

WITCH FINDER

The second Mathias Thulmann novel • By C L Werner

MATHIAS THULMANN, THE relentless witch hunter, is back. Accompanied by his brutish henchman Streng, he travels to Wurtbad, hot on the trail of an unhallowed book and pursued by the evil vampire Sibbechai. However, an outbreak of plague locks down the city and threatens the life of the intrepid witch hunter. Meanwhile, an old nemesis from Thulmann's past is hatching a diabolical scheme, the townspeople are hostile, the local authorities have their own hidden agendas and that's not all. Where there is plague, there are always rats...



C. L. Werner has written a number of Lovecraftian pastiches and pulp-style horror stories for assorted small press publications. More recently the prestigious pages of Inferno! have been infiltrated by the dark imaginings of the writer's mind. Currently living in the American south-west, he continues to write stories of mayhem and madness set in the Warhammer World.

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from WITCH FINDER

THE SUN SLOWLY sank into the west, its last rays smouldering like a dying ember behind the gaps in the grey clouds. Night would soon fall upon the land, strengthening the shadows and heralding the supremacy of darkness. Travellers upon the road would hurry to find sanctuary, however mean and humble, to huddle about warm fires and hide behind locked doors, praying that the horrors of Old Night would pass them by. The eyes of such men were ever on the lookout for the flickering lantern of a roadside inn or coaching house, seeking the welcoming watchlight as keenly as they did the approach of some denizen of the dark.

No such eager hope turned the heads of the two men now riding slowly down the old dirt road. They had seen too often the dread shapes within which Old Night clothed itself. Their fears could never hope to conjure an apparition as frightful as those that walked the corridors of memory. And they had seen that there was no safety from darkness behind locked doors or beside roaring hearths.

The foremost of the two horsemen was a squat, stocky figure, his bulk straining at the weathered mass of a leather tunic reinforced with steel studs. A simple scabbard, the surface scarred where some marking had been crudely removed, swung from his hip. The sword held within was unremarkable, like any that might have been issued to the Empire's many armies. Like the crossbow holstered on the saddle of the rider's horse, it was the simple but effective tool of a professional soldier.

But the rider no longer considered himself as such. Still, old habits, like bad habits, were difficult for Streng to be rid of.

The bearded mercenary lifted the fur waterskin hanging from a strap across his chest and took a deep swallow of something far more vibrant than water. Streng grunted appreciatively, letting the skin fall, the liquid within sloshing noisily as it slapped against his hip.

He preferred beer. It was a much more sociable drink, and it took a vast quantity to put him down. Vodka was a much harsher spirit, and overindulging in its favours could result in assorted aches and bruises, a visit to the local dungeon, or a bill for damages. Still, his time campaigning in the north had taught Streng one unassailable fact – there was nothing better to chase away the cold of winter than a bottle of good Kislevite. He only wished he'd been able to liberate more of it from the wine cellar of the Grey Crone back in Klausberg. Of course, the innkeeper would have noticed the disappearance of more than two bottles. Reikhertz had been a decent enough host, and Streng would have hated to bash his skull in over something as minor as a few bottles of vodka.

He sucked at his teeth, growing thoughtful. There would be a fair bit of coin coming his way when they reached Wurtbad. The Temple of Sigmar's gold was more honest than most he had earned during his brutal life, but it spent just as quickly. The mercenary smiled. He should manage a week of drinking, gambling, whoring and fighting when he reached the city. Assuming, of course, that he stayed one step ahead of the watch. And allowing that his employer didn't have other plans. Streng cast a sour look at the rider following in his wake.

The witch hunter was a black shadow upon the back of his white steed. His cloak whipped about him in the wind that blew from the north, his face hidden beneath the brim of his tall hat. The weapons that hung from the templar's belt were more extravagant than those borne by Streng: a pair of pistols with their dark-stained grips inlaid with gold; a silvered longsword with a gilded pommel sheathed in a dragonskin scabbard. But then, everything about the witch hunter was meant to provoke the onlooker. To evoke feelings of respect and pious terror.

