

WITCH HUNTER

A Warhammer novel by C L Werner

IN THE GRIM medieval Old World, the dreaded witch hunters are feared above all others. These puritanical individuals are tasked with hunting out evil throughout the lands, using whatever means necessary to destroy those foolish enough to ally with the Dark Powers. Counted amongst the most able of the Witch Hunters is Mathias Thulmann, a ruthless devotee of Sigmar whose exploits are recounted to scare citizens of the Empire.



A nameless horror stalks the distant district of Klausberg, leaving a trail of bloody destruction in its wake. Can Thulmann and his vicious sidekick Streng solve the Klausner curse and put an end to this reign of terror forever?

C. L. Werner has written a number of pulp-style horror stories for assorted small press publications. More recently the prestigious pages of Inferno! have been infiltrated by the dark imaginings of the writer's mind. Currently living in the American south-west, he continues to write stories of mayhem and madness in the Warhammer World.

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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from WITCH HUNTER

IT WAS NOTHING much to look at really. Just a tiny little hovel like so many others that might be found beyond the walls of Wurtbad, four walls of timber tilted at an angle by the unkind attentions of time and the elements.

The thatch roof was old and ill-maintained, the roof damp and rotting where it was not missing altogether. Such was its state that the roof certainly would not survive the ice and snow of the approaching winter. Creepers and sickly yellow moss clutched at the chinking between the log walls. The awning of planks that had once shaded the front of the structure now drooped across much of the façade, one of its support poles knocked down by some long past storm. Indeed, despite everything, the dozen men who had furtively crept through the muddy, overgrown wheat field might have thought they had been led to the wrong place were it not for the thin plume of grey smoke rising from a hole in the rotten roof and the flicker of light that danced behind the sagging door of the hovel.

The foremost of the men studied the derelict structure for some time, his penetrating gaze studying its every detail. He was a tall man, lean of limb and build, his face sharp and thin. He cast a curious figure, lurking amidst the overgrown, rampant wheat stalks, dressed in his expensive shirt of scarlet and gold, his fine calfskin gloves, polished boots with massive golden buckles and long black cape edged in palest ermine.

As the man's grey eyes, like slivers of steel, watched from within the shadow cast by his wide brimmed conical hat, one

of his gloved hands gripped the heavy wooden butt of a pistol. Its twin rested in a holster fixed to the man's belt beside the scabbard of a sheathed longsword. The watcher's other hand pulled at his thin moustache, a gesture that indicated a mind deep in thought. At length, the watcher scrambled back to where the other men awaited him within the cover provided by the overgrown crop.

'You were long enough,' observed one of the men crouching amidst the mud and rot. He was a short man with an unpleasantly cruel face, his features somehow suggesting both pig and hound. His hair had begun to desert him, leaving only a fringe of white, wiry hair. He wore a tunic of reinforced leather, stained black and studded with steel, and gripped a large duelling pistol in his leather-clad hands. He glared at the returned watcher, voicing the unstated challenge lurking within the piggish man's words.

'Perhaps you would prefer that we simply announce ourselves,' sneered the moustached man. 'I am certain that this murderous sorcerer would welcome us with open arms. Perhaps invite us for tea before we take him away to be tortured and burnt.' He turned from the balding man, shaking his head with disgust. 'You've made enough of a mess of things, Meisser. Just do as I tell you and we will free Wurtbad of this horror tonight.'

The leather of Meisser's glove creaked as his hand clenched about the grip of his pistol. 'See here, Thulmann,' his gruff voice snarled. 'I'm in command here! Wurtbad is my posting, its protection is my duty, not yours! I'll thank you to remember that,' the piggish man added, his voice boiling with indignation.

The other witch hunter rounded on the balding Meisser, a face livid with rage.

'I'll remember four households butchered in their beds while you stumbled about in back alleys arresting midwives and herb-sellers,' Thulmann stated, his silky tones brimming with contempt, thrusting every word like a dagger into the inflated ego of the pompous Meisser. The older witch hunter retreated back several steps before Thulmann's cold fury.

