

WITCH KILLER

By C L Werner

WITCH HUNTER MATHIAS Thulmann is desperately searching for the forbidden tome, *Das Buch die Unholden*. Trailing the thieves that stole it into the wildest reaches of the Empire, Thulmann and his murderous assistant Streng end up in a mysterious, isolated town.

Can they find the book and escape before their souls are trapped forever in this web of evil or will Thulmann be called upon to dispense Sigmar's justice?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

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The following is an excerpt from *Witch Killer* by C L Werner.

Published by the Black Library. Games Workshop, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

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THE CHAPTER HOUSE of the Order of Sigmar in Wurtbad stood on a winding street some small distance from Wurtbad's temple district. The building was a squat, two-storey affair, its gabled roofs pointing towards the north, a plaster icon of the twin-tailed comet fixed above its entrance. The chapter house was not immune from the caprices of change that had settled on Wurtbad. One of the dungeons beneath the structure had partially collapsed after being penetrated by the inhuman skaven, damaging the foundations themselves. More far-reaching, however, would be the death of the chapter house's master, Witch Hunter Captain Meisser, a final casualty in the fierce fighting that had raged within the Schloss von Gotz. It would be months before Meisser's successor was appointed and installed in Wurtbad.

A more immediate change, however, was what interested the man who had devoted himself to watching the chapter house since dawn. From the window of the house of a petty Sigmarite official, he had watched the comings and goings associated with the brooding structure across the cobbled street, with keen interest. With a quill, he carefully made a note of every person arriving and leaving. As darkness settled, he at last turned his eyes from the chapter house door, consulting the notes he had scratched into a sheet of vellum. A smile twisted his features.

By his calculations, there should only be two or three men left in the chapter house, one of them wounded. He considered the rather numerous household of the owner of the home, patiently waiting for him in the parlour below. Eight against two and a half were the sort of odds he was willing to entertain, especially since his eight would be a bit more durable than the denizens of the chapter house.

Yes, he decided, the risk was slight, and the potential reward, promising.

ELDRED HURRIED THROUGH the lonely halls of the chapter house. He had been long in the service of the witch hunters and knew well the priceless value of speed. With such dark powers at work in Wurtbad, even the slightest delay might mean damnation and death. Certainly the relentless, steady pounding upon the oak doors of the chapter house bespoke urgency.

The pounding on the door continued unabated as Eldred rushed towards it. Had something gone wrong? Did the witch hunters need help? And if they did, what sort of aid could Eldred possibly render them? With a sense of grim foreboding he placed his hand on the thick steel bolt that held the door shut and peered through the narrow grate set into the portal.

The man who stood outside the chapter house was not one of the templars, although he was not unknown to Eldred. Constantin Trauer was a clerk for the temple of Sigmar, maintaining the many accounting ledgers that monitored the temple treasury. He was a small, nondescript man, with an almost effete demeanour. In the light brown cloak of his office, his thinning hair plastered against one side of his forehead, there was certainly nothing about the man that suggested menace. Yet Eldred found himself instinctively recoiling. The clerk seemed oblivious to his alarm, barely registering the fact that the door had swung open, his right hand half-raised as if to strike upon it once again.

Eldred's fingers tightened around the slim dagger he wore upon his belt. Ever since the attack in the dungeons, Thulmann had ordered all the servants to go about armed. Eldred was thankful for this edict as he watched Constantin stagger forwards, his steps clumsy and awkward. The clerk's head swayed brokenly upon his neck and Eldred gasped as the blind, lifeless chill of Constantin's eyes met his gaze. The servant rushed forwards, dagger clenched in his fist, determined to slam the door shut before the clerk could stagger into the room.

Eldred barked a command for the clerk to withdraw, and threatened him with the dagger, but Constantin continued to shuffle forwards. His bleary eyes did not even react to the sound of the servant's voice. The eerie lack of response from the clerk sent a shiver of fear wriggling down Eldred's spine, but what he saw beyond the clerk caused him to gasp. More figures were

stepping out from the darkness, moving with shuffling, swaying steps. Whatever was wrong with Constantin, he was not alone in his affliction. Too late, Eldred realised he had allowed the intruder to stand between himself and the warning bell set beside the door.

