

**A WARPSTONE PUBLICATION**

# **SIGMAR PROVIDES**

**A Warhammer Short Story  
by Klaus Mundt**



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The icy wind whipped into their faces as they looked down the grassy slope towards the woods and the wisps of smoke that rose through the sickly brown canopy of the Drakwald trees, just a mile away.

Joachim shivered and brushed aside a strand of his reddish, unkempt hair.

“Now at least we know why they call this place the Howling Hills,” he chuckled and looked at his companion, who was standing a few feet away, slowly rubbing the long, livid scar on his neck, face impassive.

“All right,” he continued. “What was our suspect’s name again and what did he do? Stole a loaf of bread, judging by the measly bounty on his head.”

The other one turned his head and stared Joachim in the eye. “Franz Ketzer is a convicted heretic wanted by the Church, and the prize is not to be measured in coin, but in the service we offer to our divine Lord Sigmar. Your cravings for worldly goods will one day become your doom.” His voice was cool and measured.

Joachim pinched the bridge of his nose. “Listen, Ingolf. Your Lord Sigmar may provide you with everything you need...”

Ingolf nodded. “That is right. Sigmar provides.”

Joachim was by far too used to this kind of conversation to be stunned. “I know. You keep saying that. You’re a gods-fearing man. And I respect that. But it’s not like you’re a witch hunter or anything like that. And in my world, people want money for their services: A decent meal or a pair of boots that lasts through the winter. I can’t live on stale bread and mouldy cheese forever. I once read your teeth come out if you...”

“You can’t read.”

Joachim swore silently.

“Listen,” he continued. “If this man down there has obviously no need to hide, lighting a fire just like that and if he’s so badly wanted by that Church of yours and all, maybe we should be careful. Remember, this time there’s only the two of us. I wish the team was complete.”

Ingolf slowly shook his head. “I know our friend is busy somewhere else, Joachim. But our Lord Sigmar is with us. Have faith.”

Joachim glanced at the leaden sky, as if waiting for a sign.

“You know Ingolf, sometimes I really wonder how we got to working together.”

Ingolf raised an eyebrow and his mouth twitched into a wry smile.

“Let me refresh your memory then. It was that rather unfortunate incident with those Tilean Sergio brothers back in Altdorf about three years ago...”

Joachim shook his head and set out through the long, thrashing grass down the slope towards the wood.

“Let’s just get to work,” he sighed as he unslung the vicious crossbow from his back in one fluid motion.



Franz Ketzer started as he heard the rough voice from the edge of the clearing he had picked for his campsite.

“In the name of our Lord Sigmar!” the voice boomed. “Your path ends here. I will wipe your

heresy from the face of this world!”

Franz rose from his crouch by the hot fire as the man slowly emerged from the line of trees, a warhammer in his hand. This was by no means one of the hammers the knights of the Order of the Fiery Heart carried. Nonetheless it was a dangerous enough weapon. The slightly insane gleam in the man’s eyes added to the impression that he had meant what he had said. Or was that really insanity in those cold eyes? He thought he had seen this look on many a zealot’s face before they burst into ramblings about their gods. Sigmar, Solkan, Shallya, all the same to him. But Franz had come across people like this dozens of times. His hand fell onto the hilt of his sword. “But Sigmar is not here!” he snarled, slowly drawing his blade.

Ingolf smiled a mocking smile. “That is what they all say.”

Franz leapt forward and was upon his opponent in the blink of an eye, his sword lashing out towards the other’s face. He liked humiliating his victims and, if possible, incapacitating them before he finished them off. A well placed blow to the eyes had ended many of his fights before they had actually started and always presented him with the opportunity to watch his puny opponents’ fear rise, but leaving them with a small spark of hope up until their inevitable and painful death.

Ingolf’s hammer came up like lightning, blocking the heretic’s sword just in front of his face.

“You don’t stand a chance, Chaos filth!” he spat and rammed his forehead into Ketzer’s face.

Franz’s bloodied visage twisted into a mask of malice. “Is that right?”

The back of his jerkin erupted and a long tail shot forth. It ended in a razor sharp point dripping with a clear liquid.

Ingolf jumped back, but he knew he was not fast enough to dodge the poisonous tip effectively, as it whipped over the heretic’s head. He dropped to his knees, avoiding a hit by less than an inch. Now, Ketzer was upon him, attacking him wildly with his sword, while his scorpion tail was trying to strike home.

Ingolf broke into a sweat. He knew he could not withstand this barrage for more than a few seconds. He tried to rise from the muddy ground to gain a better fighting position. “Sigmar!” he roared as he swung his hammer at his opponent, missing him, but driving him back a step.

Ketzer opened his mouth to shout back, but the words never came. He had a look of sincere surprise on his face as he screwed up his eyes, as if he wanted to see the iron tip of the crossbow bolt that was protruding from his forehead. His tail lashed out wildly a few more times without finding its mark. Then he collapsed.



Joachim walked across the clearing smiling apologetically.

“I’m sorry. I just needed time to get a clear shot. Ranald knows, I like a job where I don’t even need to draw my sword. By the way, this mutant here turned out to be a nasty piece of work. Do you reckon there is any chance we can get a bit more for him, tail and all?”

