

WARHAMMER

Death's Cold Kiss



THE VON CARSTEIN TRILOGY

Steven Savile

A WARHAMMER STORY

**DEATH'S
COLD KISS**

Von Carstein - 00.1

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(A Flandrel Scan v4.0)

The old priest fled the castle.

Lightning seared the darkness, turning night momentarily into day. The skeletal limbs of the trees around him cast sinister shadows across the path that twisted and writhed in the lightning. Thunder rolled over the hills, deep and booming. The rain came down, drowning out lesser sounds.

The primeval force of the storm resonated in Victor Guttman's bones.

"I am an old man," he moaned, clutching at his chest in dread certainty that the pain he felt was his heart about to burst. "I am frail. Weak. I don't have the strength in me for this fight." And it was true, every word of it. But who else was there to fight?

No one.

His skin still crawled with the revulsion he had felt at the creature's presence. Sickness clawed at his throat. His blood repulsed by the taint of the creature that had entered Baron Otto's chamber and claimed young Isabella. He sank to his knees, beaten down by the sheer ferocity of the storm. The wind mocked him, howling around his body, tearing at his robes. He could easily die on the road and be washed away by the storm, lost somewhere to rot in the forest and feed the wolves.

No.

The temple. He had to get back to the temple.

He pushed himself back up and lurched a few more paces down the pathway, stumbling and tripping over his own feet in his need to get away from the damned place.

There were monsters. Real monsters. He had grown numb to fear. A life of seclusion in the temple, of births and naming days, marriages and funeral rites, such mundane things, they somehow combined to turn the monsters into lesser evils and eventually into nothing more than stories. He had forgotten that the stories were real.

Guttman lurched to a stop, needing the support of a nearby tree to stay standing. He cast a frightened look back over his shoulder at the dark shadow of Drakenhof Castle, finding the one window that blazed with light, and seeing in it the silhouette of the new count.

Vlad von Carstein.

He knew what kind of twisted abomination the man was. He knew with cold dark certainty that he had just witnessed the handover of the barony to a daemon. The sick twisted maliciousness of Otto van Drak would pale in comparison with the tyrannies of the night von Carstein promised.

The old priest fought down the urge to purge his guts. Still he retched and wiped the bile away from his mouth with the back of his hand. The taint of the creature had weakened him. Its sickness was insidious. It clawed away at his stomach; it tore at his throat and pulled at his mind. His vision swam in and out of focus. He needed to distance himself from the fiend.

His mind raced. He struggled to remember everything he knew about vampires and their ilk but it was precious little outside superstition and rumour.

The oppression of the pathway worsened as it wound its way back down toward the town. The sanctuary of rooftops and the welcoming lights looked a long, long way away to the old man. The driving rain masked other sounds. Still, Guttman grew steadily surer that he was not alone in the storm. Someone—or something—was following him. He caught occasional glimpses of movement out of the corner of his eye but by the time he turned, the shadow had fused with deeper shadows or the shape he was sure was a pale white face had mutated into the claws of dead branches and the flit of a bat's wing.

He caught himself looking more frequently back over his shoulder as he tried to catch a glimpse of whoever was following him.

“Show yourself!” the old priest called out defiantly but his words were snatched away by the storm. The cold hand of fear clasped his heart as it tripped and skipped erratically.

A chorus of wolves answered him.

And laughter.

For a moment Guttman didn't trust his ears. But he didn't need to. It was a man's laughter. He felt it in his gut, in his bones and in his blood, the same revulsion that had caused him to black out at the feet of von Carstein when the man first entered van Drak's bedchamber.

One of the count's tainted brood had followed him out of the castle. It was stupid and naive to think that von Carstein would be alone. The monster would have minions to do his bidding, lackeys who still clung to their humanity and servants who had long since given it up. It made sense. How could a creature of the damned hope to pass itself off among the living without an entourage of twisted souls to do its bidding?

“I said show yourself, creature!” Guttman challenged the darkness. The rain ran down his face like tears. He wasn't afraid anymore. He was calm. Resigned. The creature was playing with him.

“Why?” A voice said, close enough for him to feel the man's breath in his ear. “So your petty god can smite me down with some righteous thunderbolt from his shiny silver hammer? I think not.”

Brother Guttman reeled away from the voice, twisting round to face his tormentor but the man wasn't there.

“You're painfully slow, old man,” the voice said, behind him again somehow. “Killing you promises to be no sport at all.” Guttman felt cold dead fingers brush against his throat, feeling out the pulse in his neck. He lurched away from their touch so violently he ended up sprawling in the mud, the rain beating down around his face as he twisted and slithered trying to get a look at his tormentor.

The man stood over him, nothing more than a shape in the darkness.