Streng looked away, hawking the aftertaste of the vodka from his mouth and spitting it into the dust. From the arch of his companion's shoulders, the way his chin sagged toward his chest, Streng could tell he was deep in thought. He could well imagine the paths down which those thoughts roamed. For he himself had travelled with Mathias Thulmann, templar of the Order of Sigmar, far too long to deceive himself that his employer's mind was considering cold tankards of ale and hot-blooded tavern wenches.

Well, perhaps Streng might be able to indulge those vices for a day or two. At least when they reached Wurtbad, and before the witch hunter had need of his services again.

'PLEASE.' THE BEGGING voice gnawed at Thulmann's mind, as fresh in his memory as the dark day in which the words had been spoken. 'She is just a child!' The witch hunter could still smell the sorry stench of pig dung and spoiled cabbage, the ugly odour of decay and poverty. 'For Sigmar's sake, my lord, show mercy!'

Thulmann's calfskin gloves tightened their grip on the reins of his steed. How many times had he thought back to that loathsome, black day in Silbermund? How many pleasant moments had that same recollection reached out to kill?

The memory was burned into his brain like the brand of some malevolent daemon, forever festering there until he answered the final call of Morr, lord of death.

'For Sigmar's sake, I cannot let her live.' The words had tasted like wormwood as he spoke them, spitting them from his mouth as though they would choke him. The woman had fallen to her knees then, sobbing, wailing, washing the filth from his horse's hooves with her tears.

How many ugly little villages had he travelled through, always one step behind the thrice-accursed heretic he was in pursuit of? And how many times had he arrived too late to bring his quarry to ground? Too late to find anything but the monster's handiwork, like the calling card of a daemon. Thulmann knew that it was no coincidence. His quarry was

taunting him, mocking his efforts. Daring the witch hunter to make good the chase.

He thought again of the little girl. How long had she lived? Six summers? Seven? Surely she had seen no more than eight. The child had been kicked by a mule, her tiny leg snapped and broken. It was feared she would never heal, for the break was too complex for the poor farmers of Silbermund to set. The little girl was destined to be a cripple – if she survived at all. But then, one of the gods had smiled down on the village when a traveller chanced to tarry awhile. He was a healer, a man of medicine. His promise was that he would look upon the child, and help her if he could.

Oh yes, the gods had indeed smiled upon Silbermund. The Dark Gods.

Thulmann could see the faces of the farmers, glaring at him from every corner of the square, hate boiling in their eyes. No, they would not challenge him. For they knew it had to be done. But how they hated him for it. And how he had grown to hate himself. Even the girl's father could not challenge him, but instead stood slumped against the wall of the blacksmith's shop. His gaze staring into nothingness. His face twisted in pain.

There were some heretic philosophers and mystics who dared claim that Chaos did not embody the force of evil. They said that it was like fire or water – a worldly force, a force of nature neither good nor evil. Was water evil when the banks of the Reik swelled and drowned a village? Was fire evil when it escaped the hearth and laid waste to the most part of an entire town? Such was their argument. And such men were more dangerous than the vermin who bowed and grovelled before the Dark Gods themselves, for they cloaked their degeneracy behind words like 'reason' and 'science'. They did not fear the judgement of Sigmar because they saw no evil in what they did, even when that evil glared back at them from the darkness of their deeds.

Herr Doktor Freiherr Weichs. That name haunted Thulmann, mocking him from the shadows. He had first learned of this deranged physician from a Sigmarite priest named Haeften.

Weichs had been employed by the Baron von Lichtberg to act as physician to his house. It was an appointment that ended in a hideous tragedy.

One of the village girls had been with child, a child sired by the baron's son. To avoid complications, the foolish girl had turned to Weichs, begged him to find a way to undo what had been done. The doktor, may all the gods damn his soul, had prescribed a potion he promised would dissolve the seedling life as harmlessly as it had been created. But that potion had not contained hope. It had contained the seeds of mutation. Of death. The girl's own mother reported what had happened to the village priest, when it became clear to see that the life growing within her belly was no clean thing, but a spawn of darkness.