Ingolf shot him a glance as he wiped his face and forced his hair, dark and matted with sweat and blood, back with his hand. “You still do not understand...”

“Yes, I do,” Joachim sighed. “Sigmar’s grace, uprooting evil, holding back the tides of Chaos, I understand all that! All I meant

to say was, why don't we just for once, catch one of those highwaymen. They bring a lot of gold! We could buy new equipment. Food! All for the good cause."

Ingolf's features softened a little bit.

"My dear friend," he said very calmly as if talking to a child. "Highwaymen are outlaws, yes. But most outlaws have a very sad story to tell. Sigmar will forgive them eventually." His face hardened again. "But there is no excuse for turning to the ways of Chaos, as people like this Franz Ketzer here do. That is why I hunt down those lackeys of the Ruinous Powers. That is why I find them wherever they choose to hide from justice!"

There was a short silence, as always after one of Ingolf's tirades about the minions of Chaos.

"You mean *we* hunt them," Joachim said sternly. "And stop using that tone on me. Apart from that there's no reason to get all agitated."

"I am sorry Joachim," Ingolf replied, calm again. "That is what I meant. *We* hunt them. Each for his own reasons. And as for your worries about gold, I will treat us to a good night's sleep in a warm room, a decent meal and a few drinks for you as soon as we reach the next inn. Money from my purse."

"But your purse has been empty for weeks now," he cried.

Joachim could not help but getting annoyed.

Ingolf shoved his hammer back into his belt and decapitated Ketzer's body with a hatchet. He held out the head to Joachim.

"You keep this till we get somewhere you can trade it for gold. As for your concerns about my purse, I keep a few spare crowns," he said as he made his way off the clearing.

Joachim stuffed the head into a leather sack and hurried after Ingolf.

"Crowns?!" he shouted. "You mean you have gold on you?!"

"For moments like this," Ingolf said in a satisfied voice, his face smug. "And be quiet. Think of all the highwaymen that might hear you."

Joachim followed him into the wood.

"Bastard," he muttered.



Joachim was sitting in a comfortable chair, by the warming log fire, nursing his fourth tankard of ale, his feet resting on a low stool, his eyes half closed.

Ingolf had been true to his word and had led them to an inn as soon as they had reached the town of Volgen.

He was sitting next to Joachim, busily reading a note they had received from one of their informants shortly after their arrival.

Setting up a way of receiving vital information while they were on the hunt had been one of the most challenging tasks since he had joined forces with Ingolf. He had created a list of inns, one in every bigger town inside the triangle of Nuln, Altdorf and Talabheim, where their informants would send their messages. This was not cheap, but was very efficient. The fact that he was not able to actually write a list did not bother him very much. His memory had never failed him. The thought of that made him sigh deeply. There were certain things in his life, he would rather just forget.

The image of a woman appeared before his inner eye. Lola, beautiful Lola, wet and cold. Lola, his friend for years. Back in Altdorf a long time ago. Lola, drowned and dead in his arms. The leering face of Nino Sergio, a Tilean small-time crime lord on the rise appeared.

In his sleep, Joachim knew what came next. He had had this dream so many times. It was a recollection of the bitter truth. He had failed his friend, had not arrived in time to save her from a gruesome death. It was Sergio's doing, but Joachim's failure that had cost her her life and had him abandon his home and set out to... to do something. Change things? Hunt Chaos to alleviate his own guilt? The image came back. The lifeless body of the woman, his cries for her to come back, his rage, his helplessness.

He jerked out of his dreams, as he felt Ingolf's elbow nudging him in the ribs.

"I think we found him," the Sigmarite hissed.

Joachim shook off the fresh memory of this so familiar dream. He felt like more ale.

"I think we found him, Joachim," Ingolf repeated, his voice quivering with excitement.

He had heard that tone in Ingolf's voice before. Definitely more ale. "Found who?"

"The man we have been after for more than one year now! Alfred Doppelzunge. Wanted for heresy and affiliation with the Ruinous Powers!"

Joachim looked around nervously. "You want to keep it down. Talking about this kind of thing in public never turns out well. Anyway, every time we get a tip you think it's this Doppelzunge. We don't even know what he looks like. You're obsessed."

"Mind your tongue," Ingolf said coldly. "I know it is him. It is all in this note here. Striking similarities to the Kemperbad case. There are signs. And I can read them!"

Joachim definitely needed more ale. "We can't even be sure there was a case in Kemperbad. There wasn't any real proof! Local authorities put it down as..."

"Local authorities," Ingolf snorted. "Local authorities are blind. You know that. You were there. They do not want to see the obvious, if it could hurt their reputation. That's the core problem, actually," he sighed. "Listen, Joachim, I know it is him. It is all in this note here."

"All in there?" Joachim asked dryly. "Proof and names and facts and all? There's somebody who said he was Alfred Doppelzunge down in... Where is it, anyway?"

Ingolf grabbed Joachim's shoulder. "Of course Doppelzunge does not go about proclaiming his name. He uses other identities - you know that. But there are signs. And I can read them!"

"Where?" Joachim repeated, his voice level, his eyes turned toward the ceiling.