“I could kill you now but I've never taken a priest. Do you think you would make a good vampire, old man? You have a whole flock of dumb sheep to feed on who will come willingly to you in the night, eager to be fed on if your holy kiss will bring them closer to their precious Sigmar.” The man knelt beside him, the left side of his face lit finally by the sliver of moonlight. To Guttman it was the face of ultimate cruelty personified but in truth it was both beautiful and coldly serene. “What a

delicious thought. A priest of the cloth becoming a priest of the blood. Think of the possibilities. You would be unique, old man.”

“I would rather die.”

“Well, of course. That goes without saying. Now, come on, on your feet.”

“And make your job easier?”

“Oh, just stand up before I run out of patience and stick a sword in your gut, brother. You don’t have to be standing to die, you know. It isn’t a prerequisite. Swords are just as effective on people lying in the mud, believe me.” He held out a hand for the priest to take but the old man refused, levering himself up and stubbornly struggling to get his feet beneath himself.

“Who are you?”

“Does it matter? Really? What’s in a name? Truly? Turned meat, cat’s urine and mouldy bread by any other names would still smell repugnant, wouldn’t they? They would still stink of decay, rot, so why this obsession with naming things? There is no magic in a name.”

“What a sad world you live in,” Guttman said after a moment. “Where the first things that come to mind are riddled with corruption. Give me a world of roses and beauty and I will die happily. To live as you do, that is no life at all.”

“Do not be so hasty to dismiss it, priest. They have an old saying in my hometown: *Die reinste Freude ist die Schadenfreude*,” the man said in perfect unaccented Reikspiel. “The purest joy is the joy we feel when others feel pain. Now I believe it is the only genuine joy we feel. The rest is transitory, fleeting. Soon the darkness will be all you have left, and the light and your precious roses and everything else you think of as beautiful will be nothing more than memories. The knowledge of this gives me some slight happiness I must confess. When you’ve been reduced to nothing, then let us see how much of the so-called beautiful you choose to remember. My name is Posner. Herman Posner. Say it. Let it be the last thing you say as a living creature. Say it.”

“Herman Posner,” Brother Victor Guttman said, tasting the name in his mouth. The words were no more evil than any others he had said. There was nothing unique about them. They were not tainted with vile plague or ruined by undeath. They were just words, nothing more.

“A rose or rot, priest? You decide,” Posner said. His hand snaked out grabbing the old man by the collar and hauling him up until his toes barely touched the floor. Guttman struggled and fought, kicking out as Posner drew him in close enough for the priest to taste the redolent musk of the grave on his breath. The creature’s touch was repulsive.

It didn’t matter how much he kicked and twisted against Posner’s grip; it was like iron.

He felt the teeth—fangs—plunge into his neck, biting deep, hard. The old man’s body tensed, every fibre of his being repulsed by the intimacy of the kill. He lashed out, twisted, flopped and finally sagged as he felt the life being drained out of him.

And then the pain ended and Posner was screaming and clutching his own chest.

Guttman had no idea what had caused the vampire to relinquish his hold. He didn’t care. His legs buckled and collapsed beneath him but he didn’t pass out. He

lay in the mud, barely able to move. He was sure his tripping heart would simply cease beating at any moment and deny the vampire its kill. There was a delicious irony to the thought, the beast gorging itself on dead blood, only realising its mistake when it was too late.

Posner lifted his hand. The skin beneath was burned raw with the mark of Sigmar's hammer.

For a moment the old priest thought it was a miracle—that he was saved. Then the cold hard reality of the “miracle” revealed itself. The silver hammer he wore on a chain around his neck had come loose from his clothing and as the vampire leaned in the silver had burned its mark on the beast. Silver. At least that part of the stories was true. The metal was anathema to the lords of the undead. He clasped the talisman as though it might somehow save him. It was a feeble gesture. Posner leaned over him and grasped the silver chain, ignoring the hiss and sizzle of his own flesh as he yanked the holy symbol from around Guttman's throat, and tossed it aside.

The stench of burned meat was nauseatingly sweet.

“Now let's see how you fare without your pretty little trinket, shall we?”

Before Guttman could scramble away Posner had him by the throat again, fingernails like iron talons as they sank mercilessly into his flesh. The pain was blinding. The priest's vision swam in and out of focus as the world tilted away and was finally consumed in an agony of black. The last sensation he felt as the pain overwhelmed him was the vampire's kiss, intimate and deadly, where his fluttering pulse was strongest. Guttman's eyes flared open and for a fleeting moment the world around him was intense, every colour more vibrant, more radiant, every scent more pungent, more aromatic, than they had been through his whole life of living with them. He was dying, drained of life and blood, and this intensity was his mind's way of clinging on to the memories of life, one final all-consuming overload of the senses. Victor Guttman let it wash over him. He felt his will to live fade with his thoughts as he succumbed to Posner. He stopped struggling, the fight drained out of him.

Posner yanked his head back, better to expose the vein, and sucked and slurped hungrily at the wound until he was sated. Grinning, he tilted the old man's head and dribbled blood into his gaping mouth. Guttman coughed and retched, a ribbon of blood dribbling out of the corner of his mouth. His entire body spasmed, rebelling against the bloody kiss and then he was falling as Posner let go.