The old servant cried out, screaming an alarm to the other occupants of the chapter house. There were two other servants in the building and Franz Graef, a witch hunter who had been injured in the battle with Baron von Gotz. He only prayed that his warning came in time.

Eldred flung himself at Constantin. For all his ungainliness, the clerk was immovable, and held his ground against the charge. Eldred's fingers stabbed his dagger into the thing's shoulder. For the first time, the zombie seemed to take notice of him, lifting its cadaverous fist and smashing it into Eldred's skull, spilling the servant to the floor. Head swimming, Eldred struggled to rise to his feet and face the monster once more.

'I need one of you alive,' a sneering voice hissed from the doorway. Eldred turned towards the sound, seeing a man who was almost as corpse-like as his undead followers. He wore a grey cassock around his lean body, trimmed in thick brown fur. The exposed skin of his hands and face was pallid and sickly, his black hair stringy and unkempt. But there was a malevolent life in the eyes that stared from the man's thin, hungry face, exuding an almost tangible sensation of the profane and the evil. Here, then, stood the master of the corpse-puppets.

The necromancer waved his leprous hand and the zombie of Constantin shuffled back towards Eldred. 'If you behave, you can be my prisoner,' the sorcerer said as he strode into the building.

With arcane gestures, the necromancer ordered the zombies into the chapter house, and watched them march silently into the building.

It was not long before screams banished the eerie silence. The necromancer's pale features pulled back in an appreciative smile as the sound reached his ears. Eldred groaned in horror as he heard his comrades murdered.

The sorcerer glared down at his captive. 'Do the sounds of death disturb you?' The necromancer laughed. 'This is but the prelude to the symphony!' He crouched down to stare into

Eldred's eyes.

'If there was one thing I learned from the tedious operas of my homeland, it is that every instrument has its part to play.' Impossibly, the smile on the sorcerer's face became even more menacing. 'Now it is time for you to play yours. I will ask a question, you will provide an answer. Where did they put the vampires?'

Eldred moaned in renewed horror as he heard the necromancer's words, but a fresh string of screams from deeper within the chapter house killed any thoughts of refusal. The sorcerer rose to his feet again, motioning for the zombie of Constantin to lift their captive from the floor. With an extravagant flourish, the necromancer motioned for Eldred to lead the way. The servant complied with shocked subservience, moving almost as lifelessly as the zombies.

You may have thought yourself finished with me, Sibbechai, the necromancer thought as he followed behind Eldred, but Carandini has not yet finished with you.

'LIE DOWN AND die!'

Streng's boot smashed into the ratman's face, spattering the earthen wall with blood and fangs. The mercenary delivered another brutal kick to the creature's throat, crushing its windpipe. The body continued to shudder and twitch, but the brute was good and dead. Streng wiped a hand caked in dirt and blood across his forehead to stem the trickle of sweat seeping into his eyes. He cleaned his gory blade on the ratman's body, not allowing himself to think about how it had nearly been him lying on the floor of the cavern. Even a moment's distraction meant the difference between life and death in the creeping dark of the skaven warren.

The mercenary turned away from the dead monster, eyes narrowed as he looked for any other sign of opposition. The floor of the cavern was strewn with furry carcasses. Some were old, others were much more recent. Streng saw human bodies mixed in with those of the vermin. Some of these, too, had been present before the ambush. Only one of them wore the livery of the von Gotz palace guard, and there did not seem to be any other soldiers or witch hunters among the dead. Streng breathed easier, but did not fully relax his guard.

'I don't think they planned that ambush,' a scar-faced soldier in the griffon-tabard of the Ministry of Justice said. 'I think they were trying to hide in here and we surprised them.'