'I'll report this flaunting of my authority!' Meisser warned, eyes round with shock. Suddenly his words were brought up

short as the witch hunter felt the sharp prick of steel pressed against his side. He turned his head, finding himself staring into the smiling features of Thulmann's underling. The man was stocky, with broad shoulders and a slight paunch. His leather breeches were faded and worn, his armoured jerkin filthy with sweat and dirt. The man's hair and beard were dark brown, grimy and unkempt.

The henchman grinned as he pressed the dagger a little more firmly against Meisser's side.

'You'll do exactly like he tells you,' Streng grinned into Meisser's ear.

The balding witch finder looked toward the other men lurking amidst the environs of the muddy field. They were his men, apprentice witch hunters under his command and tutelage. However, not one of them moved to extinguish the situation. Meisser might be their commander, but they recognised a fool when they saw one, and none of them were eager to follow a fool into battle.

Meisser licked his lips nervously and nodded his head in defeat.

'Nicely done, friend Streng,' Mathias Thulmann told the knife-wielding thug. 'Now if you will kindly relieve Brother Meisser of his pistol so I need not worry about a bullet in the back, we'll be on about our business here.' The witch hunter looked around him, gesturing for the apprentices to draw close in order that he might disclose his plan of attack to them.

MATHIAS THULMANN CROUCHED just outside the filthy hovel, ears listening for any sign that its occupant had detected the presence of his party, or the men he had deployed to surround the structure. He looked back at the five men he had chosen to accompany him into the witch's lair.

'I remind each of you,' his silky voice whispered. 'Guard your own lives, but see that the witch is taken alive.' Thulmann studied each man's face, making certain that his warning was understood. He met the questioning gaze of his henchman Streng.

'You certain that this is how you want to do it?' Streng asked. 'Wouldn't it be better just to put the place to the torch and have done with it? They'll be burnt anyway.'

'I want to know the reason for these atrocities,' the witch hunter told him. He thought again of the four households, slaughtered down to the last child, all of them Wurtbad's most prosperous river merchants. There was something more than simple evil and malevolence at work here. Someone was hoping to profit by these horrors. Greed was one of the simplest motives by which any crime was countenanced, but it took a truly sick mind to consider witchcraft as the solution to their ambitions. 'And I would hear who paid to have them done,' Thulmann added.

'Shouldn't you at least send him back to guard the perimeter?' Streng gestured with his head to indicate Meisser. The witch hunter captain of Wurtbad was now equipped with a sword, his confiscated duelling pistol tucked securely under Streng's belt.

'No, I want him with us,' Thulmann commented. 'I wouldn't want Brother Meisser to miss one moment of the excitement.' The witch hunter sighed, drawing his sword and pointing it at the hovel. With a shout, the men lunged forward, Streng at the fore. The burly henchman sent a savage kick smashing into the ramshackle door, tearing it from its rotted leather hinges to crash upon the earthen floor of the hovel. Streng leaped into the room, Thulmann and the other witch hunters right behind him.

The interior of the hut was small, but into that space had been crammed more paraphernalia than could comfortably occupy a room three times as large. Dried bundles of weeds and herbs drooped from the ceiling, dead and eviscerated birds hung from leather straps fastened to the roof beams.

A huge pile of bones, of every size and shape, was heaped against one wall, a collection of foul-smelling jars and pots filling a crude series of shelves beside it. The head and skin of a black cow stared at the intruders with its empty eye-sockets from the hook that fastened it to the support beam that rose from the centre of the hut. Beyond, shapeless masses dangled and drooped, drifting back into the inky recesses of the chamber.

A dozen noxious stinks fought to overwhelm the senses of the men, but no more charnel a reek assailed them than that

which rose from the small fire-pit and the black iron cauldron that boiled above it. As the attention of the witch hunters was drawn to the only source of light in the gloomy shack, a dark shape rose from beside the cauldron, glaring at the intruders.