The vampire walked away, leaving the old man to die.

To die, Guttman realised sickly, and become one of their kind. An abomination. No. No. It cannot happen. I will not kill to live. I will not!

But he knew he would.

In the end, when the blood thirst was on him and his humanity was nothing but a nagging ghost he would feed.

Guttman clawed at the mud, dragging himself forward a few precious inches before his strength gave out. His erratic breathing blew bubbles in the muddy puddle beside his face. His hand twitched. He felt himself slipping in and out of consciousness. Every breath could easily have been his last. He had no idea how long he lay in the mud blowing bloody bubbles. Time lost all meaning. The sun didn't rise. The rain didn't cease, not fully. He tried to move but every ounce of his being cried out in pain. He was alone. No passing carters would save him. He had a

choice—although it was no choice at all: die here, now, and wake as a daemon, or fight it, grasp on to the last gasp of humanity and hope against hope that something in the temple could stave off the transformation and buy him precious time. Death was inevitable, he had always known that, accepted it. He would meet Morr, every man, woman and child would eventually; it was the way of the world. He promised himself he would do it with dignity. He would die, and stay dead. Judge me not on how I lived but how I die... who had said that? It made a grim kind of sense.

On the hillside around him the cries of the wolves intensified. It was a mocking lament. He knew what they were, those wolves. He knew how the beasts could shift form at will. He dreaded the moment their cries made sense to him, for then his doom would be complete.

He dragged himself another foot, and then another, almost blacking out from the sheer exertion. His face held barely inches above a muddy puddle, he stared at his own reflection in the water, trying to memorise everything he saw. He knew the image would fade, knew he would forget himself, but it was important to try to hold on to who he was. Another foot, and then another. The old priest clawed his way down the long and winding road. He felt the steel breeze on his face as he craned his neck desperately trying to see how far away the city lights were.

Too far, they taunted him. Too far.

He would never make it.

And because of that he was damned.

Desperately, Victor Guttman pushed himself up, stumbled two unsteady steps and plunged face first into the mud again. He lay there, spent, cursing himself for a fool for coming to the castle alone. The chirurgeon was long gone, probably safely at home in his bed already, tucked up beside his shrew of a wife while she snored. Or he's lying dead in a ditch somewhere. He was just as alone when he left the castle. Just as vulnerable. And probably just as dead. Guttman thought bitterly.

Again he stumbled forward a few paces before collapsing. Five more the next time. He cried out in anger and frustration, willing someone to hear him and come to his aid. It was pointless, of course. The only people abroad at this ungodly hour were up to no good and would hardly come to investigate cries on the dark road for fear of their own safety. Thieves, robbers, bandits, lotharios, debauchers, drunks, gamblers and vampires, children of the night one and all. And not a Sigmar fearing soul amongst them. He was alone.

Truly alone.

Meyrink and Messner were passionately arguing an obscure point of theosophy, the older man being driven to the point of distraction by the younger's sheer belligerence. He was impossible to argue with. There was no reasoning, only absolutes. The arguments were black and white. There was no room for the grey spaces of interpretation in between. Normally there was nothing Meyrink enjoyed more than a good argument but the youth of today seemed to have abandoned the art of reason in favour of passion. Everything was about passion. Meyrink laid aside the scrimshaw he had been carving and rolled his neck, stretching. The carving was therapeutic but his eyes weren't what they had been even a few years ago and the close detail gave him a headache from straining. He felt every one of his years.

Brother Guttman would return soon. Perhaps he could make young Messner see reason.

“Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps,” Meyrink muttered bleakly. He didn’t hold out a lot of hope.

“Ah, is that the sound of quiet desperation I hear leaking into your voice, brother?”

“Not so quiet, methinks,” Meyrink said with a lopsided grin. He liked the boy, and was sure with the rough edges rounded off his personality Messner would make a good priest. He had the faith and was a remarkably centred young man.

“Indeed. I was being politic. Come, let’s warm our bones beside the fire while we wait for Brother Guttman’s return.”

“Why not.”

“Tis a vile night out,” Messner remarked, making himself cosy beside the high-banked log fire that spat and crackled in the hearth. He poured them both cups of mulled wine.

“For once I’ll not argue with you lad,” Meyrink said wryly.

The night stretched on, Meyrink too tired to debate. He looked often at the dark window and the streaks of rain that lashed against it. Messner was right: it was a vile night. Not the kind of night for an old man to be abroad.

They supped at their cups, neither allowing the other to see how much the old priest’s lateness worried them until a hammering on the temple door had them both out of their seats and almost running through the central aisle of the temple to answer it. Meyrink instinctively made the sign of the hammer as Messner threw back the heavy bolts on the door and raised the bar. It had been many years since they had left the temple open through the night. It was a curse of the times. He didn’t like it but was sage enough to understand the necessity.

Messner opened the door on the raging storm.