Ingolf coughed. "Marburg."

Joachim turned to him fully now. "Marburg? You saw signs in that piece of scribble there and now you want us to rush off to Marburg? That place is at the end of the world!"

Ingolf grinned back at him. "A mere three or four hundred miles from here. I have worked it all out. We head south, maybe one week's march, till we reach the river. From there we can take one of the boats going upstream. There will be another few hours of

daylight. If we leave now, we can..."

"Can't do it," Joachim interrupted him. "Not today."

Ingolf looked puzzled. "Why not?" he asked.

Joachim couldn't help but smile. "Well, you promised me a decent meal, some drinks and a good night's sleep in a warm room." He yawned and stretched happily. "The meal we had, but I could do with another drink and we still need to sleep in that incredibly cosy room. Wouldn't want you to break your promise. But here's one from me in return. We'll leave tomorrow as soon as I've slept off all the ale I'm about to drink."

He got up and made his way to the bar ignoring the ferocious stare Ingolf gave him.



The march south and the never-ending autumn rain, the boring upstream journey and the daily diet of salted fish, stale bread and water had by no means helped to change Joachim's opinion about this journey, especially because the boat fare had eaten up the bounty on Ketzer's head they had collected at the temple of Sigmar in Volgen. Ingolf on the other hand was almost cheerful as they drew closer to their destination. He was not particularly fond of travelling by boat. He preferred his feet on solid ground at any time. But he knew this long journey would be worth the confinement to a few square yards of wooden planks. It would even be worth the appalling bragging of the sailors as they tried to beat each other's lies about how many women they had in each port of the Old World. Places they had, there was no doubt about that, never laid eyes on. Doppelzunge would pay dearly for having him endure this. He smiled grimly.



"So what do you make of all this?" Joachim asked as he counted their few remaining coins for the fifth time in the small and draughty room they had rented for the night. They had arrived shortly before dark and had spent a few hours in the dimly lit taproom of their inn talking to some local farmers and fishermen.

"Quite a gloomy bunch of people around here, don't you think?" he added as he looked up at Ingolf who was staring out the window at the wet and muddy streets of Marburg.

"They most certainly are, Joachim. And you would be, too, if you were led to believe the things they believe."

"So, you think they are right?" Joachim asked. "You think the Baron's family is cursed?"

Ingolf let out a sharp laugh. "Sigmar, no! On the contrary! Certainly Baron Walter is in grave danger, but not from a curse or any such thing. It is the superstition and the hushed talk about 'replacing' him that is the real threat to him."

Joachim dropped the coins back into his purse one by one. "Well, the Baron's son died. And not the peaceful way seems. Then people in the town started dying, too. There's been 'accidents' ever since. Twelve deaths in less than one month. Looks a lot like some kind of curse to me."

Ingolf nodded slightly. "Just like in Kemperbad. But curses are not handed down from a ruler to his people. And to curse a whole town requires a lot of power. Too much, I daresay, even for Doppelzunge. But we should keep in mind that he is a master of deception and infiltration."

Joachim frowned. "You know an awful lot about curses."

Ingolf heaved a deep sigh. "Never you mind my friend. Sometimes you are full of surprises, too. Especially when it comes to entering places that are, at least to other people's eyes, locked and inaccessible, or, I might add, when it comes to the anatomy of the female body."

Joachim grinned sheepishly. "Can't blame a man for broadening his horizon."

"Anyway," Ingolf continued. "Let us introduce ourselves to Baron Walter tomorrow. I am wondering if he is even fully aware of the danger he is in. And I would like to meet this visiting noble gentleman from the south the people mentioned. I have sent a note to our informant that we will be residing in the Baron's manor from tomorrow on."

"And what makes you think he will take us in?"

"If he is not entirely blind, he will know that he needs all the help he can get."

Joachim stretched out on his bug ridden mattress, scratched himself and yawned. "And if he is?"

Ingolf extinguished the oily lantern and lay back on his mattress, too. "Then we will make him see."



"So you have noticed that your people are getting closer to a riot or maybe even a revolt every day? And you haven't even increased the guard?" Ingolf asked, astonishment showing in his voice. "On our way to your manor, to your home, we have not been stopped once. We are fully armed!"

"In fact," Joachim added, "the only person who cared to ask us about our business here was the lovely young lady who brought us to this very room."

Baron Walter looked tired. It was obvious from his clouded eyes, from his sagging shoulders and his slightly trembling voice that he was worn out. He met Ingolf's enquiring gaze with a weak smile.

"Believe me, I am very well aware of what is going on in my own municipality. And maybe my people are right. Maybe we are all cursed. But if that is the case, there is nothing much I can do about it anyway, is there? Guards or not?"

He paused to gather himself.

"My son and heir died three weeks ago. My wife has fallen ill and is confined to her bed. The townfolk are getting restless. Currently the only joy I have is my daughter Matilda, who happens to be the lovely young lady that escorted you here to my study. I love my people. I really do, and I think that is something not every noble in our holy Empire could say of himself. But to be perfectly honest, you find me desperate."

Ingolf's voice was firm. "As I said, the hand of our Lord Sigmar guided us here. You seem to be in dire need of assistance to locate and wipe out the source of the ill luck that has come upon you. Assistance we can provide!"

