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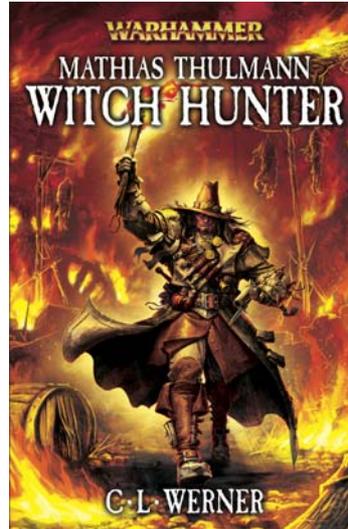
MATHIAS THULMANN: WITCH HUNTER

A Warhammer omnibus

By C.L. Werner

Contains the novels Witch Hunter, Witch Finder and Witch Killer, three short stories, plus an introduction by the author.

In the grim medieval Old World, the dreaded Witch Hunters are feared above all others. These tyrannical individuals are tasked with hunting out evil throughout the towns and villages, using whatever means they find necessary in order to destroy those foolish enough to ally with the Dark Powers. Counted amongst the most zealous of the Witch Hunters is Mathias Thulmann, a ruthless individual whose exploits are recounted to scare citizens of the Empire.



About the Author

C. L. Werner has written a number of pulp-style horror stories for assorted small press publications, including Inferno! magazine. Currently living in the American south-west, he continues to write stories of mayhem and madness set in the Warhammer world.

More Warhammer from C.L. Werner

PALACE OF THE PLAGUE LORD

RUNEFANG

The following is an excerpt from *Matthias Thulmann: Witch Hunter* by C L Werner. Published by the Black Library. Games Workshop, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

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THE AIR WAS RANK with the smell of decay and death, a morbid atmosphere that crawled within the murk like a pestilent fog, staining the rays of moonlight filtering through the thatch roof so that they became leprous and sickly. The interior of the hovel was small by any standard, yet into this space had been crammed enough weird paraphernalia to fill a space ten times as big. Bundles of dried roots and withered weeds drooped from the few wooden poles that supported the roof, their noxious stench contributing in no small part to the foul air. A set of crude timber shelves supported a disordered collection of clay jars and pots, a strange glyph scratched in charcoal upon each to denote whatever unclean and hideous material might be found within. The rotten carcasses of dozens of birds swung from leather cords affixed to the roof beams, ranging from songbirds to water fowl and the uglier birds found upon battlefields and graveyards yet all alike in one way. For not one of the birds was complete, each one was missing some part a clawed foot there, a wing here all vital ingredients in the practices of the hovel's lone inhabitant.

She was bent and wizened, crushed low by the weight of years pressing upon her shoulders. A shabby brown shawl was wrapped about her crooked back; vile grey rags that might once have been a gown billowed about her skeletal limbs. Scraggly wisps of white hair crawled like worms from her head, the blotched skin so thin from time's ravages as to scarcely conceal the bone beneath. Her face was a morass of wrinkles, like the crinkling surface of an autumnal leaf. A sharp nose stabbed out from her face, looming like a hawk's bill above her gash of a mouth. From the sunken pits of her face, two little eyes twinkled with a cold, murderous mirth.

The old woman stared down towards the fire smouldering at her feet. A chill seemed to billow up from those embers, the dread clutch of magic and sorcery, the loathsome touch of powers unclean and unholy. The frigid caress of the supernatural was enough to make even the bravest soldier falter, but the old woman was so accustomed to invoking such forces that

she no longer acknowledged the horror of such things. Her toothless mouth cracked open into a ghastly smile as she watched her magic take shape. The eerie fire had changed colour, deepening into a bloody crimson, lighting the interior of the hut as though it were engulfed in flame. Within the fire, tiny figures began to appear: tiled roofs and plaster walls, narrow streets and winding alleys. The old woman could see the tall steeples of cathedrals and temples, the mammoth towers of castles and forts. But her ambitions this night were not devoted to such lofty places. Her business was with a different section of this place. She focused her will and the image began to boil, disintegrating into a crimson fog before reforming into a more concentrated view of the city.