The wind and rain ripped at the porch, pulling the heavy door out of the young priest’s hands.

For a heartbeat Meyrink mistook the shadows on the threshold for some lurking horror, distorted and deformed as they were by the storm, but then the wine merchant Hollenfeuer’s boy, Henrik, lumbered in out of the driving rain and dark, a bundle of rags cradled in his arms. It took Meyrink a moment to realise that the rags weren’t rags at all, but sodden robes clinging wetly to slack skin and bones, and that Henrik had brought Brother Guttman home. The old priest’s skin had the same blue pallor as death. His eyes rolled back in his head and his head lolled back against the boy’s arm, his jaw hanging loose.

“Found ’im on the roadside a couple of miles back. Carried ’im ’ere.” Henrik grunted beneath the strain. He held the old man in his straining arms like a sack of coals. “No idea how long ’e’d been there. ’E’s still breathing but ’e’s not in a good way, mind. Looks like ’e’s been attacked by wolves or summink. ’E’s got some frightenin’ wounds where ’e’s been bitten round the throat.”

“Put him down, put him down,” Meyrink flapped. “Not here, no, no, not here. In his room. In his room. Take him to his room. What happened? Who did this to him?”

“I don’t know,” Henrik said, tracking the storm into the temple. Behind him, Messner wrestled with the door. Meyrink moved in close, feeling for the old priest’s pulse. It was there, faint for sure, but his heart was still beating and his blood was still pumping.

They carried the broken body of Victor Guttman up the winding stairs to his bare cell and laid him on the wooden pallet he called a bed, drawing the blanket up over his chest to his chin. The old man shivered. Meyrink took this as a good sign—there was still life enough in him to care about the cold.

He sent Henrik on his way, urging him to summon Gustav Mellin, the count’s surgeon. He pressed a silver coin into his palm. “Be convincing, lad.” The wine merchant’s boy nodded and disappeared into the storm.

Meyrink went back to the old priest’s cell where Messner was holding a silent prayer vigil. He cradled Guttman’s fragile hand in his, whispering over and over entreaties to Sigmar, begging that His divine hand spare the old man from Morr. It was odd how the young man could be so adamant in the face of theory and yet so devout in the face of fact. His blind faith was as inspiring now as it had been annoying a few hours ago. Meyrink hovered on the threshold, looking at the young man kneeling at the bedside, head bowed in prayer. Guttman was clinging to life—a few words, even to the great and the good, wouldn’t save him. It was down to the old man’s will and the surgeon’s skill, if he arrived in time. When it came down to it that was their prime difference: Meyrink was a realist, Messner an idealist still waiting for the brutality of the world to beat it out of him.

Meyrink coughed politely, letting Messner know he was no longer alone.

“How is he?”

“Not good. These wounds...”

“The bites? If that is what they are.”

“Oh that is what they are, without doubt. Whatever fed on him though, it wasn’t wolves.”

“How can you be sure?” Meyrink asked, moving into the cell.

“Look for yourself. The first set of puncture wounds are precise and close together, suggesting a small mouth, certainly not a wolf. And there are nowhere enough teeth or tearing to match the savagery of wolves. If I didn’t know better I’d say the bite was human.”

“But you know better?”

Messner shook his head.

“Then let us content ourselves with the fact that the world is a sick place and that our dear brother was set upon by one of the flock. It makes no difference to the treatment. We must staunch the blood loss and seal the wounds best we can, keeping them clean to keep out the festering. Other than that, perhaps you are right to pray. I can think of nothing else we can do for our brother.”

They did what they could, a mixture of prayer, medicine and waiting. Mellin, the surgeon arrived at dawn, inspected the wounds clinically, tutting between clenched teeth as he sutured the torn flesh. His prognosis was not good:

“He’s lost a lot of blood. Too much for a man to lose and still live.”

“Surely you can do something?”

“I’m doing it. Cleaning up the wounds. If he deteriorates, my leeches will be good for the rot, but other than that, he’s in the hands of your god.”

Guttman didn’t wake for three straight days. Mostly he lay still, the shallow rise and fall of his chest all that distinguished him from the dead, though he did toss and turn occasionally, mumbling some incoherent half words while in the grip of fever dreams. The sweats were worst at night. In the darkest hours of the night the old priest’s breathing was at its weakest, hitching and sometimes stopping for long seconds as though Guttman’s body simply forgot how to breathe. Messner only left his bedside for a few moments at a time for daily ablutions. He ate his meals sitting against the bed frame and slept on a cot in the small cell, leaving Meyrink to oversee the day-to-day running of the temple and lead the congregation in prayers for Brother Guttman’s swift recovery.

The fever ran its course and on the fourth day Victor Guttman opened his eyes.

It was no gentle waking: he sat bolt upright, his eyes flew open and one word escaped his parched mouth: “Vampire!” He sank back into the pillow, gasping for breath.