Haeften had, in turn, informed the temple and they had sent Thulmann to assess the matter. It took some time to determine the cause of the girl's condition. At first, he had thought the seed of the mutation might lie with the father, and so had put Reinhardt von Lichtberg to the test as well as Mina Kurtz. But later, much later, Mina had confessed her shame. Confessed what she had asked Weichs to do. But by then it was too late. The heretic had seen which way the wind was blowing and fled. Thulmann tarried only long enough to dispose of Mina Kurtz, and the unclean life within her. He then set out on the trail of the man truly responsible for the girl's destruction.

THULMANN REMEMBERED CLOSING his ears to the sounds of wailing that filled the air. He had looked toward the pile of wood heaped in the centre of the square; at the stake rising above it; at the tiny form lashed to it. There was a faction of the Order of Sigmar who held that suffering was needed to purge the soul of any who were tainted by Chaos. Sforza Zerndorff was one such man, the late Lord Protector Thaddeus Gamow had been another. They claimed it was necessary to wrench every last scream from a heretic before extinction. For only thus could the witch hunter ensure the soul of the condemned might be pure enough to enter the sight of Sigmar on passing through the Gates of Morr.

The witch hunter stared at the tiny figure. At the little girl slumped against the pole. What crime had tainted this child's soul? She was surely guiltless – a victim of heresy, not a heretic herself. It would take a cruel, calloused soul like Zerndorff not to see that. If a child had to be tortured for the greater glory of Sigmar, then he was not the same god that Thulmann worshipped and served.

Thulmann had commanded the innkeeper to produce his strongest grog, and then had Streng feed it to the child until she fell into a drunkard's stupor. He hoped that it was enough, that she would not regain her senses when the flames did their work.

A child's broken leg, Thulmann wondered at the corrupt mind that could seize upon such misery and exploit it. That could subject a small child to his abominable experiments. Weichs had set the child's leg, then wrapped it in a poultice which, he assured the girl's parents, would speed the healing and ensure the bone would not knit crookedly. Then he had left, words of gratitude following him as he departed the village. Two days later, Thulmann had arrived in Silbermund and asked the villagers if a stranger, a tall elderly man who might be presenting himself as a doctor, had passed their way. His enquiries led him to the child.

The witch hunter shuddered as he remembered that moment – just as he recalled so many similar moments. He'd voiced a prayer to Sigmar that even Weichs would not be so depraved, that he had spared the girl his inhuman attentions. Then, slowly, he had cut the poultice away from her leg. There had been screams then, the girl's parents wailing in horror. Thulmann himself turned pale. He had seen worse things, but never on the body of a child. Coarse black hair covered the flesh beneath the poultice, an unclean growth like the fur of a fly. The contagion was spreading, too, already beginning to creep upwards toward her knee. The fur was an outward sign of the infection, but what other changes might be happening inside, within the girl's mind and soul? Perhaps the cruel mutation would so completely consume her that she would become no more than an animal, loping off into the woods to

join the foul beastman tribes, a lust for human flesh gnawing at her belly.

Thulmann spoke prayers to Sigmar as he cast the iron brand into the pile of burning wooden fagots, but truly did not know if he meant them for the little girl or for himself. The flames had burned quickly, fiercely. The witch hunter had ordered most of the village's store of lamp oil dumped upon the tinder. He doubted if even one of the fire wizards of the bright magic college could evoke fire so swiftly. Yet, even so, it seemed to take an eternity to burn. Thulmann had forced himself to watch, refusing to look away, and once more swore the same oath he had made at each such pyre – that he would find Herr Doktor Weichs and make him pay for his crimes.

THE TRAIL HAD led to Wurtbad. Weichs was known to have been in the city, before he became embroiled in the strange and sinister murders that led to the arrest and execution of the witch Chanta Favna. But the trail was cold now. Ordered by Sforza Zerndorff, newly appointed Witch Hunter General South, Thulmann had been forced to abandon his hunt to investigate the dire events unfolding in the village of Klausberg.