Baron Walter's face hardened. "You are mercenaries," he said acidly. "There is no gold for those who want to feed on my family's misfortune!"

Before Joachim could intervene Ingolf was out of his seat and slammed his fist on the Baron's desk. He winced, as visions of armed guards, dungeon cells and finally gallows flashed before his eyes.

"We are men true to the way of our Lord Sigmar," he hissed at the Baron. "As you are, I trust," he added regaining his composure. "We offer you our help. We can help you protect your family and your people. We do not require payment for the honour of rooting out evil."

He sat down again.

Joachim swore inwardly. At least there would be the modest bounty on Doppelzunge's head.

"But of course the choice is yours," Ingolf said. "All we ask is that you accommodate us for as long as we are needed. And you will have to cooperate and answer our questions."

Walter was silent for a long time.

"So be it," he finally said with a shrug. "I give you one week."

Ingolf nodded and smiled. "Let us not waste any time then."



"Please tell us about your son and his passing," Ingolf said after a servant had brought brandy. "As I understand, that was the beginning of the accidents. We need to know every detail. We need to find a reasonable explanation for the mishap that has befallen you and those dear to you."

The Baron emptied his glass and refilled it.

"Of course. My son died in a hunting accident. To make a long story short, he was killed by a wild boar."

Joachim reached for the bottle and smiled at their host encouragingly. "We need to hear the long story."

Baron Walter nodded and sighed.

"Well then," he said. "I didn't join the hunt on that day. I was caught up settling a dispute between Herr Schauer and one of my guards."

He chuckled unhappily. "Otherwise it might have been me and not my son who..." his voice trailed off.

"I understand," Ingolf said, containing his impatience. "Who is Herr Schauer?"

"Herr Schauer is travelling with the viscount. The Viscount Friedrich von Hochsleben is my guest."

Joachim frowned. "And where did Herr Schauer go after you had, uh, resolved that dispute?"

"To his quarters," the Baron said. "At least I would think so. Why?"

Joachim shook his head. "Never mind."

"Anyway," the Baron continued. "My son Arne was a very keen hunter. On that day it was him, the viscount and, of course, Heinrich Bogen, our Master of the Hunt, curse him."

Ingolf raised an eyebrow. "Why would you say that?"

Walter barked a short laugh. "Because I hold him responsible for my son's death! As the Master of the Hunt, he should know about the beasts in our woods. That's what I paid him for. But still that stupid bastard led my son and our noble guest into the territory of this crazed boar. He neglected his duty to protect my family and my guests!"

"Did you say you paid him?" Joachim asked. "He is not here anymore?"

The Baron helped himself to another glass of brandy. "I wish he was. I would make him regret ever betraying my trust. He abandoned my own flesh and blood and my distinguished guest in the woods. The boar escaped after killing Arne and injuring the Viscount. And while that was happening Bogen just watched and then fled. He was seen the next day by a woodcutter, but we haven't been able to track him down so far. Maybe he is even responsible for all the accidents. He is a skilled woodsman and well versed in setting traps of any kind."

"Very good," Ingolf said. "This is certainly worth investigating. But now about the viscount, how long has he been your guest and was he severely injured?"

"You will meet the viscount at dinner. He sustained a deep wound to his thigh. He is still limping and endures a great amount of pain. As for your first question, he has been my guest for a month now. He travelled all the way from his lands around Hochsleben in the south to arrange a trade route for Marburg timber. As you might know, Hochsleben lies at the foot of the Black Mountains about three hundred miles from here. A quite barren region if you can trust the Imperial cartographers."

Ingolf sighed reverently. "I know. Actually, Hochsleben lies close to the Black Fire Pass where once our Lord Sigmar..."

Joachim waved away his musing.

"All very interesting, I'm sure," he interrupted. "But what about those accidents? Twelve people dead in less than one month. That's quite out of the ordinary, isn't it?"

"It is indeed," the Baron said surlily. "The first incident happened right here at my manor two days after the hunting accident. One of the stable boys was trampled to death by a horse. The next day a stevedore in town was crushed by a falling barrel after a rope snapped. Then a newly wed couple died in a fire. They were burned alive in their bed while they were sleeping. I still remember the sight of their charred bodies. But probably the most awful thing was when some children were playing on the bridge crossing the creek that leads down to the river. The bridge collapsed and they all drowned. Three children dead. It's hardly surprising that my people are upset." He shook his head. "What am I saying? They are angry and frightened. They are losing their faith in Lord Sigmar and their trust in me as their ruler and protector. I have already ordered my daughter to stay at home. She loves going to town to socialise. I sent her to the fair city of Nuln for her education, but since she came back she thinks Marburg is a rather dull backwater place. She even knew some of the people that were killed. But it's simply not safe now. What if the people vent their frustration on her? It's not her fault! I cannot allow that," he said, his voice firm now.

"That is right," Ingolf agreed. "Please, allow me one last question for now."

The Baron nodded.

"What has your wife fallen ill with?"

Baron Walter looked at him puzzled. "Sieglinde collapsed this morning. She has been feeling weak since our son died. Doctor Block is looking after her as we speak."