The suddenness of it shocked Meyrink. He thought for a moment that he had misheard, that the dry rasp had been some last desperate plea to the gods for salvation before the old priest shuffled off the mortal coil, but it wasn’t. He had heard correctly. Guttman had cried vampire.

Meyrink stared at the sutured wounds in the old man’s throat, his mind racing. Could they truly be the mark of the vampire? The thought was ludicrous. It hadn’t even crossed his mind. Vampires? But if they were... did that mean Victor Guttman is one of them now? Tainted? He was a priest of Sigmar surely he couldn’t succumb to the blood kiss...

Meyrink took the old man’s hand and felt none of the revulsion he was sure he should if Guttman had been born again into unlife.

“It’s not too late, my friend,” he said, kneeling at Guttman’s bedside. “It’s not too late.”

“Kill... me... please,” the old man begged, his eyes rheumy with pain. The surgeon had left nothing to dull the pain and Meyrink was loathe to let the man loose with his leeches. “Before I... succumb... to it.”

“Hush, my friend. Save your strength.”

“I will not... kill. I will... not.”

Reinhardt Messner turned the brittle pages of the dusty old tome. He was tired, his enthusiasm for the search long since gone and the ink on the paper was a degree less intelligible than a spider’s scrawl. The words had long since begun to blend into one. Beside him Meyrink grunted and shifted in his chair. It had been three days since Brother Guttman’s return to the land of the living. During that time he had faded in and out of consciousness. He refused food, claiming he had no appetite. He drank little water, claiming he had no thirst. This disturbed the young priest. No hunger, no thirst, it was unnatural. It added a certain amount of credence to the old man’s story of vampires but Messner refused to believe there was any real truth to it. Still, he studied the old tomes looking for some kind of geas that might be used to seal Guttman in the temple. It was useless. There was nothing.

The few references to the vampiric curse he had found revolved around fishwives' gossip and stupid superstitions about garlic and white roses. The only thing of any use was a single line about silver being anathema to the beasts. Other than that there was nothing of substance. One had ideas of how to keep a vampire out of a building, not keep it trapped within one—though for a while he hoped the solution might be one and the same.

“This is out of our province,” he admitted grudgingly, closing the book in a billow of dust. “Short of sealing Brother Guttman in a silver lined vault, which is both impractical and impossible given the cost of the metal, I have found nothing. I hate to say it, but this is useless. We are wasting our time.”

“No, it has to be in here somewhere,” Meyrink objected, for once their roles of donkey in the argument reversed. Meyrink was being the stubborn ass refusing to see the impossibility of their situation. If Guttman had been infected—and that was how he thought of it, a disease—then the best thing they could do for the old man was drive a stake through his heart, scoop out his brains and bury him upside down in consecrated ground.

If...

“You know it isn't, brother. This is a wild goose chase.”

“What would you have us do? Slay our brother?”

That was a question he wasn't prepared to answer. “Nothing good comes of death,” he said instead, hoping Meyrink would take it as his final word.

“Yet we cannot stand guard over him night and day, it is impossible. There must be a way.”

A thought occurred to him then: “Perhaps magic runes...?” They could place runes on the doors and windows to act as locks barring Guttman's ingress and egress, thus confining the vampire to the crypts.

Meyrink spat. “Would you consort with the servants of Chaos?”

He was right, of course. The practice of magic was outlawed—it would be next to impossible to find anyone to craft such magic, and even if they could, for how long would the magic remain stable? To rely on such a warding was to court disaster, for certain, but Messner knew there was hope in the idea. Could such a series of runes be created to turn the old temple into a sanctuary for Guttman?

“The count would have access...” and then he realised what he was saying. The count.

Von Carstein.

The vampire count.

He made the sign of Sigmar's hammer.

There would be no going to the castle for help.

The doors and window frames of the temple had been inlaid with fine silver wire; bent into the shape of the runes the mage had sworn would keep the undead at bay. Meyrink had had no choice but to employ the man, despite his deep-seated distrust of magicians.

Meyrink studied the silver swirls.

There was nothing, as far as he could tell, remotely magical about the symbols that had cost the temple an Emperor's ransom. The man had assured the priests that the combination of the curious shapes and the precious metal would turn the confines of the temple into a prison for any of the tainted blood. He had sworn an oath, for all the good it did them now.

Like the windows and doors, the entrance to the crypt itself was protected by a series of intricate metal swirls that had been laid in after Victor Guttman had been led below. Together, the mage had promised, these twists of metal would form an impenetrable barrier for the dead, keeping those without a soul from crossing. Again, Meyrink had no choice but to believe the man, despite the evidence of his own eyes.

Meyrink descended the thirteen steps into the bowels of the temple.

The crypt was dank, lit by seven guttering candles that threw sepulchral shadows over the tombs, the air fetid. Guttman had refused the comforts of a bed and slept curled up on a blanket in a dirty corner, ankles and wrists chained to the wall like some common thief.

It hurt Meyrink to see him like this: living in the dark, hidden away from the world he so loved, shackled.

This was no life at all.

