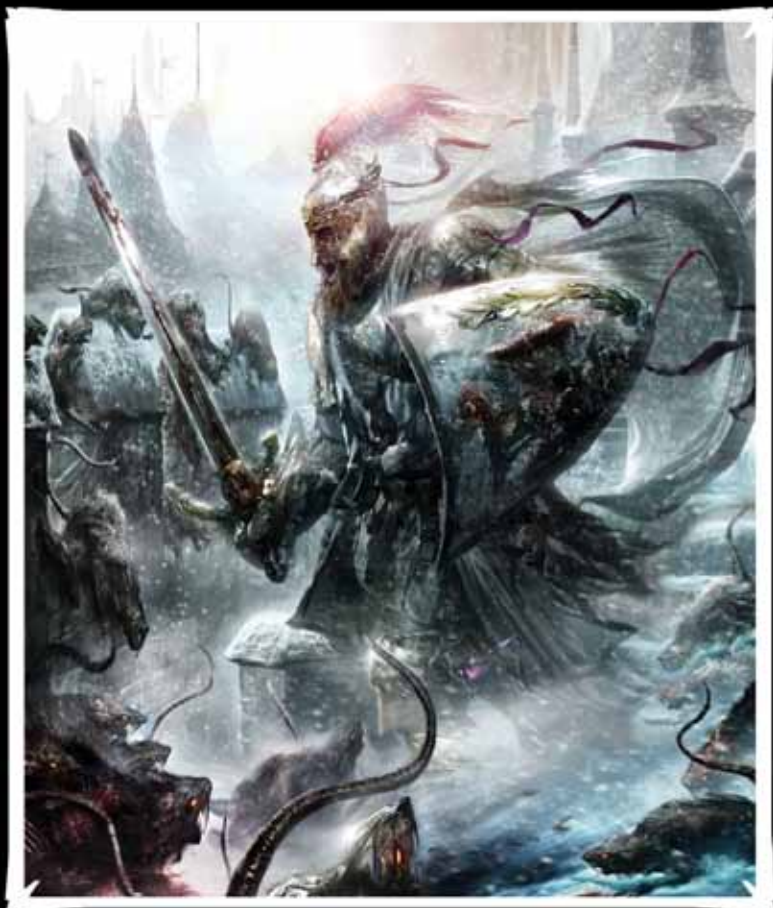


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# DEAD WINTER

## C. L. Werner

More than a thousand years after the Age of Sigmar, the Empire he struggled to create has been brought to the edge of ruin by the greedy, incompetent ruler Boris Goldgather. Without warning, a terrible and deadly plague strikes, wiping out entire villages and leaving towns eerily silent through the long frozen months. As the survivors struggle to maintain order and a worthy military presence, vermin pour up from the sewers and caverns beneath the cities, heralding a new and unspeakable threat – the insidious skaven!

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*C. L. Werner* was a diseased servant of the Horned Rat long before his first story in *Inferno!* magazine. His Black Library credits include the Chaos Wastes books, *Mathias Thulmann: Witch Hunter*, *Runefang*, the Brunner the Bounty Hunter trilogy and the Thanquol and Boneripper series. Currently living in the American south-west, he continues to write stories of mayhem and madness set in the Warhammer World.

Visit the author's website at

[www.vermintime.com](http://www.vermintime.com)

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SNARLING WOLVES GLOWED down upon the oblivious men, stone fangs bared. The flickering fire of an enormous hearth cast weird shadows across the lupine gargoyles, the shifting play of light and dark lending the marble wolves a semblance of savage life.

Far below the stone wolves, two men sparred across a polished wooden floor. The boards creaked and groaned as heavy boots stamped down on them, as thrust and parry whirled the combatants along the empty gallery. The clash of steel against steel rang through the concourse.

One of the combatants was a middle-aged man, lean of build, his close-cropped hair in retreat, his thin moustache displaying a scattering of grey. His face was thin and hard, his eyes as sharp as the edge of a knife. He wore a simple leather tunic, his only affectation being the golden pectoral that hung about his neck. He wielded his sword with suppleness and surety, his every move bearing the cool confidence of long experience.

His opponent was much younger, little more than a boy. Thick black hair hung to his shoulders, catching in the high collar of his garment. Unlike the simple tunic of the older man, the boy's gypon was extravagant, stripes of silver thread woven into the burgundy cloth, gold buttons crisscrossing the breast. An enormous buckle, cast into the profile of a running wolf, fastened a belt of dragonhide about his waist. The scabbard which hung from the belt was gilded across most of its length and engraved with elaborate scrollwork.

The boy's face was handsome, stamped with all the finer qualities of noble blood and careful breeding. There was pride in his deep blue eyes and a swagger to the curve of his mouth that betokened an innate confidence that needed neither practice nor experience to engender it. The will to accomplish was enough to embolden the boy and drive him to success.