Thulmann forgot the mad doktor for a moment, turning his thoughts to more recent events. Even if Weichs was no longer in Wurtbad, the witch hunter had business there. He had learned that an unspeakable tome of profane knowledge had been hidden in the city, a blasphemous grimoire titled *Das Buch die Unholden*. The foul tome had been the dark secret of the Klausner family and had ultimately brought about their doom.

The book had drawn the interest of a powerful vampire lord, a creature named Sibbechai, one of the ghastly necrarch bloodline. Thulmann did not think the death of old Wilhelm Klausner would be enough to kill the vampire's coveting of the book. For the necrarchs were a breed of vampire sorcerer, existing only to increase their knowledge of the arcane, determined to one day exterminate all living things and create a world of the restless dead. It was vital that the witch hunter

should find it first and destroy it. The implications of such a tome in the clutches of a necrarch were too ghastly to contemplate.

Thulmann's mind turned to the fate of the last son of the house of Klausner. Sibbechai the vampire had attacked young Gregor Klausner, left him for dead in the ruin of his father's chambers. When the witch hunter had left, Gregor was still bedridden from his ordeal, but recovering.

Recovering? Thulmann did not want to think about how swift, or how likely, that recovery would be. It had been one of the reasons that drove his hasty departure from Klausberg, more so than the desperate hope of finding Doktor Weichs or the compelling need to destroy *Das Buch die Unholden*. Gregor Klausner had been a noble, courageous man, a comrade who had helped Thulmann to uncover the horror plaguing Klausberg – even though the trail led back to his own house. Gregor had saved Thulmann's life, a debt the witch hunter knew he could never repay. For all signs indicated that Gregor had been exposed to the poison of the vampire. If he had remained any longer, Thulmann would have had no choice but to acknowledge those signs, and to do what had to be done.

There were already too many ugly memories haunting his sleep. Thulmann cursed himself for such selfish weakness, but he would spare himself the destruction and dismemberment of Gregor Klausner if he could. He would return to Wurtbad, make his report to his superiors in the Order of Sigmar, then have Meisser send one of his men to investigate Gregor's condition. Perhaps he would make a full and clean recovery. Thulmann had known men among the Templars who had staved off the infection of a vampire's bite through their faith in Sigmar, and sheer strength of will. Both qualities were strong in Gregor. But, if they were not strong enough, then whomsoever was sent by Meisser would have to deal with the fate of Gregor Klausner.

THE WIND MOANED outside the black walls of Klausner Keep, like the spectral wailing of ghosts. Red-rimmed eyes turned

toward the narrow window, discomfited by the sinister sound. There was enough misery and dread within the ancient black-stoned fortress without the elements contributing their own efforts. The woman's soft hands rose, wiping the moisture from her eyes. Miranda had been sitting beside the enormous iron-framed bed for most of the day, maintaining her quiet vigil. At times, she had been joined by Lady Ilsa Klausner, dressed in her black widow's garb, her face drawn and wasted. There was no comfort or solace in her brief visits. She had buried a husband and one son already, and the icy hopelessness that filled her gaze told Miranda she expected to bury another son before much longer.

Miranda choked back another sob. Surely, the gods could not be so cruel as to take away her Gregor? Her brave and noble Gregor. Her kindly nobleman who took an interest in the welfare of even the lowliest peasant of Klausberg. Who had risked his life to do what was right. Surely, the gods would not punish him for possessing the courage to confront the inhuman forces that preyed on the good people of Klausberg?

The young woman sighed. Gregor was dying. He had not taken food for two days now, and had not moved so much as a finger in the last twelve hours. The only sign of life lay in the faint rise and fall of his chest and in the slight rasp of air escaping his mouth. She shook her head in despair, helpless to stop the decline of her beloved, helpless to stop her hopes and dreams from fading into the shadows that reached out to claim him. Miranda gave up her contemplation of the darkening landscape outside the window. Her eyes fell once more on the silent, statuesque figure of Gregor.