The mood at dinner was bleak. Baroness Sieglinde's condition had not improved. So it was the Viscount Friedrich von Hochsleben who led the conversation. He was a tall, handsome man in his mid thirties with a winning smile and impeccable manners.

Joachim did not like him.

“So, I understand you two are here to investigate the mysterious incidents that haunt Marburg. Tell me, what do you think is the root of all this. Is it as the local people say and we are all cursed?”

Ingolf stared at him. “A curse can take many forms Lord Viscount. But it is never wise to joke about it.”

Baron Walter looked up from his plate and opened his mouth, but the viscount did not seem offended by Ingolf’s scolding tone of voice.

“I am sorry,” he said instead. “I didn’t mean to joke about a such a grave matter. On the contrary. I appreciate your presence very much. But I am very interested in your methods of investigation and your motivation to help my friend, not even demanding payment.”

Ingolf sat back. “It is in the spirit of our Lord Sigmar that...”

The door to the dining room flew open and in marched a man clad in a black cloak and a shirt and breeches of the same colour. His dark hair was bound in a long ponytail. He stopped for a moment, slammed the door shut and scanned the scene with steel blue eyes. Then he sat down opposite the viscount, reaching for a cup and the wine decanter.

There was a short silence after which the viscount laughed nervously. “May I introduce my secretary and bodyguard Herr Bartholomaeus Schauer,” he said. “Etiquette is not one of his strengths.”

Baron Walter smiled. “Herr Schauer must be very busy working out our trade agreement right now. Please join us and have some dinner.”

Schauer gave him a curt nod. “Thank you, Your Excellency.” His voice was cold.

“Bartholomaeus, may I introduce these gentlemen,” the viscount said. “This is Herr Ingolf Schmitt and Herr Joachim Tischler. Herr Schmitt was just about to tell us how they are going to solve the Baron’s problems.”

“He’s a doctor then?”

The viscount looked dumbfounded. “And how would that help?”

Schauer shrugged. “I just met Doctor Block out in the yard. I could smell the liquor on his breath from ten yards away. I thought he should be busy tending to Baroness Sieglinde’s illness.”

“Your concern is very much appreciated,” the Baron said. “But I am sure the good doctor has done his duty and then helped himself to a nightcap.”

Schauer eyed them icily. “So, what qualifies you to help?” he sneered.

There was a longer silence now.

Ingolf leaned forward, glaring at him menacingly.

Joachim’s eyes went cold and his hand tightened on his fork.

“Now, Bartholomaeus. That is enough,” Viscount Friedrich intervened. “These men have come to the aid of my friend and our host. It is in the interests of all of us that they succeed.” He leaned forward to look Schauer in the eye. “I do not wish the people insulted who will help stopping these horrible accidents from happening.”

His voice had developed a hard edge and he brought back his

winning smile with apparent difficulty.

“What is this talk about accidents at the dinner table?”

They all looked up. Matilda had entered the room quietly and overheard the last words.

“You are late,” the Baron said.

“I am sorry father. I went to change mother’s sheets after Doctor Block had finished. She still has a fever.”

“It’s all right, child. Just sit down. You have met our new guests?”

Matilda smiled warmly, finally defusing the situation. “Met them and been properly introduced. I cannot express my gratitude for your help.” Her friendly almond eyes settled on Joachim. “Will you be staying with us for long?”

“Matilda, please,” Baron Walter interrupted. He looked around apologetically. “Herr Schmitt was just about to explain their professional procedure.”

Ingolf nodded. “Indeed. As I was saying, it is in the spirit of our Lord Sigmar...”

Joachim helped himself to another cup of wine.



“Now, that was all very interesting,” Joachim said.

After dinner they had retired to the small but comfortable room the Baron had assigned to them. A fire was crackling in the hearth; its warmth driving away the autumn chill and making the place even more cosy.

Ingolf nodded absently while he was reading the note they had received after dinner.

“I think we learned a lot,” Joachim continued, trailing the path of a raindrop that was running down the outside of the window.

“What do you think of Herr Schauer?”

“Great entrance,” Ingolf mumbled absently. “One might think he has rehearsed it for quite some time.”

Joachim laughed out loud. “Just what I thought! Dangerous through and through!”

He snorted.

“The Baron on the other hand is a bit too noble for my taste,” he continued. “*I love my people*,” he mocked. “That’s what they all say, isn’t it? Hypocrites, the lot of them.”

“He seemed quite sincere to me, though,” Ingolf said. “Honest eyes, clearly worried.”

“Oh, come on, Ingolf. You of all people want to judge someone by his eyes? I always thought you were more interested in solid facts,” he said, taking interest in another raindrop that was crossing the first one’s trail.

“All right,” he conceded. “I grant that Baron Walter struck me as more of a sincere man than his new best friend and business partner, the Lord Viscount.”

Ingolf smiled. “You certainly never liked the nobles, Joachim.”

“And Matilda?” Joachim went on after a longer pause. “Pretty girl, isn’t she?”

Ingolf shrugged, still reading. “Not a girl anymore, not yet a woman. Certainly gullible.”

Joachim grinned. "And you know all about it, I take it?"

