the monster.

The witch hunter felt his pride in the heroism of his comrades wither when he saw Silja jabbing at the daemon's flank with a spear she had recovered from one of the dead skaven. He'd been so wrapped up in his own guilt and shame that he hadn't considered that Silja too was menaced by this abomination. He felt his stomach sicken when he saw Kripsnik reach down once more, seizing Gernheim in its claws. The daemon lifted the struggling man to its jaws, snapping its enormous fangs closed around him, biting off the man's head and a massive portion of his torso in one bone-breaking chomp. How easily that could have been Silja's fate.

Thulmann attacked the daemon with renewed ferocity slashing it savagely with his blade. Unlike the brutal blows of Ehrhardt and Gernheim, the cuts Thulmann dealt seemed to pain the creature, but any hope Thulmann had drained from him as he saw the steaming wounds slowly closing behind his sword. There were few mortal weapons that could do any lasting harm to a daemon's ethereal substance. Even a blade blessed by the late grand theogonist himself was little more than a penknife against a thing like the vermin lord.

Kripsnik swung his massive body around, focusing on the little human slicing away at its leg. The daemon snarled at the impudent little maggot. The daemon leaned down, sweeping its enormous hand along the ground. Silja dodged aside as the daemon's claws flashed past her, but Thulmann, intent on his attack, was too slow in reacting. The back of Kripsnik's hand threw Thulmann, sending him rolling across the ground. The witch hunter stopped himself just as he rolled near the edge of the crevasse, eyes staring into the limitless gloom that stretched away beneath him.

“Templar,” a shrill, terrified voice called out to him. At first Thulmann thought the daemon’s blow had rattled his senses, but as he painfully regained his feet, it came to him again. “Templar, you can’t beat him that way.”

“Then I’ll die trying, Weichs,” Thulmann hissed. He watched in agony as the vermin lord tried to stomp Silja with its hoof, the woman narrowly avoiding the daemon’s pounding step. He searched the ground near him for his sword, settling for a rusty skaven blade when he didn’t see his own.

“It will kill her,” the plague doktor said. “It will kill us all if you don’t listen to me!”

This time Thulmann turned to face the heretic. At some point during the melee, Weichs had sought shelter beneath the huge skaven mining machines, cowering beneath their steel frames like a cringing cur. “Why should I believe you?” Thulmann demanded.

“Because I have read this,” Weichs said. The plague doktor reached beneath his coat, removing the bloodstained bulk of *Das Buch die Unholden*. His own hide hadn’t been the only thing Weichs had tried to escape with during the battle. “I didn’t tell Skilk everything. I kept a little back, like how to deal with this horror should it actually respond to his ritual!”

Thulmann glared at the physician. “Then do so, you scum!” Weichs shook his head.

“I don’t have the stomach for that sort of thing. I am quite content to leave that to fools like you.” Weichs returned his hand to the inside of his coat, removing something else from the pockets within. He tossed a small sackcloth bag to Thulmann. “According to the book, the thing Skilk called into being exists only partially in our world. The rest of it is in whatever hell it came from. Cast the powder in that bag into its face, and it will materialise fully within our reality.”

Thulmann fought down the impulse to hurl the packet into the crevasse. He could feel its cool, clammy evil, the unclean touch of sorcery about it. He glared back at Weichs, fingering the edge of the sword he held.

“Don’t you understand! If you make it real, then it will act like any normal beast. It will bleed, templar. Steel will make it bleed!”

Thulmann stared again at the little bag in his hand. It was vile, the foul product of sorcery, the handiwork of a murderous heretic. He couldn’t use such filth. There had to be another way, but he knew there was no time to find one. He had to act. The sorcerer’s filth was his only chance, their only chance. If he acted now, he could use it to send this abomination back to the abyss. He could force its evil to do good. Briefly, the image of Wilhelm Klausner and the evil he had embraced in the name of good flashed through his mind. The laughing faces of Freiherr Weichs and Erasmus Kleib danced before his eyes, men who had become monsters because they thought they could bring good from evil.

The last of his doubts faded as he saw the vermin lord turn towards Silja. With a howl of savage fury, Thulmann charged back towards the daemon. He tore open the sackcloth, hurling the black powder within into the rat-like face of Kripsnik. The daemon shielded its eyes with its claws, recoiling from the cloud of dust. Thulmann grabbed Silja, pushing her away from the daemon’s lashing tail. He waited, watching, expecting something to happen. The daemon did not so much as cry out, instead sneering down at him as the cloud dissipated and it unshielded its eyes. The powder had done nothing. Weichs had lied to him. He’d trusted the word of a heretic and he would die for it.