He remained perfectly still, but Miranda sensed that something had changed. It took only a moment to realise her beloved nobleman's eyes had been closed before. Now they were open, staring vacantly at the ceiling. She gasped in astonishment, hurrying to the side of his bed.

'Gregor! Gregor!' she cried, reaching out and clasping her stricken lover's hand. The pale flesh was cold, utterly devoid of warmth. Miranda's face contorted with sympathetic pain as

she rubbed her own hands against Gregor's, striving to force the warmth of her own body into his.

Gregor Klausner gazed up at the ceiling, his eyes registering only a colourless expanse. Slowly he began to register the presence of the young woman at his side. The warm hands stroking his icy arm. Gregor turned his face toward her. He could perceive the room as a colourless background of light and shadow, the rich tapestries and polished wooden furnishings robbed of their vibrancy. Miranda herself was only a grey shadow, indistinct, as though his eyes could not focus upon her. But most alarming of all were the vivid pulses of crimson that shone from within, a network of rivers coursing through the apparition. Gregor closed his eyes and clenched his teeth.

He had thought it a symptom of his fever – this unreal, unholy delirium that made shadows of the living. He had believed the entrancing light flowing through those shadows a perverse dream, a foul imagining brought on by his injuries and his sickness. Now he knew it was not. He could see the blood burning within Miranda's body. See it flowing beneath her shadowy form. He could feel the warmth of it reaching out to his chilled flesh, smell its aroma caressing his face. His mouth writhed with anticipation, filling with the phantom taste of salty crimson wine rushing down his parched throat.

Gregor ripped his hand from Miranda's caress, sitting bolt upright in his bed. She reached out toward him, but Gregor recoiled as if from a viper, raising his hands to ward her off.

'Gregor!' the young woman cried again. Emotion clawed at his heart, his face twisting with an agony he had never believed possible. Again Miranda reached for him, forcing Gregor to slip from the bed onto the floor. Miranda hesitated, waiting as her beloved nobleman raised himself. But as he did so he stepped away from the bed, towards the stone wall behind him.

'Stay back, Miranda!' Gregor snarled, summoning up every last ounce of authority. His words arrested her as she made to rise from the bed. 'For Sigmar's sake, stay away!' he added in a piteous tone. The sound stabbed into the young woman, her face contorting in anguish.

'Why Gregor? What is it? What is wrong?' She began to rise once more. Gregor waved her back with a violent gesture.

'Please!' he cried. 'I don't want to hurt you!' As Miranda took one single step toward him, a worried smile formed on her face. Gregor retreated before her approach.

'But you... you would not injure me!' she insisted. 'What is this nonsense that you speak?'

'The vampire, Miranda, the vampire!' Gregor wailed. His back was to the wall now, he could retreat no further. 'It touched me! Its poison is within me!' Miranda froze, her face growing pale as the horror of Gregor's words bore down upon her.

'No,' she dismissed his hysteria. 'That isn't true. You've just been sick. Unwell. The burden of your father's death...'

Gregor buried his face in his hands, his body shuddering as deep sobs wracked him. 'It is true, Miranda. I am poisoned, corrupted. There is no future for us...'

He looked up at her, watching as the tears rolled down her shadowy face. 'I release you, my sweet. Find a good man. Make a life for yourself. I can give you nothing now.' Gregor turned away, unable to gaze upon her any longer, unable to bear the unspeakable hunger growing within him. 'Only death.' With one fluid motion, Gregor leaped forward, crashing through the glass window, falling into the black of night.

Miranda screamed, racing to the shattered glass and twisted iron fittings. She stared out into the darkness, looking for any sign of Gregor's body. She steeled herself to find it crushed at the base of the keep's wall. But nothing met her gaze, only a few shards of glass twinkling in the moonlight as the clouds briefly released Mannslieb from their grasp.

Miranda withdrew back into the room, weeping, her mind struggling to accept what she had seen and heard. She was startled when Lady Ilsa Klausner appeared, taking her into a motherly embrace.

'He's gone,' was all Miranda could manage to say.

