

My name is Walter, and I am an honest man.

It was a necessity to become one. The Empire is a war machine, and our sweat, blood, and hunger pangs are what feed it. We are constantly harassed from all sides: raiders from the North, goblins from the forests, and rats from the sewers. We are always at war with one outsider or another. The Empire does not protect us. No one does, not even Sigmar.

Sigmar's hammer is not a hammer that repairs our houses, cobbles our shoes, or builds our city walls. Sigmar's hammer is a Warhammer.

Though he does not protect us, he saves me and all of mankind. He does not save us from the mugger that sulks behind an alley, but from the evil that lurks behind false smiles and seeks to corrupt our very souls. The evil that taints both body and spirit. He offers salvation from that evil, and I pray to him for that salvation.

I remember the day the guard told me that my parents were dead. The guard was rather annoyed having to look for me and tell me about their deaths. He muttered under his breath this would delay his patrol. They died in a Beastmen attack while plowing the Graf's field. I was just a lad, too small to work the fields. My parents were good people, hard but fair. They took me to church and sang the hymns louder than anyone else standing behind the pews. I know Sigmar saved them, for they were pious people.

My innocence saved me that day, just like Sigmar saved my parents, when the Graf failed to protect my family.

I was soon thrown out onto the streets. I was too skinny to be drafted into any service and too stupid to read or write. Everywhere I looked, I was turned away. I was just another mouth to feed in a time of war. Not worth the investment.

It was hard back then, not knowing where my next meal would come from or whether the floor would be damp enough to make sleep impossible. Then, one day, an honest man found me.

He was dirty and smelled like the nightsoil man, but he had a soft smile that reminded me of my father.

He gave me a three day old bread and sat beside me as I devoured the only meal I had that week. He asked me my story, and I told him what had happened to my parents and to myself, speaking between clumps of bread scraping down my throat into my stomach.

The honest man offered me an honest life. He told me he could get me a bed and regular meals. He said I could make friends, that I was not the only child down on their luck. The words of acceptance came from my full belly faster than the words could come from my breath.

Soon after that, I met Ulric.

He was a boy around my age, and we were assigned the same lookout and delivery jobs. He was rough and always carried a wolf claw talisman that he claimed his father gave him before he died. It reminded me of my own father, and of the Sigmar hammer he carved for me as a birthday gift, the one I keep on my bedpost to watch over me while I sleep.

Ulric was an honest man before I became one. He managed to earn the dockworkers' respect and was hired when he came of age. He claimed he could carry twice as fast because he was as strong as a wolf. The dockworkers were impressed with his strength and treated him like a man, even paying for his first visit to the local brothel. He carried himself the same way he carried the dock crates, straight backed and purposeful, delivering them to our boss.

I was not strong like Ulric, nor as clever as the boss, but I was honest, and I had a talent for recruiting the young and downtrodden. To the boss they were numbers until they proved themselves, but to me they were special.

My most recent hire was a child named Gerhard. I saw much of myself in him. His parents died during the recent pox that swept through the city, and the only family he had left, his older brother, died when Beastmen overran Fort Newgrad. The child was inconsolable, and snow had begun to fall. I gave him my bread and the ale I carried in my bag. It was strange and almost funny to hear him say thank you after every bite. Something I realized I never did.

But there is always a surprise when nothing ever changes.

Everything went for the worse when Ulric was taken by the city guard. At first, I thought his wolf like strength was what finally caught up with him. There were whispers that the ladies from the brothel would show up wearing heavier makeup whenever Ulric was finished with them. What I can confirm from those whispers is that he was a lousy tipper. Still, his visits to the brothel were not the reason for his arrest.

Apparently, a guard claimed he had been beaten within a width of a copper piece of his life and tossed into the freezing river. He claimed Ulric captured him and interrogated him. Ulric was muscle, sure, but he was never the one to lead any questioning like that. Ulric was all bark and some bite, but the rumors I heard were worse than anything that happened at the brothel. Worse even than what happened with Gertrude.