"Morning, brother," he called, lightly, struggling to keep the grief out of his voice.

"Is it?" answered the old man, looking up. The flickering candlelight did nothing to hide the anguish in his eyes or the slack skin of his face. "Time has lost all meaning underground. I see nothing of light and day or dark and night, only candles that burn out and are replenished as though by magic when I finally give in to sleep. I had the dream again last night..."

Meyrink nodded. He knew. Two more girls—they were no more than children in truth—had succumbed to the sleeping sickness and died during the night. Two more. They were calling it a plague, though for a plague it was a selective killer, draining the very life out of Drakenhof's young women while the men lived on, seemingly immune, desperate as those they loved fell victim. It was always the same: first they paled, as the sickness took hold then they slipped into a sleep from which they never woke. The transition was shockingly quick. In a matter of three nights vibrant healthy young women aged as much as three decades to look at and succumbed to an eternal sleep. Meyrink knew better: it wasn't a plague, it was a curse.

"Did I...? Did I...?"

He nodded again.

"Two young girls, brother. Sisters. They were to have been fifteen this naming day."

Guttman let out a strangled sob. He held up his hands, rattling the chains in anger and frustration. "I saw it... I..." But there was nothing he could say. "Have you come to kill me?"

"I can't, brother. Not while there is hope."

"There is no hope. Can't you see that? I am a killer now. There is no peace for me. No rest. And while I live you damn the young women of our flock. Kill me,

brother. If not for my own sake, then do it for theirs.” Tears streaked down his grubby face.

“Not while you can still grieve for them, brother. Not while you still have compassion. When you are truly a beast, when the damned sickness owns you, only then. Before that day do not ask for what I cannot do.”

“He has to die!” Messner raged, slamming his clenched fist on the heavy oak of the refectory table. The clay goblets he and Meyrink had been drinking from jumped almost an inch, Meyrink’s teetering precariously before it toppled, spilling thick bloody red wine into the oak grain between them.

“Who’s the monster here? The old man in the dungeon or the young one baying for his blood?” Meyrink pushed himself to his feet and leaned in menacingly. It was rapidly becoming an old argument but that didn’t prevent it from being a passionate one.

“Forty-two girls dead, man! Forty-two! What about the sanctity of life? What is the meaning of life, brother, if you are willing to throw it away so cheaply?”

“We don’t know,” Meyrink rasped, his knuckles white on the tabletop. “We just don’t know that it is him. We have no evidence that he gets out. He’s chained up in there. There are wards and sigils and glyphs and all sorts of paraphernalia aimed at keeping him locked up down there, helpless... harmless.”

“And yet every morning he feeds you stories of his dreams, talks of the young ones he has seen suffering at the hands of the monstrous beasts. He regales you in glorious detail, brother. The creature is taunting you and you are too stupid to realise it.”

“No. Not too stupid. It is compassion. The old man raised you as he would his own son, from when the temple took you in fifteen years ago. He cared for you. He loved you. He did the same for me in my time. We owe him—”

“We owe him nothing anymore. He isn’t Victor Guttman! He’s a daemon. Can’t you get that into your thick skull, man? He barely touches the food we take down for him for a reason, you know. It doesn’t sustain him. Blood does. Blood, Brother. *Blood.*”

“Would you do it? Would you turn murderer and kill the man who might as well have been your own father, everything he did for you? Would you? Take the knife now, go down into the crypt and do it, cut his heart out. Do it, damn you! If you have so little doubt, do it...”

“No.”

“Well I am not about to.”

“I know men who could,” Messner said softly, wriggling around the impasse with a suggestion neither man really wished to consider. Bringing in outsiders. Part of it was fear—what would happen if people realised the priesthood of Sigmar had been infected with the tainted blood of vampires? Another part was self-preservation. The streets had been rife with rumours for days. Two witch hunters were in Drakenhof, though from what little Messner had managed to learn they were not church sanctioned Sigmarite witch hunters, and were barely in the employ of the Elector Count of Middenheim. Their charge had been issued nearly a decade ago, now their hunt was personal. They had come to town a week ago, looking for a man by the

name of Sebastian Aigner, who, if the gossips were to be believed, they had been hunting for seven years. He was the last of a bunch of renegade killers who had slaughtered the men's families, burning them alive. Metzger and Ziegler, the witch hunters, had found the others and extracted their blood debt. They had come to Drakenhof looking to lay their daemons to rest, and perhaps, Messner thought, they could purge the temple of its daemon in the process. "They could tell us for sure. This is what they do."

Meyrink looked sceptical.

"Forty-two young women, forty-two. Think about it."

"That is all I have been doing, for weeks. Do you think I don't lie awake at night, imagining him out there, feasting? Do you think I don't sneak down into the crypt at all hours, hoping to catch him gone, so that I know beyond a shadow of doubt that he is the killer my heart tells me he isn't? Always I find him there, chained to the walls, barely conscious, looking like death itself, and it breaks my heart that he is suffering because of me!"

