

The logo for Warhammer Age of Sigmar, featuring the word "WARHAMMER" in large, gold, serif letters with a blue background, and "AGE OF SIGMAR" in smaller, gold, serif letters below it. The logo is set within a gold, ornate frame with pointed ends.

WARHAMMER
AGE OF SIGMAR

BROKEN REALMS

A dark red, monochromatic illustration of a chaotic battle scene. In the foreground, a dragon-like creature with wings and a long tail is engaged in combat with a large, armored warrior on a horse. The warrior is holding a sword and a shield. In the background, other figures and creatures are visible, including a winged figure and a large, horned creature. The overall scene is filled with action and conflict.

THE PATH OF FUTILITY

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‘But, my lord... are you *sure*?’ Petroff asked, as he had thirteen times since they had begun. At least, Mannfred thought it was thirteen. He’d stopped keeping count.

Giving a sigh, the von Carstein resisted the urge to decapitate his servant in a moment of irritated spite. He supposed he could not blame Petroff. Even after several lifetimes’ worth of audacious deeds, what he planned to perform tonight was perhaps on the wrong side of daring.

‘You worry too much,’ the Mortarch chuckled with false geniality. Glancing at his underling through the gloom of Castle Sternieste’s undercroft, Mannfred patted the small, rune-marked box in his hands. ‘I lived through... well, *endured* the death of a world. Some would say I precipitated it. I think I can handle a bit of aetheric rough-and-tumble.’ A low, rasping growl from the back of the chamber saw Mannfred snap his head around with a snarl. ‘And stop grumbling, Ashigaroth. Cowardice doesn’t become you.’ In response, the dread abyssal gave a crackling hiss, furnace-orange innards blazing brighter as it snapped at the errant spirits drifting through the crypt.

Snorting, Mannfred looked back to the centre of the chamber. Seven living thralls, drawn from Carstina’s most downtrodden villages, had already begun the ritual, marking the flagstones with sigils of corruption that were old when the realms were young. Already those runes were eating at the stonework, the rock bubbling into slurry. Even if tonight’s ritual went flawlessly, this chamber would have to be sealed for decades. Still, Mannfred had lived his unlife on the principle that any advantage was worth seizing. The Mortarch took a moment to watch his minions pour tainted ichor and slabs of rancid meat into the cauldron, each motion accompanied by a sonorous dirge and the ringing of rusted iron bells. Then, he glanced back at the box.

‘I acquired this at Rotsoul Mire, you know,’ Mannfred said, as he clicked open the lid and reached inside with a heavy nullstone gauntlet. Petroff shuffled back a step as the Mortarch produced a crooked knife. The thing’s blade looked to be carved from mildewed bone, its handle wrought of rotten heartoak wound with lurid ivy. Corruption emanated from the thing, fizzling against Mannfred’s fingers even through the nullstone. Only the profane powers bound into the vampire’s own being kept it in check. ‘You never know when such things will come in handy.’ The Mortarch strode forth, watching his thralls as they chanted, counting the syllables.

As the seventy-seventh note of the dirge left his thralls, the vampire struck. The tainted blade carved open each throat in quick succession; only the last of the thralls had time for instinct to take over and raise his hands in defence, before the Mortarch’s weapon carved through them and his neck alike. Mannfred could feel Petroff’s hungry gaze as crimson blood jettied outwards, splattering down into the cauldron. But the vampire had passed up feasts in the past for – his own – greater benefit, and he would doubtless do so again. As the bodies collapsed, Mannfred stabbed downwards, driving the blade into the blood-soaked flesh within the receptacle.

A column of light – mouldering green, feverish yellow, throttling purple, and all at once – erupted from the cauldron, accompanied by a wave of nauseating stench. Pulling his cape close to ward off the odour, Mannfred braced himself against an eruption of mystic force. Even over the insane sobbing that now filled the vault, he heard Petroff’s scream as the vampire was launched backwards, and Ashigaroth bound to its feet with a clatter of bone. The Mortarch’s commanding hiss saw the dread abyssal restrain itself, even as Mannfred stared into the hateful unlight.

The illumination dissipated. In its wake, something rose from within the cauldron. It appeared as a withered tree, unfolding its grasping, barren branches, but Mannfred knew it for an illusion. One only had to look to the shadow forming on the wall behind to see the truth of it, the image of some bloated, inhuman, horned entity. As the cacophony faded, Mannfred lowered his cape and straightened. In the centre of the tree’s trunk a lone, milky eye stared out, quivering with barely repressed rage.

‘Bold, von Carstein,’ the tree-daemon wheezed. Its branches twitched with each syllable, the eye watering with gruesome seepage. ‘Bold, even for you. To invite one of us into your own halls.’

‘Of all the places in these realms that I do not care about, Castle Sternieste I care about the least,’ the vampire shrugged. ‘My only regret is your kind’s stench. I never have been able to get used to it.’

‘The Grandfather is displeased with you and your ilk, vampire. You have run rampant, as of late. You seek to halt blessed entropy, to defy your place in his great cycle.’