He was taken to the Rock for questioning.

The boss was not happy about that and made sure we stayed alert, in case anyone else came snooping around. Though we were Honest Men, with nothing to hide.

It was quiet for a while. We all silently said our goodbyes, knowing he would never come back. Only a short time after we cleared out his bunk and chest did we hear that Ulric was back at the docks, working again. His face looked like he had paid a visit to himself after a few too many. I wanted to see him, but the boss told me to wait until things cooled down. I wanted to say hello and see what they had done to him, but Ulric knew to keep his distance, and the boss knew best. Either way, I had my hands full taking care of the kids.

It was soon after New Year's, and after the bell tower incident, when the hideout was raided. I was collecting the day's haul from Gerhard and the other kids when the door swung open and three men stormed in, tearing the place apart and killing everyone.

I was stupid. Instead of grabbing the kids and running for the secret exit to the sewers, I hesitated. I looked back at my bunk, at the hammer pendant my father had made for me, and debated whether I had enough time to grab it.

The next thing I knew, a strange sensation overcame me, and I fell into a trance filled with pinks and extravagant colors that did not exist in my miserable life. Colors the Graf paid a worker's yearly wage to import from distant lands. Colors of flowers my mother once dreamed of owning. All these and more enveloped my skin, hypnotizing me.

When I came to, I was tied up. My chest was bloody from a gaping chest wound and everything felt numb. Gerhard was next to me, tied back to back with me, facing the opposite wall, our hands manacled together. I was totally confused, unable to make sense of what had happened.

That was when Ulric stepped into the room.

But it was not Ulric.

Whatever it was, it wore Ulric's face without a single bruise, and a completely different voice came from its mouth. It was cloaked, but the wolf talisman peeked out at the neck. It did not acknowledge me and spoke directly to Gerhard.

"Hello, child. I just want you to know that your friends are still alive, and I promise I will not hurt you."

Gerhard began sobbing, harder than the first time we met. I was not sure what upset him more, the thought of his friends being hurt or the imposter standing clearly in front of us.

I tried to gather my voice to speak, to ask what was happening, but Ulric spoke words that I could not repeat in a million years. He dragged his finger across the sweat beading around his neck and flicked it toward us.

An incomprehensible scent of a perfume too sweet to be real flooded my nose and mouth, and for a moment my hearing began to fade. All those masses I attended as a child warned us about witchcraft and those who practiced it. I knew this false Ulric was casting a spell. I held my breath and steeled my mind. Sigmar saved me, just as he saved my parents. I was so focused on myself that I did not even notice when Gerhard fell under Ulric's spell.

I nudged Gerhard and asked if he was all right. There was no response. I kept speaking to him, asking again and again if he was okay. Even though we were bound back to back and I could not see his face, I knew something had happened. I could feel his attention locked solely on Ulric, and he stopped crying.

"Now that he has stopped crying, I have a question for you, man. Do you want to live, and is there anyone else you want to live tonight?"

Shocked by the question, I nodded. I knew full well I had no say in the matter and that no protection was coming for me or anyone else.

"Good. I promise to set you free and keep all the other children safe if you swear allegiance to the Dark Gods. I do not care which one, so long as you forsake your oath to Sigmar and pledge your soul elsewhere. I will also inform you that your boss has accepted this deal. He works for us now."

A shudder ran down my spine. All I could think of were the times I spent in church, listening to the Theogonist proclaim the virtues of Sigmar during those freezing days. He warned us that the heretical and unclean followers of the Dark Gods take many forms, all meant to lure us away from Sigmar's glory and salvation.

"You are one of them," I said. "I may be an honest man, but I am a faithful follower of Sigmar. My answer is no."

Pride filled my stomach, the same feeling I had when I caught a great fish with my father and carried it home for my mother to cook. I glanced toward my father's hammer, knowing I had earned it and that Sigmar would reward me for my faith.