"Forty-two," Reinhardt Messner said again, shaking his head as though the number itself answered every objection Brother Meyrink voiced. And perhaps it did at that.

"Talk to them if you must, but I want no part of it," Meyrink said, finally, turning and stalking out of the room.

Alone, Messner righted the spilled goblet and began mopping up the mess. It was, it seemed, his destiny to clean up after Meyrink.

Messner greeted the younger of the two with a tired smile and held out a hand to be shaken.

Metzger ignored it and didn't return the smile. There was something distinctly cold about the man, but given his line of work it was perhaps unsurprising. The older man, Eberl Ziegler, nodded and followed Metzger into the temple. He, at least, had the decency to bow low before the statue of Sigmar Heldenhammer and make the sign of the hammer whereas the other just walked down the aisle, toeing at the seats and tutting at the silver runes worked into the window frames. His footsteps echoed coldly.

Messner watched the man, fascinated by his confidence as he examined every nook and cranny of the old temple. Metzger moved with authority. He lifted a thin glass wedge from the front table, beside the incense burner, and tilted it so that it caught and refracted the light into a rainbow on the wall.

"So tell me," Metzger said, angling the light up the wall. "How does this fit with your philosophy? I am curious. The taking of a human life... it seems... alien to my understanding of your faith. Enlighten me."

Behind Messner, Meyrink coughed.

"Sacrifice for the good of mankind, Herr Metzger. Sacrifice."

"Murder, you mean," Metzger said bluntly. "Dressing the act up in fancy words doesn't change it. You want me to go down into the basement and slay a daemon. I can do this. It is what I do. Unlike you I see no nobility in the act. For me it is a case of survival, plain and simple. The creatures would destroy me and mine, so I destroy

theirs. So tell me again, why would you have me drive a stake into the heart of an old man?"

"He isn't an old man anymore. Victor Guttman is long gone. The thing down there is a shell, capable of ruthless cunning and vile acts of degradation and slaughter. It is a beast. Forty-two young women of this parish have suffered at the beast's hands, witch hunter. Forty-two. I would have you root out the canker by killing the beast so that I do not find the words forty-three coming to my lips."

"Good. Then we understand each other."

"So we kill to stop more killing?" Brother Meyrink said, unable to hold his silence. "That makes as much sense as going to war to end a war."

"We love to hate," the witch hunter said matter-of-factly. "We love to defeat and destroy. We love to conquer. We love to kill. That is why we love war so much we revere a killer and make him a god. In violence we find ourselves. Through pain and anger and conflict we find a path that leads us to, well, to what we don't know but we are determined to walk the path. It has forever been so."

"Sigmar help us all," Meyrink said softly.

"Indeed, and any other gods who feel benevolent enough to shine their light on us. In the meantime, I tend to help myself. I find it is better than waiting for miracles that will never happen."

"How do you intend to do it?" Meyrink asked.

Messner paled at the question. Details were not something he wanted.

The witch hunter drew a long bladed knife from his boot. "Silver-tipped," he said, drawing blood from the pad of his thumb as he pricked himself on the knife's sharpness. "Surest way to do it. Cut his heart out of his chest, then burn the corpse so there's nothing left."

Messner shuddered at the thought. It was barbaric. "Whatever it takes," he said, unable to look the witch hunter in the eye.

"Stay here, priest. I wouldn't want to offend your delicate sensibilities. Ziegler, come on, we've got work to do."

They descended in darkness, listening to the chittering of rats and the moans of the old man, faint like the lament of ghosts long since moved on. His cries were pitiful.

The candles had died but tapers lay beside fresh ones. Metzger lit two. They were enough. Death was a dark business. Too much light sanitised it. His feet scuffed at the silver wrought into the floor on the threshold. It was nothing more than mumbo-jumbo. There was no magic in the design. Some charlatan had taken the temple for all it was worth. It was amazing what price people would pay for peace of mind.

The fretful light revealed little of the dark's secrets.

Carefully Metzger moved through the crypt, Ziegler two steps behind him, sword drawn in readiness for ambush. Metzger had no such fear. The only things alive down in the crypt were either too small or too weak to cause any serious harm. There was no sense of evil to the place. No taint. He raised the candle, allowing the soft light to shed more layers of pure black in favour of gentler shadows.

The old priest was huddled in the corner, naked and emaciated, his bones showing stark against the flaked skin. He barely had the strength to lift his head but

defiance blazed in his eyes when he did so. Suppurating sores rimmed his mouth. There were dark scars where he had been bitten. Metzger had no doubt about the origin of the wound. It was the cold kiss of death: a vampire's bite. The old man had been fed on, of that there was no doubt. But that didn't mean that he had been sired into the life of a bloodsucking fiend.

Again, there was no residual evil that he could discern, only a frightened old man.

He trod on a plate of food that lay untouched at Guttman's feet, the plate cracked and mouldy cheese smeared beneath his boot. A nearby jug of water was nearly empty.