Chanta Favna let a dry hiss of laughter trickle past her lips as the sight manifested itself before her. The merchant district of Wurtbad was one of the most secure places within the river city, surrounded by thick walls thirty feet high and topped with iron spikes. Patrols of city watch and private militia regularly walked the streets, guarding against any would-be thieves who had managed to get over the walls, ensuring that no stranger tarried within the district unless that man had proper business there. For two hundred years, the merchants had been mostly safe from the crime that stalked the rest of Wurtbad, safe from the thieves and murderers who plied their trade in the dead of night. They thought themselves protected from such things within their fortress-like district.

The old witch sneered. Men were so quick to become complacent, to deceive themselves into thinking themselves safe. Her withered hands reached toward the fire, clutching a small wooden doll. The hag smiled as she glanced down at the minnikin. This night the fat, indolent wealthy of Wurtbad would again learn to fear the approach of night, to shudder beneath their bedclothes as they waited out the long hours and prayed to their gods for a hasty dawn.

A new figure appeared within the scene unfolding in the flames. Chanta Favna watched as it tottered over the wall, slipping like a gangly shadow between the iron spikes.

‘That’s my darling boy!’ the witch cackled. ‘Over wall and under moon, shade within the night of doom!’

There would be a red sky this night in old Wurtbad, a night of screams and blood and terror. The witch’s pulse quickened as she considered the carnage that would soon unfold somewhere within the city. There would be havoc enough to satisfy her for a time, more than enough to remind her patron that his payment had best be as timely and generous as he had promised.

THE TWO RIDERS MADE their way slowly through the cramped, muddy streets of Wurtbad. The crowd of craftsmen, merchants, beggars and peasant farmers parted grudgingly before their steeds, waiting until the last moment to allow the animals to pass. Half-timber structures loomed to either side of the street, gaudily painted signs swinging from iron chains announcing the goods and services that might be procured within the tall, thin buildings; announcements made more often than not with crude illustrations of shoes and swine rather than written Reikspiel.

‘Good to be back in civilisation, eh Mathias?’ one of the riders laughed, his gaze rising to an iron balcony fronting the upper storey of a building some distance down the narrow street and the buxom brunette leaning against it, a much more lively and vivid manner of announcing the establishment’s trade. The rider was a short, broad-shouldered man, his body beginning to show the first signs of a paunch as his belly stretched the padded leather tunic that protected his torso. A scraggly growth of beard spread across his unpleasant face, and the disdainful sneer that seemed to perpetually curl the man’s lip.

The man’s companion was, by contrast, tall and lean, his hair and beard neatly trimmed. He wore a scarlet shirt trimmed with golden thread, fine calfskin gloves clothing his hands as he gripped the reins of his steed. A long black cape trimmed in ermine hung about his shoulders and a wide-brimmed hat of similarly sombre hue covered his head. The face behind the shadow cast by the hat was thin and hawkish, a sharp nose flanked by steely eyes, a slight moustache perching above a thin-lipped mouth. From the man’s belt swung a pair of massive pistols and a slender longsword sheathed in dragonskin. The buckle that fronted the rider’s belt announced his profession as surely as any of the gaudy signs that swung in the feeble breeze the twin-tailed comet, holy symbol of Sigmar, patron god of the Empire the sign of that god’s grimmest servants, the witch hunters.

‘Foul your soul with whatever debauchery pleases you, Streng,’ the witch hunter declared. ‘One day you will answer for all the filth you’ve degraded yourself with.’

‘But I’ll die happy,’ the other man retorted, a lewd smile on his harsh features.