The shape resolved itself into the form of a woman, bent almost in half by the weight of her years. A shabby, ragged brown shawl was draped across her crooked spine, a collection of grey rags that might once have been a dress clothing the rest of her body. Her face was a mass of wrinkles, a spiderweb etched into the cold and colourless skin. The bones of her skull seemed to press against the wrinkled covering, showing yellow beneath the skin. Her nose was broad and sharp, like the beak of a razorbill, her eyes tiny pinpricks of malice.

Straggly white hair hung about her body, drooping as far as her knees. The hag opened her gash-like mouth, letting a trickle of spittle drool from her lips.

'So, my boy was followed after all,' the witch observed, the words leaving her toothless maw in a scratchy hiss. 'But if you think you'll be stoking a fire with these old bones, you're sadly mistaken.'

'Your unholy tricks won't protect you now, hag,' declared Thulmann, striding toward the witch, sword and pistol both pointed at her breast. 'The judgement of the god you've profaned and mocked is upon you this night!' The old crone's smile broadened, ghastly in its malevolence.

'You think so, do you?' she cackled. 'But you've forgotten Chanta Favna's darling boy!' From the black interior of the hovel, the sound of creaking wood and groaning iron issued, followed a moment later by the tottering form of the monstrous abomination the witch hunters had tracked to this, the lair of its creator and controller.

The creature was tall, forced to stoop under the low ceiling of the hovel. It was rail thin, which was fitting, since just such an object had been used to form its spine. Its body was an old burlap sack stuffed with rubbish and old dried out reeds. Its arms were long sticks, hinged at the shoulder and elbow with iron fittings. Its legs were poles, wooden feet nailed at their ends.

The monster's head was an old dried out pumpkin, upon which had been carved a leering and ghastly suggestion of a

face. About its neck hung a withered, one-legged toad, a talisman that reeked of loathsome and unholy magic.

However, it was none of these features which arrested the attention of the men who had moments before challenged the construction's mistress. It was the long, sharp claws of steel that tipped each of the scarecrow's slender arms, the bladed hands that still dripped with blood from those it had slaughtered already this night.

Almost before the men could fully register its arrival, the scarecrow was upon them, lashing out with murderous swipes of its rickety limbs. One of Meisser's apprentices fell under the monster's steel claws, wriggling on the floor as he tried to push his entrails back into the gaping hole the scarecrow had ripped from his belly. The other witch hunters warded off the butchering sweeps of the automaton's flailing arms, swords crashing against claws of steel.

Thulmann fired his pistol into the ghastly pumpkin face, the shot shattering against the sorcery-strengthened shell. Streng tore Meisser's own pistol from his belt, firing at the scarecrow as its bladed hand swept toward the throat of his employer. The shot glanced off the claw, the impact redirecting the flashing talon to chew into the timber wall of the hovel.

Meisser lunged at the scarecrow as it tried to free its hand from the wall, stabbing and slashing at the unnaturally strong substance of its backbone. It seemed impossible that such a ramshackle thing could move with such deadly swiftness.

Thulmann moved to aid the witch hunter captain in his efforts, but was dealt a glancing blow that knocked him to the floor. One of Meisser's remaining apprentices shouted a warning to his mentor as the scarecrow freed its trapped arm, but the older witch hunter was too slow in recognising the danger. The scarecrow's claws slashed downward, ripping open Meisser's sword arm. With a scream of anguish, Meisser fell back, his apprentices stepping forward to protect their master. The scarecrow lashed at the swords of the two men, its powerful blows forcing them to give ground before it.

'That's it!' laughed Chanta Favna. 'Kill them all! But do it slow my pet, I want to savour every scream!' The hag's hands were held before her, swaying and jerking in time to the scarecrow's

movements. Dangling from those withered claws was an articulated wooden doll, a small manikin that the witch manipulated with deft motions of her scrawny fingers. The severed leg of a toad was fastened around the midsection of the tiny figure. As the doll moved, so too did her sorcerous construction.

From the edges of the battle, Streng noted the old hag's manipulations.