His swordsmanship displayed a less refined, more primal style than the studied motions of the older man. It was emotion rather than skill which governed his blade, but such was the fire of his passion, the quickness of his reflexes that his guard was impenetrable, his attacks avoided only by the narrowest margin.

The older swordsman smiled as he twisted his wrist and blocked a slash from his adversary's blade. 'That would have been an impressive feint – if you had intended it as such,' he told the boy.

A smirk tugged at the corner of the boy's mouth. 'I don't need feints to sneak past your blade, old man.'

The other swordsman smiled back, rolling his blade across the back of the boy's sword and stabbing the point towards his breast. His foe dropped and shifted, swatting the thrust aside with the pommel of his own weapon. The older fighter nodded, impressed by the move. 'Nice work. I'd think you'd been studying the tricks of the Estalian diestro – if I didn't know you have no patience for books.'

The boy jabbed his sword at his foe's left arm, then turned his entire body so that he followed through with a rolling slash at the man's right leg. Both attacks crashed against the other swordsman's intercepting blade.

'Why read if there's nothing more to learn, van Cleeve?' the boy quipped.

The old man snorted with amusement, then brought his boot stamping down, not upon the floor, but upon his adversary's foot. The boy danced back in surprise. For an instant, his guard was down. It was all the opening his instructor needed. The point of his sword pressed against the youth's belly, the cork cap sinking into the cloth of his doublet.

'If all you want to do is get killed, then there's nothing more I can teach you, your grace,' van Cleeve said.

Laughing, the boy brought his sword whipping around in a stunning display of speed and flourish, the edge pressing against his instructor's neck. 'That is a mortal wound, but not immediately fatal. We die together, old man.' Smiling, he withdrew his blade, pausing to remove the nub of cork before returning it to its scabbard.

Van Cleeve sighed as he attended to his own weapon. 'I think his excellency the Graf would take small comfort from knowing his only son dispatched his assassin before he died.' The swordsman shook his head. 'You have an impressive natural aptitude, Prince Mandred. If you would only apply yourself to the science of the sword...'

Mandred frowned. It was an argument he had heard many times and one that he didn't appreciate, especially since it was a train of thought van Cleeve shared with his father. 'Techniques and schools of sword would ruin me. Tame a wolf and you dull his fangs.'

'A tame wolf lives longer,' van Cleeve observed.

'A wild wolf is happier,' retorted the prince. Van Cleeve could see he would make no points sparring with his student's wit. Clicking his heels together, the Westerlander bowed to the prince and withdrew from the gallery. Mandred waited only until the swordsman was out of sight before turning and dashing down the stairway at the far end of the gallery.

His sparring with van Cleeve had been frustrating today and the prince had been impatient to extract himself from the duel. There were more important things than sword practice going on within the halls of the Middenpalaz. Noblemen and dignitaries from across the city had been arriving all day. Something big was going on and he was determined to learn what it was.

Stealing through the brooding halls of the palace, Mandred avoided the most populous corridors. Using side passages and circling through empty chambers, he avoided encountering the small army of peasants who maintained the Graf's household or the armed guards who saw to the royal family's protection. The only one who noted his passing was Woten, the hoary grey wolfhound lounging in one of the banquet halls, but the dog was more interested in the warmth of a blazing hearth than Mandred's activities. A wag of the tail was all the notice he paid the boy.

Creeping along the heavy, stone-walled corridors, Mandred reached his destination, a little waiting room adjoining the Graf's council chamber. There was a secret to the room, one which only a few people knew. A painting set into the wall could be tilted outwards upon a hinge once a hidden catch had been unlocked. Behind the painting was a pane of cloudy glass. It corresponded with a large mirror in the council chamber, but the reflective surface was only upon the outside. From the waiting room, a person could peer through the glass and observe whatever went on in the other room. The whole thing was dwarf-work, as attested by the sharp runes carved into the edge of the glass. Mandred wondered about the trick behind the spyhole but had long ago given up on puzzling it out for himself. Dwarfcraft or witchcraft, it was enough that the trick worked.

Gazing into the council chamber, Mandred could see twenty or so of the city's noblemen seated around the circumference of the Fauschlagstein, a great stone table carved from a single block of Ulricsberg granite. Among the city's notables, he could see the glowering visage of Grand Master Arno Warsitz, his great red beard drooping against his chest; the stern countenance of Ar-Ulric, High Priest of the White Wolf, his wolfskin robes matching his snowy hair and the milky eye staring blindly from the right side of his face; Thane Hardin Gunarsson, chief of Middenheim's dwarfs, his wizened face pulled into a perpetual frown. Beside such grim councillors, Graf Gunthar looked cheerful and vibrant, his dark hair swept back, his long houpelande of ribbed kersey flowing about him, the dark blue of the loose gown contrasting with the sombre blacks and russets of his council.