The witch hunter did not bother to continue the conversation, knowing that his disapproval of Streng’s vices only made the man take even greater enjoyment from them. Mathias Thulmann had long ago learned that Streng would never rise from the gutter, he was the sort of man who would never be able to do more than live from one day to the next. The future was

something that would sort itself out when it came, and the approval or disapproval of any god was a concept far too lofty for a mind like Streng's to ever grasp.

Ironically, it was this quality that made him so capable an assistant for the witch hunter. Streng did not lend his mind to morbid imaginings, did not feed the germ of fear with figments of his own imagining. That was not to say that the man did not succumb to fear; confronted by some unholy daemon of the Ruinous Powers he would feel terror like any other mortal soul, but he was not one who could allow anticipation of such an encounter to unman him before the time of such a confrontation.

'I think we will do better to begin our inquiries with the stage lines, not the bordellos,' Thulmann commented as the two men rode past the establishment that had aroused his henchman's interest. 'From what we know of the character of our quarry, he wouldn't be hanging about a bawdy house.'

'We need to chase a better class of heretic,' grumbled Streng, reluctantly removing his eyes from the shapely woman draped across the iron balcony.

Thulmann nodded in agreement.

'Freiherr Weichs is the most wretched creature we've hunted together,' he agreed. 'He would befoul even that ghoulish warren we found in Murieste. The day that scum hangs, the very air will become less stagnant.' There was passion in the witch hunter's voice, a fire in his tone. The heretic scientist and physician Doktor Freiherr Weichs had been the object of Thulmann's attention for nearly a year. He and Streng had pursued the villain across half the Empire, following his trail from one city to the next. They had come close several times, but always the madman had remained just beyond their reach. Thulmann fairly bristled with frustration at his inability to bring Weichs to ground.

'Suit me fine if we catch that vermin this time,' Streng said, spitting a blob of phlegm into the gutter, narrowly missing the boots of a passing labourer. 'Been some time since I was able to ply my own trade. After all these months, it'll be a pleasure to make Herr Doktor Weichs sing! He'll be admitting to the assassination of Emperor Manfred when I get through with him!'

Thulmann turned his stern gaze on his henchman, draining him of his bravado and sadistic cheer. 'First we have to catch him,' Thulmann reminded his professional torturer.

THE WITCH HUNTER and his companion emerged from the large stone-walled building that acted as the Wurtbad headquarters for the Altdorf-based Cartak coaching house. The Cartak coaching line was one of the largest in the Empire, operating in dozens of towns and cities. They were also known for their scrupulous attention to detail, always recording the names and destinations of their passengers in gigantic record books. But as Thulmann had examined their records, the forlorn hope that something would arouse his suspicion failed to manifest. It had not been entirely a fool's hope, Weichs had been bold enough to use his own name on several occasions and lately had taken a perverse delight in using ciphers for aliases, tweaking the nose of his pursuers. Either the heretic had tired of his little game, or else there had been nothing for Thulmann to find in the Cartak records. The witch hunter had a feeling that the other four coaching houses operating out of Wurtbad would be no more helpful.

As Thulmann strode towards the street, he noticed a company of soldiers dressed in the green and yellow uniform of Stirland approaching. As they came closer, he could see that a golden griffon rampant had been embroidered upon their tunics, marking them as members of Wurtbad's Ministry of Justice. Thulmann watched with mounting interest as it became obvious the soldiers were coming for him. He could hear Streng mutter a colourful curse under his breath. The witch hunter smiled. Under normal circumstances, his companion would have good reason to dread the approach of the city watch, but there had been no opportunity as of yet for Streng to work himself into one of his drunken fits, which raised the question as to what the soldiers did want.

'You are a Sigmarite templar, newly arrived in Wurtbad?' the foremost of the soldiers asked when he and the three men shadowing him were but a few paces away. The stern, almost overtly hostile look on the soldier's face made it clear to Thulmann that the man already knew the answer to his question before he asked it.