Streng spat on the corpse nearest him. 'That evens things a bit. They damn well surprised us with that cave-in of theirs.' The warrior could see the expressions of the men around him darken as he mentioned their recent escape. Only a dozen of them had gained the safety of the side tunnel before the entire passage had collapsed. Since then two emotions had struggled to control every man: terror and rage. Streng had been careful to cultivate the fury every man felt, bringing it to the fore. Fear would do nothing to help their chances of survival, but savage hate might.

'Rather peculiar hole, even for underfolk,' one of the palace guards commented, tapping the side of what looked like a large iron stove with the flat of his sword. Streng looked at the strange objects scattered around the cavern: tables strewn with stoppered jars and foul-smelling bottles, a brick kiln, several iron furnaces and some sort of immense press. The hair on the back of his neck began to rise. Since taking service with Thulmann, he'd seen the laboratories of more than a few alchemists, and this apparatus looked disturbingly similar.

A thought flared through his mind and he strode towards one of the human corpses. Turning it over with his foot, he found himself looking into a villainous face, frozen in an expression of horror. But more interesting was the leather mask that he found in a pocket of the man's tunic, a leather mask with a long, bird-like beak and crystal lenses over the eyes: the mask of a plague doktor.

The inarticulate howl of frustration that exploded from Streng turned every eye on him. The soldiers watched, puzzled, as the mercenary hurled the leather mask across the cavern with a savage gesture. He'd been here, the foul scum Thulmann had hunted across half the Empire, the bastard physician who experimented upon his fellow man, filling the veins of his victims with the filth of Chaos. Freiherr Weichs had been here. This was his lab, the fountainhead of Stir Blight and the plague in Wurtbad.

Streng snarled, sweeping his arm across one of the tables, knocking jars and bottles to the floor, and then gripped the edge

of the table and upended it, sending it crashing to the floor. He turned away from his vandalism to find the soldiers watching him warily.

'Come on,' he barked. 'There's nothing here, let's get moving!'

'Where?' protested one of the palace guards. 'Where are we supposed to go? Where?'

Streng's eyes were like ice as he turned on the man. 'We'll take one of these tunnels and find our way back to the surface.' The mercenary stabbed a finger at one of the black tunnel mouths, a decisive gesture that gave no hint of the randomness with which he had chosen it. 'We kill any rat bastard unlucky enough to come across our path!' he added with a venomous oath.

THE THREAT OF plague had kept the waterfront of Wurtbad abandoned, even the most desperate of the city's denizens forsaking the area where the disease had done such brutal work. With the quarantine in effect, the steady stream of ships plying the river had vanished, the river patrol keeping ships from the port.

Even so, two men stood upon the wooden pier in the early hours of dawn. The taller of the pair wore the heavy black robe of a priest of Morr. Beside him stood a thin figure garbed in grey, his lank black hair hanging in his eyes, his features displaying a trace of foreign blood. In his hands, the Tilean held a glass vessel filled with black ash.

Carandini watched the sun rise into the sky, the shadows of night retreating before it. He smiled as the warm rays bathed his face. A necromancer was not the sort to cultivate an intimate relationship with the sun, their loathsome activities best conducted under the shroud of night, but today, today he could think of no more glorious a sight. His fingers stroked the surface of the bottle – it would not be long now.

'I will not do this thing,' the priest groaned. 'It is an affront to Morr! I will not do it.'

Carandini took a step towards the man, shaking his head sadly. 'I worry that you are looking at this the wrong way, father. While it may be true that my chosen vocation is at odds with the puerile superstitions of your morbid little cult, that doesn't mean we can't be friends. Why, I am doing you a great boon! I'm giving you the opportunity to do a favour for your god, to be of noble service to him. You are being given the chance to

right an affront to the divinity of your god, to reclaim something stolen from his domain.'

'You are a monster!' the priest spat, horrified by Carandini's words. 'You are a profaner of Morr, a violator of graves. Corpse-stealing monster!'

The necromancer tapped a forefinger against the bottle he held. 'Hardly as monstrous as what is in this bottle, father.' He thrust it towards the priest, laughing as the robed man shrank back from the vessel. 'See, even reduced to ash and dust, the dread Sibbechai still has the power to frighten you! How can you say what I ask of you is some crime against your god? Why, I am only doing what the witch hunters would have done had I left the vampire's cinders in their possession.'