‘I’m afraid that he’s about to become a lot more displeased,’ Mannfred chuckled. The Mortarch’s expression sharpened into a scowl, narrowed eyes locked on that of the decay-daemon. ‘Within this seal, creature, you are mine to command. So, show me. Show me the Bleeding Gate.’

Gurgling in distaste, the daemon’s pupil shimmered out of focus. Upon the milky orb left in its wake, an image resolved. Mannfred lent in closer. His eyes trailed over the image of a portal surrounded by carven vines, gheistlight bleeding from it over the surrounding wasteland.

‘Yes... there it is,’ the Mortarch murmured. ‘More. Show me the defences.’ This time, the daemon seemed slightly more obliging. A swirl of pus-laden blood congealed over the image, before draining away to reveal hordes of trudging, cyclopean daemons, bloated monstrosities bathing amidst vile swamps and tribes of mortals marked by unclean runes debasing themselves before seeping altars.

‘You see, von Carstein?’ the daemon crowed. ‘You see the hopelessness of your task? The insurmountable truth of it? All Invidia will rise against you. The Cultivator will rise against you, to say nothing of the accursed Everqueen and her spawn.’

‘Oh dear. What a pity. How *will* I get out of this one?’ said the vampire, still smirking. Before he could continue, the daemon gave a rattling laugh, its pupil reforming.

The entity’s gaze darted sideways. Following it, Mannfred’s grin froze. One of his thralls had collapsed slightly off-centre, landing atop one of the binding runes of the circle and smudging it. A small detail, yes, but crucial. Neferata would be howling with laughter, were she ever to learn of it. Another chortle left the entity, branches creaking and twitching.

‘You really *should* be more careful, von Carstein.’

Mannfred threw himself backwards and unsheathed the blade Gheistvor a fraction of a second before the cauldron exploded, showering him with iron fragments. What rose from within was now a hulk of suppurating flesh, its lower body splitting into two stump-like legs and its torso ripping open so the putrid organs within could spill free. Branches punched from its shoulders and cracked in the foetid air, while its limbs were as mouldering trunks. In the centre of the entity’s chest, the eye opened once more, staring out with redoubled fury. Mouths lolled open across the daemon’s flesh before belching forth a stream of pestilential sorcery. Rasping a series of incantations, Mannfred thrust a hand forwards and unleashed a counter-spell. A storm of screaming spirits erupted to meet the ruinous energies, both spells bursting in a shower of force.

Mannfred only just had time to raise his blade as the rot-daemon stomped forwards with uncanny haste, driving a trunk-limb towards him. One hand gripping Gheistvor’s hilt, the one bracing itself against the flat of the blade, the vampire caught the blow. Any mortal would have been hurled from their feet, if not pulped outright. Instead, preternatural strength flooded into Mannfred’s limbs, his might matched against that of the daemon now looming over him. Looking up over the blade, Mannfred caught his foe’s gaze. Despite himself, he grinned.

A yell of fury heralded Petroff’s return. He had worked his way around the daemon’s flank and now charged with sword drawn. Mannfred’s foe did not even avert its gaze. For all the power behind the other vampire’s blow, it accomplished little more than seeing his elegant blade stick fast in the daemon’s bark-flesh. Before Petroff could pull free, a cluster of slick vines burst from the infernal creature, enveloping him. Mannfred could only tut as Petroff howled in agony and terror, struggling helplessly as he was absorbed into the daemon’s body.

Devouring the vampire seemed to grant the daemon a second wind. Its eye quivered with the expectancy of murder as it pressed against Gheistvor, more vines questing out for Mannfred. An insane burble left the creature as Mannfred hissed and was forced to a knee. In response, the vampire lifted his gaze – still grinning – and spat a single word.

‘Ashigarth.’

The chamber suddenly echoed to the clatter of bone claws, and a howl fit to freeze souls split the air. Waiting for his opponent to overbalance, Mannfred threw himself prone, ducking beneath the daemon’s oaken limb. Before it could crush him, the entity staggered back as the Mortarch’s dread abyssal pounced into its chest. Laughter turned to bellows of anger, then howls of denial,

as Ashigaroth pinned the daemon down and began tearing into it. As sickening noises filled the vault, Manfred grunted. The von Carstein painfully got back to his feet with Gheistvor's aid, watching his mount expel its outrage for a few long moments.

'You claimed that the task awaiting me in Invidia is insurmountable,' Manfred said, snarling for Ashigaroth to cease. All that now remained of the daemon was a crooked spur of bark, the eye still quivering at its core. Even that was fading, the entity's strength thoroughly beaten out of it. Yet as he lifted his blade and aimed its tip at the slime-weeping orb, Manfred grinned. There was one last thing he wanted it to hear on this plane. 'The truth is... you're absolutely right.' With a single smooth motion, the vampire drove Gheistvor down, right into the daemon's core. Yet even over its howls, Manfred was certain his final remark reached it.

'In fact, I intend to make sure of it.'

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