Ingolf looked up, having finished reading the note.

"I do not feel like justifying myself for having other interests than carnal pleasures, my dear friend. My time will surely come," he said tersely.

"I know," Joachim smirked. "Sigmar provides."

"Precisely," Ingolf replied. "Even though I certainly lack your expertise, since I have never been professionally affiliated with..."

"Yes, I get it, Your Pureness," Joachim snapped sourly.

"Anyway," Ingolf continued without pausing. "I suggest you have an early start tomorrow and take a look at the area," he said quietly. "Maybe you can find something useful in Bogen's quarters. The hunter's lodge might be locked though."

Joachim shrugged. "So?"

Ingolf went to stand beside Joachim. He kept his voice low as he showed Joachim their informant's note he had just read.

"If you found the dinner interesting, this here might even be exciting," he said. "We will have to tread very carefully, but at the same time we have to act swiftly. Something very foul is afoot. I have a feeling that Doppelzunge is about to make his move. We have arrived here not a minute too soon, maybe even a bit too late to thwart Doppelzunge's plot completely. But we have to stop him, Joachim. I will not let him slip away again. We will have to set our plan in motion right away."

Joachim raised an eyebrow at him. "What plan?"

Ingolf waved the sheet of parchment and beamed. "I was just about to tell you."



The morning's cold mist had barely risen as Joachim made his way across the deserted yard.

He stopped as he saw a lone black figure crouching on the lawn. As he watched, Bartholomaeus Schauer rose and started walking in his direction at a measured pace. On

the ground, where the man had been a moment ago, Joachim could see a body. He looked around. Servants were emerging from a manor's side door to start their chores. They looked at him curiously. Schauer had reached him now. Joachim stepped into his path.

"Where do you think you are going?" he demanded.

Schauer stopped and turned back to the silhouette on the lawn. "Going to inform the Baron that his doctor is dead," he said without a trace of emotion.

By now the servants had stopped. One of them had noticed the body.

"He is dead?" Joachim asked.

"Died hours ago. Fell onto the rake, it seems," Schauer confirmed.

"He fell onto the rake and got himself killed?" Joachim asked, his voice raised.

Schauer looked at him indifferently. "Told you he was drunk," he said. "Must have stumbled in the dark."

The servants were moving towards them now. From the manor's front door he could hear the voice of Baron Walter. "Sigmar save us!" he shouted as Joachim heard his footsteps approaching.

"Weren't you the last one who saw the doctor yesterday?" Joachim asked and slowly turned to face Schauer.

The man looked at him coolly. "Do you want me to be the last one who sees you, too?"

There were people all around them now. Somewhere Joachim heard Matilda sobbing and praying.

He straightened his back, his left hand rubbing the knuckles of his right. He smiled.

"I didn't trust you the moment I met you, Schauer. And I wish you'd just stop pretending you're so dangerous."

Schauer sneered at him. "What makes you think I'm pretending?"

"That's more like it," Joachim said and swung his fist at the other one's chin.

Schauer swayed back and avoided a hit. "You asked for it," he said.



It was dark outside. Joachim still felt the throbbing pain in his nose where Schauer had landed just one punch that had sent him sprawling to the ground. Matilda had tended to it and, while doing that, touched him more times than necessary. He smiled faintly.

After that he had paid a visit to Bogen's quarters. That and the search of the area had yielded no clues whatsoever. And now, many hours later, he was sitting by the fire in the reading room, helping himself to some brandy and listening to the wailing that was going on outside. Baroness Sieglinde von Marburg had succumbed to her illness less than two hours ago. Ingolf had been right. They had to act quickly. Ranald knew, this was the part of his chosen occupation he hated the most. Death and desperation was to be found wherever they went. One day someone would have to answer for all this. But Doppelzunge first. The plan was all set. He drained his glass and got up.

Stealth was not one of Ingolf's strengths and he knew it. But he knew an opportunity when he saw one.

After offering a prayer to Sigmar that he might guide Baroness Sieglinde safely to the Gates of Morr, he had set out through the now empty corridors. He knew what was at stake. He knew Sigmar would guide and protect him. He gave a satisfied nod as he reached the door and found it unlocked. The plan had worked.

The Viscount looked up from the desk as the door swung open.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

So far so good, Ingolf thought.

"Well, Your Lord Viscount..."

"Yes. What *are* you doing here," a cold voice snarled from behind him.

Ingolf spun around. Schauer had his sword drawn and sneered.

"Sigmar's beard!" he swore.



Joachim was making for their room as Matilda came along the corridor breathlessly, a worried look on her face. She raced towards him and slung her arms around his neck.

"Oh Joachim! I'm so glad I found you," she panted.

Joachim patted her back comfortingly. "I know Matilda," he said.

"It's been a shock to us all. Your mother..."

"That's not what I mean," she said, her eyes welling with tears, her voice trembling. "You have to come straight away! It's Ingolf!"

Joachim's eyes narrowed.

"What happened to Ingolf?" he asked coldly.

Tears were running down her cheeks now.

"Schauer," she said.

He looked her in the eye and wiped away her tears.

"Of course," he said, nodding knowingly now. "Of course."