Ulric looked annoyed and said calmly,

"Hello, child. I have a favor to ask. Can you please say yes to my next question? I promise that if you do, I will not hurt you, and I will help your friends."

"Mhmh, Mister Ulric. I can do that," Gerhard said.

Ulric did not even let the meaning of it settle before turning back to me.

"I will simply ask the child the same question. He is enthralled by me. He cannot hear you. Your soul is worth nothing compared to an innocent like him. The Dark Gods accept all souls, willing or not, though they have preferences. Souls taken unwillingly are far more desirable than those given freely. I do not care whether it is your soul or the child's, but I will ask one last time."

I tried desperately to pull Gerhard's attention away from Ulric, but nothing worked. He was fully captivated and there was nothing I could say to reach him. I looked at my bedpost one last time, and with tears in my eyes, I turned to Ulric.

"What will happen to him? You promise he will be okay and that nothing bad will happen to him?"

"I promise that I will not harm the child or the other children. Under my care, they will have better lives. I can give them exotic foods and new clothes to wear. They will sleep on soft beds, and

they will not have to beg on the streets or do the things you and your people made them do. They will live lives of excess and experience things no one could ever imagine. They will grow to know love. I promise they will have a better life than you ever did, if I take care of them. Pledge yourself to the Dark Gods and forsake Sigmar, or I will ask the same question of the child."

"His name is Gerhard."

"Understood."

I closed my eyes and thought of the day the Grand Theogonist himself placed a hand on my head and told me that Sigmar would save me, that I would grow into a fine soldier one day.

With tears streaming down my face, I spoke.

"You promise he will have a better life than me? You promise?"

"I swear that the children I spared today, and those under my protection, will have better lives than you could ever imagine."

I slowly turned my head away from the bedpost. The symbol of Sigmar was too heavy to bare.

"Then I forsake Sigmar's divine protection, and I pledge my soul to the Dark Gods."

The moment the words left my mouth, my heart sank into my stomach and the pounding in my head ceased. It felt as though small, clawed hands seized my insides and twisted them into knots as Sigmar's grace left me forever. The only proof it had ever existed streamed down my face from my eyes, mixed with breathless sobs and the filth running from my nose.

It took everything I had not to vomit those words back out, but I could not take them back. His family was gone. The guards were nowhere to be found. Sigmar was not there to protect him.

Someone had to.

It had to be me.

Now he was safe.

Though my soul was condemned for all eternity, I knew in that moment that I had done the right thing.

I saved him.

The moment passed, and then a second, nearly identical Ulric stepped into the room. This new Ulric lacked the wolf talisman and spoke with a frustrated tone to the one I had made my deal with.

"I need one of the children you captured. There are not enough survivors."

“It is your ritual. How many did you save?” the other replied. “I haven’t claimed them yet but I’m the one who captured these children. The man has JUST pledged his soul, so unfortunately he cannot be used.”

The frustrated Ulric stared blankly at the other, then pinched the bridge of his nose.

“What about a trade? Let me claim him, and I will forgive your debt.”

Without a moment of hesitation, the two shook hands.

I was stunned. Physically, I could not speak or move. I could barely comprehend what had just happened. But I could feel the weight pressing down onto my body.

The man approached the child with a club and struck him swiftly, knocking him unconscious.

I felt the sudden weight across my back as the child went limp, but I felt nothing else. I was completely numb. The new Ulric glanced at me briefly, dismissed my existence, untied the ropes, and lifted the child away from me.

I sat there, unrestrained, and did nothing. I watched without resistance as the child was dragged from the room to be used in whatever ritual the other Ulric was preparing.

There was nothing I could do. I was incapable of stopping it.

I was a sad, worthless man, watching a child I had sworn to protect be dragged away forever.

“My name is Walter, and I did not lie.”