'Mathias Thumann,' the witch hunter introduced himself. 'Ordained servant of our most holy lord Sigmar and templar knight of his sovereign temple.' Thulmann put a note of command and superiority in his tone. He'd had problems before with local law enforcers who felt that the presence of a witch hunter was some slight upon their own abilities to maintain order, their own competence in apprehending outlaws and criminals, as though the average watchman was trained to deal with warlocks and daemons. 'Lately of Murieste,' he added with a touch of sardonic wit.

'Kurtus Knoch,' the soldier introduced himself. 'Sergeant of Lord Chief Justice Markoff's personal guard,' he added, putting just as much stress in

his own position as Thulmann had when announcing his own. 'My master asks that you meet with him.' The soldier's hard eyes bored into Thulmann's own. 'Now, if it is not too inconvenient.'

The witch hunter gave Knoch a thin smile. 'Your master is arbitrator of the secular law. My business is that of the temple.'

The soldier nodded.

'My master is well aware of the difference,' Knoch told him. 'That is why this is a request rather than an order.' The sergeant's voice trembled with agitation, arousing Thulmann's interest. He and Streng had not been in Wurtbad long enough to have earned this man's ire, nor that of his master. And why would Lord Markoff be interested in a witch hunter from outside the city when there was a permanent chapter house within its walls? Perhaps the reason for Knoch's resentment had something to do with the answer to that question.

'Streng,' Thulmann turned to his henchman. 'Go and secure lodgings for us, then begin making inquiries with some of your usual contacts.' The witch hunter was always amazed at the speed with which Streng was able to insinuate himself with the criminal underworld of any settlement they tarried in, another quality that made the man indispensable. 'With luck, you may learn something useful.'

Streng feigned a servile bow, then retreated down the street.

Thulmann returned his attention to the soldiers.

'I am a busy man, Sergeant Knoch,' Thulmann stated. 'Let us see your master so that we may both of us return to more profitable endeavours.'

THULMANN WAS TAKEN to the monstrous Ministry of Justice, a gigantic, grotesque structure which loomed above the other ministries that had been clustered together within the cramped confines of Wurtbad's bureaucratic district. Knoch led the witch hunter through the marble-floored halls, past the glowering portraits of past Chief Justices and High Magistrates, and to the lavish dining hall that served the current Lord Chief Justice. The room was as immense as everything else about the building, dominated by a long table of Drakwald timber that might have easily served a hundred men. Just now, there was only one chair set before it; dozens more lined the far wall like a phalanx of soldiers.

Lord Chief Justice Igor Markoff was a severe-looking man, his black hair cut short above his beetle-like brow. There was a hungry quality about the man's features and his squinting eyes, not unlike that of a starving wolf. Just now, the object of Markoff's hunger was not the plate of steaming duck

on the table but the man his bodyguard had just escorted into his dining room.

‘Mathias Thulmann,’ Knoch announced without ceremony. The soldier took several steps away from the witch hunter, scowling at the man’s back. Markoff set down his knife, dabbing at his mouth with a napkin before rising from his seat.

‘So, the stories are true, then,’ Markoff said. ‘That idiot Meisser has finally decided that he hasn’t the faintest clue what is behind our troubles.’

The Lord Chief Justice’s tone was harsh and belligerent, tinged with underlying contempt. Thulmann had heard such voices before, from burgomasters and petty nobles across the Empire, men who resented forfeiting even a fraction of their power and authority to the temple, even in times of the most dire need. However, the frustrated fury he saw blazing in Markoff’s eyes was something even more familiar to the witch hunter, for it was the same look he saw staring at him in the mirror when his mind contemplated his fruitless hunt for Freiherr Weichs.

‘I am afraid that you have my purpose for coming to Wurtbad misconstrued,’ Thulmann said. ‘I am here pursuing my own investigations. I’ve not been contacted by the Wurtbad chapter house, either before arriving in your city, or since.’

Thulmann’s apology only seemed to irk the magistrate even more. Markoff slammed his fist against the polished surface of the table.