Then Kripsnik threw back its head, bellowing in pain as Ehrhardt’s blade slashed into its leg once more. This time the wound did not close behind the steel. This time thick black blood jetted from the wound. This time tendons parted before the steel, bone splintered and flesh tore. The vermin lord howled as its maimed foot crumpled beneath its weight and it crashed to the ground with a thunderous impact.

Kripsnik reared its head, glaring straight into Thulmann’s eyes. It knew what had happened and who had caused it. Thulmann turned and fled as the daemon scurried after him, crawling on all fours like some titanic rat. The witch hunter leapt across the crevasse, joining Weichs on the far side. The vermin lord followed him, lunging across the pit, crashing on the far side with an impact that set the

digging machines rattling. Weichs retreated before the enraged daemon, but Thulmann turned and slashed at its face, cutting deep into its muzzle.

With a bellowing roar, Kripsnik lunged for Thulmann, smashing into the mining machines head on. Thulmann was thrown back by the daemon's impact, knocked from his feet as the mining machines shuddered across the floor. The world exploded into a whining, shrieking clamour. Thulmann risked a look back at the enraged daemon. It was only a few yards behind him, but pursuing the witch hunter had become the least of its concerns. In its headlong charge, the daemon's massive bulk had struck the line of machines with the force of a thunderbolt. That impact had driven Kripsnik's body hard against a pointed drill, the fury of its velocity impaling the monster's chest on the device. The violence of its attempt to free itself had somehow caused the machine to become active, the churning drill slowly digging its way deeper and deeper into Kripsnik's struggling bulk.

Thulmann watched as the shrieking, wailing monster tried to pull itself free, oblivious to the path its struggles were leading it. There was almost something human about the expression that came over the vermin lord's features as it suddenly felt its hindquarters hanging over empty space, but Kripsnik's surprise had come too late to aid him. Unbalanced, the hulking daemon fell into the crevasse, the immense weight of the digging machine hurtling after it into oblivion.

As the daemon disappeared from sight, Thulmann could feel the oppression in the air vanish and the chill stink of sorcery fade. However they had been brought about, the powers of Old Night had been driven back.

"Masterful, absolutely masterful." Thulmann turned his eyes from the crevasse to see Weichs creeping towards him. The witch hunter stalked towards the old man, causing him to recoil in terror. "Your promise! You swore an oath!" Thulmann glared at the plague doktor, seizing the tome the old man cradled in his arms. Weichs resisted for a second before deciding to relinquish his claim on the tome. The book was a small price to pay for his liberty. Thulmann studied the human-skin binding for a moment and then stuffed it under his arm, trying to contain his disgust. He stared again at Weichs, regretting the desperation that had made him agree to the villain's bargain. Weichs smiled back at him, recognising the frustrated outrage in his expression.

"You aren't going to let him go," Silja exclaimed. Thulmann turned, discovering with some surprise that Silja and Ehrhardt had crossed the crevasse to join him. The witch hunter shook his head sadly.

"I swore an oath," he said sadly. Silja gave him an incredulous look, as if doubting his sanity.

"Given to a maggot, a murdering parasite," she swore. "Such an oath counts for nothing!" Weichs trembled as the woman turned on him. "I didn't swear any oath." Thulmann grabbed her by the arm, pulling her back to him.

"I spoke for you as well as myself," Thulmann said. "My oath may not mean anything to you, but it does to me."

Weichs grinned at the two lovers, smoothing out his coat. He flicked a snide salute to Thulmann and turned to leave. He found his way blocked by Ehrhardt's armoured bulk.

"A templar of Sigmar does not speak for a knight of Morr," Ehrhardt's sepulchral voice intoned. The knight's armoured gauntlet closed around Weichs' shoulder, lifting him from the ground. The plague doktor turned ashen with terror.

"Stop him, Thulmann! Call him off!" he screamed. Thulmann smiled as Ehrhardt carried Weichs towards the crevasse.

"You heard the man, Herr Doktor," the witch hunter said. "The Order of Sigmar has no right to speak for the Black Guard of Morr."

A litany of curses and pleas rolled from Weichs as he struggled in Ehrhardt's grip. At last the knight stood beside the crevasse. He extended his arm, holding Weichs above the black pit's depths. "I think I'll let you go after all," the knight said. "Morr can be most merciful."

Weichs' last scream seemed to linger after him as he plummeted into the abyss.