Any impression of cheer, however, did not reach to the Graf's eyes. They were ringed by dark circles, their sapphire depths haunted by worry.

'We are agreed then,' Graf Gunthar told his councillors. 'Middenheim will not be weakened to placate the diktats of a corrupt Emperor. We will not dismiss our soldiers and we will not empty the city treasury to pay an unjust tax.'

The statement brought nods of affirmation from the assembled nobles. Thane Hardin stroked his blond beard and scowled at the gold-grubbing effrontery of the manling Emperor. Even the worst gold-crazed dwarf wouldn't have dreamed up such a crooked scheme as Boris's plot to tax the human *Dienstleute* out of existence and leave his Empire disarmed and defenceless.

Graf Gunthar paced about the table, studying each of his advisors in turn. 'You are all aware what defying Emperor Boris could mean. He might raise an army to seize what he feels is owed to him.'

'Let him try,' growled Grand Master Arno, clenching his fist. 'The Drak-rat will never breach the Ulricsberg.'

'He wouldn't have to,' cautioned Viscount von Vogelthal, the Graf's chamberlain. 'He could simply lay siege to the mountain and cut us off from the rest of Middenland. Whatever the quality of our warriors, Emperor Boris can field more than us.'

Graf Gunthar nodded, agreeing with the chamberlain's observation. 'That is why I have decided that we must lay stores against any punitive actions the Emperor might take. We must levy the farms and freeholds around the Ulricsberg, double their harvest tax. I want the storehouses full to bursting before winter sets in. We can depend upon Emperor Boris to wait until the spring before mounting a campaign in the north, but every day after the thaw he stays in the Reikland will be a boon from Ulric.'

'The raugrafs and landgraves won't appreciate having their obligations increased,' objected Duke Schneiderei.

'We face an emergency,' Graf Gunthar snarled at the duke. 'If we are to survive, every man must make sacrifices.' He stopped pacing about the stone table and rested his hands against the cool granite surface. 'To that end, I have issued orders that the Sudgarten and Konigsgarten are to be dug up. The ground is to be used as farmland. Whatever seed we can spare is to be sown at once, before the first frost.' He sighed as he looked across the worried faces of his advisors. 'It might not help us if Emperor Boris strikes fast, but if he delays, we may just bring in a crop before his army lays siege to the Ulricsberg.'

Many of the nobles nodded grimly at the pragmatic decision. They would grieve for the loss of the parks with their colourful shrubberies and flowers, but they would grieve even more if starvation descended upon their city.

'There is another concern we should consider, your highness.' All eyes turned upon the aged Ar-Ulric when the high priest spoke. He was much more than simply another of the Graf's advisors. As the chief authority of the cult of Ulric, he was the most powerful priest in Middenheim, venerated by Ulricans across the Empire as the representative of their god upon the mortal coil.

Ar-Ulric rose from his chair, his one-eyed gaze sweeping across the chamber. 'There is plague in the outlying provinces, in Sylvania and Stirland. If the disease spreads beyond their borders, into Talabecland and Hochland, or our own Middenland, then we must be prepared for refugees.'

'We have already taken in three thousand Westerlanders,' grumbled Viscount von Vogelthal. 'And another two thousand Drakwalders. The city can't hold any more squatters.'

'Nor will it,' Graf Gunthar declared. 'We must protect Middenheim. Accepting those fleeing from enemies is one thing, but there is a point when mercy becomes irresponsible.' He hesitated, collecting his thoughts, weighing the responsibility for his decision. 'No, Your Eminence,' he told Ar-Ulric, 'Middenheim will not harbour refugees from the plague. Any trying to climb the causeways, any setting one foot upon the Ulricsberg, must be cut down like dogs. Anyone seeking entry into the city must be sequestered at the foot of the mountain.'

Ar-Ulric bowed his head. 'If that is your decree, then do I have your leave to inform the Temple of Shallya of this decision? The priestesses will want to know and make their plans accordingly.'

'You have my leave,' Graf Gunthar said. 'But you may also warn the temple that anyone who attends refugees will not be permitted back into the city. I will make no exceptions. Not even for a priestess.'

Shocked by the cruelty of his father's decree, Mandred drew away from the spyhole, swinging the hinged painting back into place. It sickened him to think his father could be so unfeeling, to abandon the sick and the desperate, to turn his back upon those who needed help.

He had always admired his father's wisdom, but wisdom was nothing without compassion.

When he was Graf, Mandred swore he would be both wise and compassionate. He wouldn't be a cowardly tyrant like his father.