'Then why steal them at all! Why this profane farce?'

The necromancer's face lost its air of humour and condescension. 'Because I owe this thing a debt. I have to see for myself that it has been destroyed, that its remains have been removed from any possibility of resurrection. I have to make sure that none of its filthy kind will learn of Sibbechai's death and seek to restore their fellow fiend.'

Carandini smiled once more as he looked back to the rising sun. The long game of trick and trap he had played with the necrarch was over, and it was Carandini, not Sibbechai, who had emerged as the victor. The vampire had almost triumphed, leaving the necromancer in the cellars beneath the castle, compelled to stay behind while the necrarch tried to claim *Das Buch die Unholden*. The arrival of the skaven had nearly been the death of him, the filthy magics of the horned skaven sorcerer sending an army of ravenous rats to consume the necromancer. It had taken every trace of his willpower and skill to conceal himself from the rats, to weave such a cloak of black magic around himself so that even their keen senses could not find him. The effort of focusing and maintaining such power had nearly killed him. Even now, the memory caused his heart to thunder within his breast.

But the spell had held, and Carandini had not died. He'd sensed the destruction of Sibbechai when the enchantment the vampire had placed upon him was broken. Before Carandini could rush into the castle above to look for the grimoire, however, he'd seen the skaven return, fleeing back into their bur-

rows. Once again he had locked eyes with the horned sorcerer, but this time the ratman held *Das Buch die Unholden* in its foul paws. Had the creature been alone, Carandini might have dared to confront it, despite its tremendous power. The ratman had not been alone though, nearly a score of its fellows still hurried after it. The necromancer had remained hidden, his sense of self-preservation overcoming his lust for the book. Now he knew who had it, he would be able to find it again, and when he did, it would be under circumstances that favoured him, not the skaven.

'Are we ready, father?' Carandini asked. The cleric did not speak, merely bowed his head in submission. He joined the necromancer on the edge of the dock, a silver talisman clutched in his hands, arcane words whispering past his lips. Carandini tapped the glass bottle one last time, and held it out over the river, popping the cork from its neck. As the priest continued to invoke the rite of exorcism, Carandini turned the bottle over, scattering the vampire's ashes into the swift moving River Stir.

'*Repast en pace*,' Carandini echoed the priest as he watched the last dregs of ash tumble from the bottle. He hoped that wherever Morr deposited the souls of vanquished vampires, it was unpleasant

'SIR, I THINK I see light ahead!' The words were spoken by a young, blond-haired soldier from the Ministry of Justice. He was one of only three survivors Thulmann and Ehrhardt had encountered in the tunnels.

'Do you think there might be more survivors?' Ehrhardt asked the witch hunter.

'Possibly, or it may be our ratty friends trying to draw us into a trap,' Thulmann replied, his voice heavy with fatigue. 'Either way, we can't afford to avoid it. If it is some of our comrades, we cannot abandon them. If it is a trap, it shows more intelligence and organisation than these running battles we've been fighting. Something will be in charge, one of their noxious leaders. If we can capture it alive, we may be able to get information from it, find a way out of here, or perhaps find the creature we came here to kill.'

One by one, Thulmann's group extinguished their torches, crawling through the darkness as they followed the witch

hunter towards the light. Soon they were close enough to see shadows moving in the tunnel ahead, and hear voices whispering from the darkness.

'I still say we are heading the wrong way,' a man's voice snarled.

'Do as you like,' came the growled reply, 'but I'm sticking to this tunnel. The way the mangy curs have been thick along it, it has to lead somewhere!'

The second voice was terribly familiar to the witch hunter. He was pleased to find that his henchman Streng had also been lucky enough to escape the skaven trap.

'You've been saying that for the last half hour!' snapped another of the soldiers, busily tying a bandage around his left arm.

'And he is no doubt correct.'