‘I should have known that fool Meisser would never ask for help,’ Markoff fumed. ‘Why should he when no one in Altdorf seems inclined to listen to my complaints? Far be it for the Grand Theogonist and his lapdogs to rein in one of their unruly mongrels!’ Markoff lifted his clenched fist, shaking it beneath Thulmann’s nose. ‘Damn me, but I’ll take matters into my own hands! Just let your temple try and burn me for a heretic!’

‘You should be very careful about making threats against the servants of Sigmar,’ Thulmann warned, feeling his blood growing warm as the Lord Chief Justice voiced his impious remarks.

To his surprise, Markoff did not even blink, but instead snorted disdainfully, before resuming his seat at the table.

‘I’ll do worse than threats if this cur Meisser continues on as he has,’ Markoff stated. ‘He has only two dozen men. I have five hundred, and the baron’s guard if I need to call upon it.’

Thulmann stared for a moment, at a loss for words. Had he actually heard the Lord Chief Justice of Wurtbad threaten violence against a chapter house of Sigmarite templars? The shock receded after a moment, replaced not with the outrage at such blasphemy Thulmann expected, but a deep

curiosity at how matters between the secular and temple authorities could have degenerated to such a point.

‘Perhaps I might be able to make your concerns known to the proper authorities if I were to know the particulars of the matter,’ the witch hunter told Markoff.

‘Particulars of the matter?’ Markoff scoffed. He pulled the knife from the roast duck, pointing it at Thulmann. ‘Four households slaughtered in two months, slashed to ribbons. This killer doesn’t leave bodies, he leaves piles of meat!’ Markoff plunged the knife back into his dinner with a savage thrust. ‘Nor does this human vermin prey upon the poor and unknown. No, the merchant quarter is his hunting ground! The merchant quarter, a district almost as secure as the baron’s own palace!’

Markoff rose again, his body trembling with agitation. ‘As if the massacres were not enough, rumour began to build among the superstitious simpletons in the street. They said that no human assassin could manage such horrors, that it was the work of some devilish sending, some daemon beast called up by sorcerers and witches!’

Markoff glared at Thulmann, his face livid with rage.

‘That is where your friend comes in! Witches and daemons are the province of Sigmar’s temple knights, those who would protect us from the menaces of Old Night. Meisser took over the investigation after the second incident, fumbling about like some backwoods roadwarden. He’s arrested fifty-seven people, hung five and burned three! The streets around his chapter house echo with the screams of his prisoners until the first light of dawn!’ Markoff’s face twisted into an almost bestial snarl. ‘And still this murderous maniac has not been stopped! Only two weeks ago there was another incident. The Hassel family, an old and respected house, butchered like swine from the old grey-headed Erik Hassel to Frau Hassel’s infant child.’

Thulmann listened to the magistrate’s tirade, feeling the fury communicate itself from Markoff to the witch hunter himself. This Meisser, this witch hunter captain, sounded to be as much of a terror to the city as whatever fiend was perpetrating these atrocities. Without having met Meisser, Thulmann could guess his type – brutal and incompetent, perfectly willing to hang and torture the innocent simply to mask his own inability to uncover the real villain. Perhaps there was another reason behind such doings, but Thulmann had seen enough brutality and incompetence wearing the colours of the temple to doubt it.

‘Thank you for voicing your concerns, Lord Chief Justice,’ Thulmann said, bowing his head to the official. ‘Rest assured that I will personally

investigate this matter. That is, if you will officially sanction such an investigation.' For the first time since the witch hunter had entered the room, Markoff's hostility abated. He returned to his seat, nodding thoughtfully to himself before speaking.

'Whatever you need from me, you will have,' Markoff declared, a smile crawling onto his face.

MATHIAS THULMANN: WITCH HUNTER can be purchased in all better bookstores, Games Workshop and other hobby stores, or direct from this website and GW mail order.

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