Joachim raced after her, his mind reeling. Ranald, what a plan, he thought.

Matilda stopped at a door.

"In here," she urged. "I don't know what he's doing to him!"

Joachim took a deep breath to brace himself for the coming confrontation and stepped into the room.



As it was, Schauer was standing at the back of the room, his arms folded before his chest. Right in front of the man the Viscount Friedrich von Hochsleben was sitting at his desk, a pistol levelled straight at Joachim's chest. Ingolf was sitting on a chair, tightly bound by a good length of rope, his face stern.

Matilda closed the door and picked up a sword that had been propped up against the wall. She pointed the tip of the blade at Joachim's throat, stepping in front of him. She blew him a kiss. "Sorry, handsome. But sometimes duty stands above desire."



The Viscount gave them a satisfied smile. "So, finally we are all here. And if it isn't the two men who were so hot on my heels in Kemperbad. You came really close that time. Unfortunately for you both, this time you came a bit too close. Lord Slaanesh knows, I cannot tolerate that."

Ingolf's eyes never left the Viscount. "Doppelzunge," he spat. "Finally your are man enough to face me."

Alfred Doppelzunge nodded. "Now that you are securely tied to that chair. I've never been much of a fighting man myself, so I prefer our first and last meeting that way."

"You ran last time," Ingolf sneered. "You should have run this time while you still had the chance. Your Lord of Pleasure cannot save you from Sigmar's wrath."

Doppelzunge cast a glance around, feigning astonishment.

"Oh, I am sorry, but didn't you notice that you are the one who will not live to see the next hour? So, stop pretending you could pose any threat to me."

Ingolf slowly shook his head. "You put way too much faith in the Ruinous Powers. They abandon all their lackeys eventually."

Doppelzunge shook his head in disbelief. "And you really think Sigmar will get you out of this, don't you?"

Ingolf smiled and nodded. "Sigmar provides."

"Sigmar is dead!" Doppelzunge spat.

Ingolf sighed. "I hear that a lot."

Joachim was still staring at Matilda and at the blade she was holding to his throat. He could feel that the tip had punctured his skin and a thin trickle of blood was running down his neck.

"How did you do it then?" he asked icily.

Doppelzunge shifted his attention to him.

"How did I do what?"

"Well, everything. How did you set it all up? How did you ensnare young Matilda here and what is *his* role?" He raised his chin in the direction of Schauer.

"I see," Doppelzunge said and leaned back. "Of course you want to know. It's quite simple actually. Bartholomaeus is in fact my bodyguard. And he is really good at what he does. Ruthless, too. A character trait that is priceless to me. I can't stand moralists. So, I pay him a handsome amount of money to keep all worldly harm from me and ignore those parts of my business he might not like. And he hated you two deeply the moment he heard you were here and why you were here. What did you call them again Bartholomaeus? Blinded lapdogs of patron deities?" he laughed. "Lovely. But the actual foundation to this little scheme here was laid when I met dear Matilda in Nuln a long time ago. We got along very well, didn't we? Matilda and I share the same interests."

Joachim shuddered at the thought of Doppelzunge and Matilda practising the foul rituals of the Dark Lord of Pleasure.

"She also told me about this conveniently quiet barony here. An ideal place for me to settle down for a while before I...", he glanced at Matilda's back. "Before *we* move on to something greater."

Matilda smiled.

"You might have noticed that my father is a weakling," she said. "But unfortunately he is almost as devout a follower of Sigmar as good Ingolf here. There was no way of changing him. But this one here is different," she purred, caressing Joachim's cheek. "You like the darker ways of life, don't you? We could have moulded you into a good follower of our way."

Joachim leered at her. "You make him lower than that pistol and I'll show you what I know about moulding people."

Doppelzunge laughed. "Brave till the end! I appreciate that. But it won't help you. Anyway, before I came here, Matilda found us a valuable collaborator. It took some gold and I believe a few favours of a more private nature to bring Herr Bogen onto our side. I almost felt pity for young Arne as Bogen cut him down like wheat. I just had to give myself this cut so it would look like I bravely faced the boar and tried to protect Arne. Of course it was easy for me to shoot Bogen when we met for the final instalment of his blood money. I couldn't allow witnesses, you understand. As for the following accidents, that was very easy, too. Matilda is well respected and liked in town and nobody would ever suspect her of being involved in anything sinister. You didn't have a hard time cutting ropes and setting houses on fire, did you?"

"Not at all," she said. "And I didn't have a hard time poisoning my beloved mother either. It broke my heart, but it had to be done. And Doctor Block had always been a stinking drunk. Even a defenceless young girl like me could easily kill him. We just couldn't let him discover that mother was being poisoned or even let him heal her. So, I gutted him and left him lying on the lawn."

Ingolf was by no means able to contain his disgust. "So, your sick plot has brought you this far," he spat. "But how do you plan to dispose of your father?"