The men all spun around, blades at the ready as Thulmann spoke, eyes narrowed as they peered into the darkness. The witch hunter strode boldly into the ring of light, his fatigue forgotten in his joy at finding more of his men alive. To Streng and the men with him, the witch hunter's sudden emergence from the gloom was almost supernatural, some divine sending of holy Sigmar himself. The effect lessened somewhat when Ehrhardt and the three Ministry of Justice troopers followed Thulmann into the light. The miracle was somehow cheapened for being shared.

'We thought you was dead,' Streng observed when he managed to recover from his shock. The mercenary scratched a filthy hand through his scraggly beard. 'I shoulda known it would take more than a few tons of earth falling on your head to finish you, Mathias.'

Thulmann clapped a hand on Streng's shoulder, causing a puff of dust to rise from his leather hauberk. 'I'm not so surprised to see you either. You've crawled your way out of more miserable holes than this in the aftermath of one of your drunk-en revels.'

The stocky mercenary smiled at the remark; his employer never had approved of the impiety of his ways.

'Now that you've decided to put in an appearance, I'll let you lead this rabble,' Streng said, gesturing at the men around him. 'You've fought the skaven in the past, maybe they'll believe you

when you say the best chance we've got of getting back is to go where the rats are thickest.'

Thulmann stared at his henchman, noting the curious look in Streng's eyes. He was not sure exactly what the warrior was playing at, but he would follow his lead, for the time at least. 'My assistant is indeed correct,' the witch hunter said in a quiet, controlled voice. 'If there have been more skaven in these passages, then they are most likely trying to keep us from reaching a path to the surface and escaping this pit. Stick to this passage and before long we'll be feeling the sun driving the dampness of these burrows from our bones.'

The encouraging words had their effect. Thulmann saw many of the soldiers smile grimly at the prospect of regaining the surface. Streng had driven them as far as he could with nothing more than simple hate. Thulmann offered them something that would take them still further: hope.

He felt remorse that his hopeful words were untrue, but knew that only by keeping the men moving would they stand any chance. Ehrhardt seemed to be the only one who detected the hollowness of Thulmann's words. He said nothing, however, simply resting his enormous sword against his shoulder and taking a torch from one of the soldiers. Holding the brand aloft, the giant knight marched deeper into the passage. The survivors lost little time in following after the imposing Ehrhardt. Streng and Thulmann lingered behind to form a rear guard.

'Mind explaining what is going on?' Thulmann asked, his voice low so that only his henchman would hear his words. 'You know as well as I that whatever organised defence these monsters had has collapsed as surely as that tunnel back there. They aren't trying to keep us from some path back to the city. These are frightened, disorganised packs of animals falling back to their innermost lair, instinctively protecting the most vital areas of the warren – the breeding pits and the burrows of their ruling elite. I'm not leading these men towards the surface; I'm leading them deeper into the warren. Why?'

A harsh intensity was on Streng's face when he turned to answer the witch hunter.

'We found a room back there,' the mercenary said. 'A big cave with lots of strange equipment in it. The sort of stuff an alchemist might have... or a physician. We found a lot of bod-

ies too, and not all of them were rats. Most of them, man and rat alike, had masks like that plague doktor was using.'

'Weichs,' Thulmann hissed, spitting the name off his tongue as if it was poison.

Streng nodded grimly. 'He was here, Mathias, working with the skaven. Looked like he might have fallen out with his hosts, but if he did, his body wasn't among the dead.'

Thulmann looked away, his eyes fixed upon the shadows of the passage. A hundred bitter memories swarmed inside his skull, snarling their anger in his mind. Of all the heretic scum he'd hunted over the years, he could think of only one worse than the renegade doktor.

'You think he might still be here?' Thulmann asked through clenched teeth.

'If he isn't, whatever rat is boss of this nest might know where he's gone,' Streng answered. 'That's why I wanted to press deeper into this maze, try to get my hands on one of their leaders.'

The witch hunter nodded his head. He knew that Streng did much of what he did for money. No higher purpose motivated him, but catching Freiherr Weichs had become as much of an obsession to the callous mercenary as it had to himself.