'I know,' Lady Ilsa tried to console her. 'I know. My son died three days ago.'

WITHERED FLESH STRETCHED into a grotesque leer, a look of feral, inhuman triumph. Crimson eyes narrowed with satisfaction, the flaming orbs burning a little brighter from the pits of the vampire's face. It had taken many days, far longer than it expected, but at last its call had been answered. The taint it had placed in young Gregor Klausner's blood had at last begun to consume him. The strength and defiance of the boy's spirit had surprised the necrarch, for a time it had even worried that Gregor might be able to resist its power, to overcome its venom and sink into a mortal, permanent death.

But the ancient will of Sibbechai had been greater, more than sufficient to devour the man's soul. It was good that there had been such strength within the last of the Klausners. Sibbechai had need of such strength. By the use of its arcane arts, the vampire would add it to its own reserves of power. It was akin to those practices of mortal wizards, who studied light magic and employed small retinues of acolytes to aid them in focusing and empowering their spells. It was so foolish to think that dark magic might not profit by similar means. Of course, there was some danger. The necrarch was not certain of control over its newly created spawn. If Gregor Klausner had not become its slave, then he would certainly try to avenge himself on the vampire. And the magical link between them would work both ways – Sibbecahi would always be able to sense its new progeny, but perhaps Gregor would be able to follow that same bond back to his unclean father of darkness.

The necrarch lifted a shrivelled hand, its black, necrotic flesh clinging to the bones like wet parchment. It pushed upon the heavy wooden lid of its casket, forcing the panel to the floor with a resounding crash. Sibbechai exerted a small measure of power, causing its body to pivot upwards as though fixed on unseen hinges. It was a vain employment of the vampire's black arts, but Sibbechai knew such displays would keep its unwanted ally nervous and uneasy. It did not want the miserable mortal wizard to enjoy a moment's peace while he stood in the presence of one who was a master of the necromantic

arts, centuries before the wizard was even a gleam in his father's eye.

Sibbechai's skeletal face considered the dank shadows of its new lair which was a small barrow mound just beyond the district of Klausberg. The vampire's unnatural vision pierced the darkness, exposing every crack in the walls, every pebble lying upon the floor. The figure of a man stood revealed, standing between the vampire and the barrow's opening. Thin and scraggly, his slight figure huddled within the fur-trimmed mass of a heavy cassock, ratty black hair falling about his pale, leprous face. Scrawny hands scratched at the sleeves of his necromancer's robe, and Sibbechai smiled again at the mortal's unease, exposing its chisel-like fangs. The necromancer took a step back, one spidery hand slipping within the sleeve of his grey robe. Then the wizard seemed to collect himself, glaring angrily at the vampire.

'The maggot crawls from its hole, does it?' Carandini's spiteful voice lashed at the vampire. 'I grow weary of waiting, leech. Three days and three nights I have stood here while you rested within your coffin. I will wait no longer!' The necromancer's hand emerged from within his robes, a small, silver twin-tailed comet icon dangling from the slender chain twined about his fingers. Sibbechai recoiled from the holy symbol, but its mocking smile did not wither. It had seen the fear within the mortal's eyes, however bold his words. The necromancer was fearful that he had made a mistake. Fearful that he had allowed the vampire too much time.

'Put that obscenity away,' Sibbechai's hissed. 'As you grow weary of waiting, I grow weary of your childish theatrics.' The vampire turned its head, watching as Carandini returned the tiny icon to a pocket within his robes. Sibbechai responded by stepping down from its coffin, its tattered black robe hanging shroud-like about its spindly frame.

'Your waiting is at an end, necromancer,' Sibbechai pronounced. 'I am recovered from my ordeal, ready to resume the quest we share.' The vampire studied Carandini's pale features. No, the necromancer could not conceal his doubt and fear. But killing him now might not be so easy, a frightened wizard

was still a wizard, after all, and even a frightened man may speak a Word of Power. Besides, the recovery of the grimoire had already taken several unexpected turns. The mortal might possibly come in useful, if fate held any more in store. For the time being, it was better to let Carandini live and believe their tenuous alliance still held.