"Oh, I was coming to that," Doppelzunge said pleasantly. "First of all, you two showed up. And since I still owed you for disturbing my plans in Kemperbad you became my priority. But to be honest, I am quite disappointed that you stumbled into this trap so easily. I really thought you were better sport. But life is full of disappointments, isn't it? I will grant you the honour of being killed by my own hand nonetheless. In the end you entered my chambers armed, accusing me of heresy and tried to kill me. I was just lucky my bodyguard was with me. Anyway, I will suggest to the Baron that a marriage between Matilda and me be part of our trade agreement. Unfortunately, something will happen to him right after our wedding ceremony. Whether he will have a tragic accident or he will die of a sudden illness I haven't decided, yet. In either case, I will offer the good people of Marburg my help as a strong ruler who will protect them from any harm. People are very gullible. Especially when they are desperate already, worn down by such ill a fate as has befallen their town. And that is that. Quite a flawless plan, don't you agree?"

Joachim looked at him in surprise. "That's what you call flawless? What about the mistakes you made?"

Doppelzunge's look was no less surprised. "There are no mistakes."

Joachim raised his eyebrows. "But of course there are," he chuckled. "First of all, you're feeling way too safe. That's always a mistake. And the second and by far biggest mistake was that you just confessed everything. You confessed that you are a fraud, a murderer and, above all, a disciple of the Chaos Lord of Pleasure. And, to be perfectly honest, we knew it was you before we even got here. We just weren't sure about your partners in crime. But, to conclude this matter, it was crystal clear to me, that young Matilda here was your accomplice, when she came to me in the corridor almost drowning in tears and her own snot."

"Enough of this!" Matilda snarled. "You are buying time and it won't help you. Kill them now, Alfred!" she screamed furiously. "I'm getting tired of these jests!"

To her surprise Ingolf was smiling at her sadly.

"You do not understand girl," he said, his voice hard again. "It is as I said. Your foul god has abandoned you. You are alone."

She shot a glance over her shoulder.

In the blink of an eye Joachim's foot came up and caught Matilda on the wrist of her sword hand. The blade clattered to the floor, but Matilda was not paying attention. Alfred Doppelzunge was lying face down on the desk, a pool of blood spreading from his throat. Behind him, cleaning the blade of his dagger on Doppelzunge's shirt, stood Bartholomaeus Schauer eyeing her coolly. He shrugged.

"I only kill when I am absolutely sure it's the right one. Joachim is right, you know. You were feeling too safe. You even believed you could buy me and you fell for the whole set up that I hate Joachim and Ingolf. Well, and he just confessed." He drew his sword. "You too, by the way," he added.

Matilda spun around wildly and hauled herself at Joachim with a scream. He dodged her clumsy attack and she was propelled past him by the force of her own assault. She stumbled and fell, trying to grab a bookshelf for support. The shelf slowly tilted away from the wall and toppled over, crashing into other pieces of furniture. A lantern exploded into a searing fireball as the oil sprayed in every direction. Matilda's dress caught fire and within seconds she was engulfed in flames, screeching madly in pain and the finality of her failure. Joachim stared as the fire spread rapidly,

hungrily feeding on the old tomes, the wood and the thick carpet. Already the heat was increasing and the flames were licking up the walls of the room. He saw Bartholomaeus cut Ingolf's bonds.

"You got Doppelzunge's head, Barth?" he yelled above the now roaring blaze.

Bartholomaeus shook his head. "No time!" he yelled back. "Get out!"



The whole manor was in uproar. Servants were running aimlessly around and shouting for help. Guards were trying to push their way through them to reach the smoke clogged passage that led towards the Viscount's quarters. Someone was shouting for water.

It took Ingolf, Joachim and Barth mere minutes in the confusion to collect their belongings and head for the now deserted foyer of the mansion. Somewhere Baron Walter von Marburg was crying for his daughter.

Joachim stopped on the doorstep and looked back.

"Do you hear him?" he panted. "We should let him know. This is cruel."

Barth slowly shook his head. "Not as cruel as the truth," he said quietly.

Ingolf put a hand on his shoulder and nodded to confirm what Barth had just said. His eyes were full of grief, a reflection of his soul.



As they were marching towards the woods that surrounded Baron Walter's manor, Ingolf looked back at the blazing fire and sighed.

"Poor man," he said. "His own flesh and blood. But I think it highly unlikely he would have ever believed us. It is better this way. He will hate us and let his men hunt us. At least for a while. But he will live. The knowledge of his daughter being a Chaos cultist would have broken what is left of his once strong faith and eventually killed him."

"Yes, I guess you are right," Joachim sighed.

"We were quite lucky in the end though," he said as they reached the edge of the wood.

He turned to Barth. "Doppelzunge said he paid you a lot. Is that right?"

Barth looked at him indifferently. "None of your business," he said and frowned. "That's my money. I earned it infiltrating that filth since spring. Apart from that, I'm getting tired of writing you notes. So, if you like, you can be the bad guy and do the real work next time. And maybe you would even get to punching me in the nose." He smiled faintly.

Joachim grinned. "You mean like in Middenheim last winter?"

Barth scowled. "You mean when you punched me like a girl?"

Joachim's mood was rising. "No," he chuckled. "I mean when you didn't show your face in public for a week."

"You still can't have my money," Barth retorted.

"Well, in that case I hope that either we'll find some coins on the road or some miracle will happen," Joachim said airily.

In the dark Ingolf was smiling.

"Have faith," he said. "Sigmar provides."