"Have you come to kill me?" The old man said. It sounded almost like a plea to Metzger's ears. The poor pathetic wretch had obviously tortured himself to the point of madness with the dreams of blood feasts. It was natural, having been fed upon to dream of feeding in the most feverish moments of the night when the kindred vampires were abroad. But dreams were not deeds. A true vampire would feel no remorse. There would be no tortured soul beginning for slaughter. There would be only defiance, arrogance, contempt, as the love of hatred boiled away all other emotions.

"Yes."

The fear seemed to leech out of Guttman, the puzzle of bones collapsing in on themselves as his body slouched against the cold crypt wall.

"Thank you."

"It will hurt, and there will be no remains for loved ones to come cry over, you understand? It can be no other way. The curse is in you, whether you killed these women or not."

"I killed them," Guttman said forcefully.

"I doubt it," Gundram Metzger said, drawing the silver dagger from his boot. "Does this scare you, priest? Does it make your skin itch and crawl?"

Guttman stared at the blade as it shone in the candlelight. He nodded.

"Make your peace with Sigmar," Eberl Ziegler said from behind Metzger. He turned his back on the murder.

A litany of prayers for forgiveness and for the safe passage of his soul tripped over Victor Guttman's lips, not stopping even for a moment as Metzger rammed the silver knife home, between third and fourth rib, into the old man's heart. His eyes flared open, the truth suddenly blazing in his mind. His screams were pitiful as he succumbed to death's embrace. He bled, pure dark blood that seeped out of the gaping wound in his chest and pooled on the floor around him.

Metzger stayed with the old priest as he died, a pitiful old man in chains.

He hung there, limbs slack, body slumped awkwardly, head lolling down over his cadaverous ribs, where the knife protruded from his chest cavity.

"It's over," Ziegler said, laying a hand on his friend's shoulder. "Come, let's leave this place. Bringing death to a temple leaves me cold."

"In a moment my friend. Go to the priests, tell them the deed is done, and fetch the paraffin oil from the cart. This place needs cleansing of the stench."

"But—"

“No buts, old friend. The place must be purged. The priests can find more walls to praise their god. But not here. Now leave me for a moment with the dead, would you? I need to pay my respects to a brave old fool.”

He sat alone for an unknowable time, the candle burning low in his hand, unmoving, waiting, alone with the dead priest.

The pungent reek of paraffin drifted down from above. It was a sickening, stifling smell. Disembodied voices argued, Ziegler’s the loudest as he continued to douse the temple in oil. The place would burn.

Victor Guttman’s eyes flared open in the dying light and his hand flew to the silver blade still embedded in his heart. He screamed as he yanked it out and sent the knife skittering across the crypt floor. The flesh around the wound was seared black.

“I tasted his blood,” Victor Guttman rasped, his head jerking up as he strained against his chains, all trace of the man gone. “I want more!”

Guttman twisted and jerked, tugging at the chains that bound him, but there was no escape.

“No,” Metzger said softly. “I told you I was here to kill you, consider this my promise delivered.” With that he stood, collected his silver knife and slipped it into the boot sheath, the gesture itself a mocking bow to the beast chained to the cold stone wall.

He walked slowly up the stairs, the creature raging in the darkness he left behind.

Ziegler was waiting at the crypt’s entrance, his face grim. He held a bottle in his hand, a rag stuffed into its mouth. He passed it to Metzger who lit the end with the last of his candle’s dwindling flame.

Together they stood at the huge wooden door, the cocktail of lamp oil and fire burning in Metzger’s hand. He tossed it deep into the body of the temple where the glass shattered off the statue of Sigmar. Flames licked at the stonework, tongues of blue heat lashing out to consume the wooden seats. Metzger and Ziegler backed out from the intense heat as the conflagration took hold and consumed the temple.

He turned to the younger priest, Messner, who had begged his help.

“The beast is dead.”

“But...”

“There are no buts, the beast’s evil cannot survive the fire. It is done. Deliver payment to Herr Hollenfeuer’s wine cellar.”

“How can we pay? We have nothing left. You’ve destroyed everything we ever had!”

Metzger shook his head sadly. “No, young sir, you did that. I am merely the tool you chose for its destruction. Do not blame the sword for the soldier’s death, blame the man wielding it.”

High above the blaze, three men stood watching the towering inferno with perverse delight.

Vlad von Carstein, the vampire count of Sylvania, watched the flames intently. Beside him, Herman Posner turned to his man, Sebastian Aigner: “Go out and feed. Make sure the fools down there know that they killed an innocent man. I want the knowledge to tear them apart.”

Aigner nodded. "It will be as you wish."

"Poor, stupid, cattle," Posner said, a slow smile spreading across his face. "This place promises a lot of sport, my lord."

Von Carstein said nothing, content to watch the Sigmarite temple turn to ashes and smoke.

Scanning, formatting and
proofing by Flandrel,
additional formatting and
proofing by Undead.