'Mathias!' the bearded henchman called out, deflecting another slash of the scarecrow's claw with a desperate sweep of his sword. Rising from the floor, half-dazed by the automaton's blow, the witch hunter looked over at his hireling. 'The witch's doll! She's controlling the scarecrow with it!'

Upon hearing Streng's words, the witch's ugly eyes focused upon the recovering Thulmann. She cackled and hissed slippery, inhuman syllables, forcing the witch hunter to meet her transfixing gaze. Chanta Favna placed all of her dark will and malignancy into her hypnotic spell, willing the witch hunter to remain where he was.

With nimble hands, she manipulated the wooden doll. In time to her manipulations, the scarecrow turned away from its hard-pressed opponents, its creaking steps turning back toward Thulmann.

Mathias Thulmann could feel the dread power of the old witch surging through his body, paralysing every nerve, urging him not to rise, commanding him to remain still. He could feel himself struggling to resist her, but it was as if his body was not his own.

The witch hunter was dimly aware of the creaking, tottering steps that were closing in upon him, yet such was the numbing power of the witch's magic that he was unable to muster any sense of haste to speed his struggles. Indeed, his entire being seemed to be in a stupor, a stupor not merely of body but of soul as well.

Only one part of his being seemed to be clear and distinct. The witch hunter's right hand yet retained its grip upon his sword, the weapon that had been given to him in the Great Temple of Sigmar in Altdorf, blessed by the Grand Theogonist Volkmar himself. Thulmann forced himself to focus upon the sword and his hand, and as he did so, the numbing deadness

started to lessen. He could sense his arm now, then the feeling of warmth and control spread to his shoulder.

Chanta Favna stared in disbelief as the witch hunter began to fend off her viperous gaze. The witch's face grew dark with worry, her manipulation of the manikin hastier and more desperate. She risked a glance to see how far her automaton had come, but found it beset once again by the other witch hunters, their clumsy efforts to destroy it nevertheless managing to impede its progress.

As the witch's attention wavered, Thulmann tore himself from her lingering spell. The witch hunter surged to his feet and sprang at the old woman. 'Enough of your black magic, crone!' he cried out. The steel of Thulmann's sword flashed in the flickering light as it swept downward at Chanta Favna. The witch screamed in a howl of pain and despair as the blade bit through her wrists. The scraggly clawed hands of the hag dropped to the floor, the manikin still held in their disembodied clutch.

As the doll struck the floor, so too did the scarecrow, tottering for one moment like a puppet struggling to stand after its strings have been severed. The bundle of sticks and straw struck the ground and broke apart, the pumpkin head rolling away from its wooden shoulders.

Mathias Thulmann loomed above the moaning Chanta Favna, the witch pressing the bleeding stumps of her wrists against her body. 'Fetch brands from the fire,' the witch hunter snarled, glancing to see the surviving men from Wurtbad ministering to Meisser's hideous injury. 'See to him later!' he snapped. 'I want this hag's wounds cauterised before she bleeds out. There are questions I need to ask her.'

The witch stared up at Thulmann's menacing tone. 'I'll tell you nothing you filth! Swine!' the witch managed to forget her own agony to heap maledictions upon the witch hunter.

'Streng, go and fetch the men watching the perimeter,' Thulmann told his henchman, ignoring the curses bubbling from the witch's mouth. 'Tell them to ready some torches. I want this place razed when we leave it.' He turned his attention back on Chanta Favna. One of the men from Wurtbad held her fast while the other pressed a knife he had heated to

a red glow against the bleeding stumps of her arms.

'I'll tell you nothing!' the witch managed to scream between painful shrieks.

Thulmann considered his prisoner, his face grown cold and expressionless now that the hunt had reached its end.

'They all say that,' he stated in a voice that was not without a note of remorse and regret. 'But in the end, they all talk.' Thulmann turned away from Chanta Favna, stalking toward the doorway of the witch's hut.

'They all talk,' the witch hunter mused. 'Even when they have nothing to say.'

***Mathius Thulmann continues his sacred mission to find
and persecute the roots of all Chaos which threaten the
lands of the Empire in
WITCH HUNTER***

Also by C L Werner

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