‘Where has the book been taken?’ Carandini asked. Sibbechai had bargained with the necromancer for its life with the abhorrent *Das Buch die Unholden*. Claiming that it knew where the book had been hidden by the late Wilhelm Klausner, it swore an oath that even the vampire feared to break. Now the necromancer was anxious to have his side of the bargain fulfilled.

‘Klausner sent the book to Wurtbad,’ Sibbechai said. ‘For some reason, he had decided it was no longer safe in Klausberg.’ The vampire displayed its lethal fangs, reminding Carandini what the reason for Klausner’s desperate action had been.

‘Where in Wurtbad?’ the necromancer demanded. Sibbechai shook its head, lifting a claw-like finger.

‘You are far too eager,’ the necrarch said. ‘Was it not you who extolled the virtues of patience?’ There was venom in the vampire’s voice as it remembered the taunting words spoken by Carandini as he kept the vampire from its coffin, as dawn began to break. ‘You will discover where in the city when I feel the time is right.’

Carandini’s glare was murderous. He could barely restrain his anger at the undead sorcerer. ‘How then shall we proceed?’ he said at last.

‘We shall journey together to Wurtbad, you and I,’ Sibbechai hissed. ‘It will take two days to reach the city and I shall rest more easily with so devoted a comrade to watch over me during the hours of day. After all, if any harm came to me, you would never know where the grimoire is located. I should think that a poor mortal, whose years are so dreadfully few, would take great pains to avoid losing his chance at eternal life.’

‘For now, however, you shall need to find us transport to the city. Something big enough for my—’ the vampire gestured

with its claw towards the heavy wooden casket, ‘-baggage. And you might bring me back something to fortify myself with. The younger the better. Young blood is so much more sustaining.’

Carandini gave the vampire a last sour glance, then crept back into the gloom. Sibbechai watched the necromancer depart. It would be able to trust the man, for now at least. He would be useful in getting to Wurtbad – Sibbechai had not spoken falsely when it praised the boon of a guardian to watch over it while it slept. It had spoken rather less truthfully about the need to feed. The necrarchs were not slaves to their thirst in the way that other breeds of vampire were. They learned, over time, to subdue and deny their hunger. The oldest of the breed rarely fed at all. But let the necromancer believe Sibbechai to be a slave to its thirst. Carandini might hope to exploit that as a weakness, and when he did, the necromancer would be unpleasantly surprised.

For, in the end, only one of them would possess the dark secrets of *Das Buch die Unholden*. Sibbechai had no doubt which of them it would be.

THE HEAVY OAK door slowly creaked inward as a slender shape crossed the threshold. The shadow paused, ears straining at the darkness for any sign her stealthy approach had been betrayed by the door’s rusty hinges. The only sound that answered was a deep rumble of snoring from the large bed that dominated the tiny chamber. The woman’s expression transformed from nervous caution to savage, bestial hate. She waited, savouring the moment, letting her eyes become accustomed to the gloom that surrounded her.

The small rooms above the Hound and Hare were owned by the bloated parasite that ran the tavern itself. He rented them by the hour to his patrons, the wealthy merchants and ancient aristocrats who composed Wurtbad’s elite, offering them privacy for their night games. Of course, later he would expect a tithe from whichever whore had plied her trade in one of the squalid little rooms, an iron cudgel ensuring his demands were always met promptly and in the correct amount.

Carefully, the woman began to cross the small room. She had removed her boots, so that her footsteps might not betray her, ignoring the wooden splinters that the floor stabbed into her naked feet. Beside the anguish that wrenched at her heart, the slivers of wood were nothing. She glided toward the bed, like some night hag conjured from a fable, glaring at the two figures sprawled among the fur blankets. The woman only gave a scant glance to the lithe shape lying on the left side of the bed – the strumpet who had replaced her seemed of little consequence. Her interest was focused upon the bed's other occupant. The man who had betrayed her.