Thulmann held Silja close to him as they made their way back through the carnage. She found his sword lying near the altar and he found one of his pistols lying beneath a mangled ratman's corpse. Ehrhardt made his way over to Krieger, helping the injured man back to his feet. Whatever the Black Guardsman felt about the man, he was not going to abandon him in the black depths of the skaven lair.

As they made their way back towards the tunnels, Thulmann paused beside one of the smouldering warystone lanterns. He watched its eerie green flames dance and shimmer. Silja sensed the change that came over him.

"What is it?" she asked. He looked at her and then down at the book cradled under his arm. *Das Buch die Unholden* glistened in the unholy light.

"So much suffering, so much death over this abhorrent thing," Thulmann said, "so much evil unleashed in the world because of one book, one madman's collection of corruption. It would be so easy to destroy it, here, now."

"Why don't you?" Silja asked. "Tell Zerndorff you didn't find it. Tell him you couldn't stop it from being destroyed."

Thulmann sighed. "It is a lie that would sit ill with me. For better or worse, Sforza Zerndorff is my superior, his order is my command." He held Silja tighter. "He is also a man who has a habit of seeing through deception. He is most zealous in pursuing those who offend him. No place in the Empire would be safe for us if I did that."

Thulmann felt the warmth of Silja Markoff against him. He felt the clammy chill of *Das Buch die Unholden* under his arm. He watched the green flames flicker and dance.

Even after all these years, he still wanted things both ways.

## EPILOGUE

Oblivion. Gregor Klausner embraced it eagerly, desperately as his corrupt body slipped back into the death it had perverted. His every waking moment had become a struggle, a battle against the unclean filth within him and the obscenity he had become. How much longer could he have continued that struggle, that hopeless fight to remain human? How much longer before he was a thing like Sibbechai, before in mind as well as body he became one of the accursed undead, a vampire? It was better to die while he was still a man and not a monster.

Harsh grey light banished the darkness of oblivion, the tangy odour of blood exciting his senses, setting the abomination within him on fire. Gregor's tongue licked his lips, finding them coated in warm, wet blood. The vampire could not subdue the hunger, licking his face clean before he could even begin to resist. When the compulsion faded, he reached to his chest, shocked to find that the arrow that had pierced his heart was gone. He turned his head, finding a body lying only a few feet away. For a moment he wondered if against all odds he had managed to overcome Streng even after having his heart skewered, but a closer look showed him the body was not that of Streng, but some poor shepherd. Gregor saw the dead man's youthful face, his features twisted in terror, his life stripped from him in a moment of crimson horror. Gregor hung his head, gripped by misery. He couldn't even remember killing the boy. Somehow that made the murder even more terrible.

"Don't carry on so," a condescending voice said. "You didn't do anything to him." Gregor looked up, finding the necromancer Carandini standing nearby, one of his cadaverous crows perched on his shoulder. "The poor lad simply had the misfortune to fall on somebody's knife." The Tilean made a show of replacing his bloody dagger in its sheath.

"Why?" Gregor demanded. The necromancer smiled at him.

"We needed his blood," Carandini replied. Gregor shook his head.

"No, why did you bring me back?" he asked. "Why couldn't you let me stay dead?"

"I was tempted," Carandini warned. "I must say you disappointed me terribly. That man was injured and unarmed, yet somehow you conspired to let him kill you. One might think you have some kind of death wish."

Gregor glared at the sneering sorcerer. "I only want to die. You had no right to bring me back."

"I thought you might still be useful to me," Carandini said. "That was all the reason I needed." The necromancer removed a small silver icon from his pocket. Gregor cringed when he saw it, feeling it sting his eyes. The Tilean laughed at his discomfort. "You see, I know you will try harder next time, because you know now that I can bring you back any time I choose. Every time you are restored a little bit less of what was once you comes back. The vampire becomes even stronger."

Gregor tried to force himself to look at the icon Carandini held, but knew he could not. The light of Sigmar had abandoned him, now he was a profane thing and the talismans of his god were anathema to him. Even the simple silver hammer Carandini held reviled him.

"There is only one way you will find peace, vampire," Carandini said. "You will help me gain possession of *Das Buch die Unholden*. Only then will I free you from the curse of the undead."

"Streng escaped," Gregor said, feeling the full weight of his defeat crushing his spirit. "He can't lead us to Thulmann and the book now."

Carandini laughed, patting the decaying head of the carrion crow. "You lost him," he said. "I did not. Even now, one of my little pretties is following him, shadowing his every move. When he returns to the witch hunter, we will know it."



## 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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