Manfred Gelt was a wealthy river trader, one of the richest in Wurtbad. It was a boast she had heard oft spoken, but Manfred had the money to back his claim, throwing it away in buckets during his visits. The best wines, the finest minstrels, the richest meals. Even the squalid little rooms above the Hound and Hare, rented not for a few hours but for an entire evening. Manfred was a man who did not like to be rushed in his pleasures.

He had spoken such pretty words to her, such enticing words. Manfred visited her exclusively for three months, promising to one day raise her from the squalor, to make an honest and respectable woman of her. He bought her gifts, putting some substance to his fine words. The woman had heard such fantastic stories before, from every drunken sailor and melancholy soldier she had entertained through the years. But Manfred's stories were different, for he had made her believe. For the first time in her short, hopeless life, she had dared to hope for better things.

The woman glared hatefully at the familiar face snoring upon the pillow, his fat little hands clutched against his breast. She should have known better. Manfred's ardour had started to cool, until at last his roving eye found a prettier face. Yes, she should have known it would end in such a manner, but the woman could not help but feel betrayed.

She leaned down over the bed, a stray beam of moonlight shining through the shuttered window revealing her pale arm and the foul, black boils that defaced it. The woman bent her

head towards his slumbering face, lips parting into a hateful sneer. Slowly, she edged closer until her lips were crushed against those of the man she had so stupidly allowed herself to love. As she withdrew, the slumbering merchant sputtered, the pattern of his snoring interrupted. The woman froze for an instant, wondering if he would awaken, then her eyes narrowed, deciding she did not care. What could he do to her now? She was already dead.

Spitefully, the woman spat into the merchant's open mouth, willing the contagion that pulsed through her body to enter her betrayer. Manfred stirred but did not awaken. With a last hateful look at him, Vira Staubkammer slipped back into the shadows. The sound of a creaking door broke through the silent darkness once more. Then the only sounds in the small room were the rumbling snores of the river merchant.

'YOUR EVENING WAS productive, excellency?' the liveried servant enquired, his arm extended to receive his master's cloak. The first rays of dawn shone down upon the streets of Wurtbad, as the sounds of the city began to stir.

'Most productive,' his corpulent master replied, his meaty jowls lifting into a lewd grin. 'Positively decadent, one might say.' He stalked past his servant, striding into the massive hall. His imperious gaze swept across the tiled floors, the marble columns and the panelled walls, secure in his knowledge that he was master of all he surveyed. 'I should have been born an Arabyan sheik, Fritz, then I should not be bothered with appearances.'

'Of course, my lord,' Fritz replied, hurrying after his master. A pair of soldiers dressed in uniforms of green and white flanked the two men, following them into the enormous hall. Fritz's master noted their approach, dismissing the two warriors with a wave of his fleshy hand.

'So tiresome, these swordsmen,' he proclaimed.

'They are only obeying their orders, my lord,' Fritz responded. 'After all, it is their sworn duty to protect your person and keep you from harm.'

'Perhaps,' sighed his master. 'But they are so terribly common. I should replace them with something much more daring.'

Some ogres from the Middle Mountains, perhaps, or a company of Sartosan pirates!' The obese figure's laughter faded into a dry, wracking cough. Fritz hurried forward, but his master shook his concerned servant away.

'You should be more cautious,' Fritz said, his voice heavy with worry. The brothels were a breeding ground for all manner of diseases. Every time his master went abroad he courted sickness.

'It is only a trifle, Fritz,' the fat man declared. 'A chill, nothing more.

So saying, Baron Friedo von Gotz, cousin to the Elector Count Graf Alberich Haupt-Anderssen of Stirland, governor of the city of Wurtbad and all its provinces, ascended the marble stairs, withdrawing to his chambers for a few hours of rest before the tedium of his office beset him for another day. As he departed, Fritz could hear the baron's boots echoing upon the tile floor, the steps occasionally punctuated by the sound of coughing.

***Murder, madness and the plague are just the
start of what Mathias Thulmann and his vile
henchman Streng have to deal with in:***

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