'Our first priority must remain finding the horned skaven and recovering the book,' Thulmann cautioned. The black knowledge contained within *Das Buch die Unholden* had been enough to transform the ruler of Wurtbad into a living avatar of the Unclean One. Who could say what even greater horrors the tome might unleash upon the world if it was allowed to remain in evil hands? As much as he wanted Weichs, he was forced to recognise that the book represented the greater threat.

'I'll remember that,' Streng replied, favouring Thulmann with a murderous grin. 'But if I have a chance at Weichs, all the black secrets in Sylvania won't keep me from taking it!'

CARANDINI WATCHED WITH eager anticipation as the sun began to sink from the sky, casting long shadows into the dilapidated fishmonger's shop. There had been a great deal to make ready before the onset of night, yet even so Carandini had spent the last few hours in impatient expectancy. The ritual he was preparing was an ancient one, from a time when the spires of ghoulishly haunted Lahmia still stood proud and tall beside the Crystal

Sea. It had been in his possession for a long time, but he'd never before had the opportunity to test its efficacy.

Thanks to the witch hunters, however, that opportunity had finally presented itself.

Carandini retreated back into the building, treading cautiously so as not to disturb the chalk sigils he had drawn on the floor. He could feel the mystical energy being pulled into the ancient symbols, the sorcerous power growing even as the sun's light became more feeble. Soon, the light of the thirteen candles he had placed around the room would be the only thing contesting the darkness. The flames that rose from them glowed with a haunting blue light. They were true corpse candles, necromantic talismans crafted from the fat of murdered men.

Carandini was careful to avoid staring at the flames directly. The black arts were dangerous to evoke, even to necromancers. The flame of the corpse candle formed a bridge between the domain of life and that of death. The incautious might find themselves mesmerised by the haunting light, helpless to prevent their souls from being drawn into the flame, or to prevent something from the other side from slipping through and investing itself within their flesh.

The necromancer fixed his attention instead upon the object that was the focus of his ritual. Lying in the centre of the room, at the very nexus of the symbols and designs drawn on the floor, was a large black wooden box, the coffin lately inhabited by the necrarch Sibbechai. Carandini could almost see the dark energies gathering around the casket, permeating its wooden surface and iron fittings, suffusing the thing lying within. The ritual required one more component... human blood.

Carandini snapped his fingers, exerting his will. There was a gap between the circles and pentagrams on the floor, a narrow walkway leading from the outer ring of the chamber towards the casket lying at its centre. The necromancer exerted his will and two shuffling, tattered shapes began to approach the coffin. Between them, the two zombies bore the struggling, whimpering figure of the priest of Morr. The captive's cries were little more than inarticulate gurgles, the necromancer having removed the man's tongue. Gods sometimes answered the prayers of priests, and Carandini was not of a mind to take any chances.

The zombies carried their charge to the casket, forcing the man to bend at the waist and lean over the open coffin. The priest's inarticulate screams rose in pitch as he saw what lay inside, and he suddenly understood the necromancer's purpose and his own role. The cadaverous claw of a zombie ripped into the priest's throat, tearing through his flesh and slashing his windpipe. The dying man struggled in the remorseless grip of the zombies as a cataract of blood exploded from his neck, spraying a wash of gore into the casket.

Carandini exerted his will once more and his undead servants withdrew, bearing the remains of the priest with them. The necromancer paid them no further notice, his attention riveted to the casket. Would it work, he wondered?

The necromancer dismissed his doubts. The ritual would succeed; it would succeed because he willed it so. He would not be denied. His enemies would not keep him from his destiny. *Das Buch die Unholden* would be his. He would make its secrets his own, and the thing inside the coffin would help him take it from those who stood in his way.

From his vantage point across the street, Carandini had seen Thulmann lead his witch hunters back to the chapter house. He had seen them bearing the ashes of his treacherous former partner Sibbechai and the more intact corpse of the vampire's minion, the vengeful creature Carandini had briefly encountered in the cellars of the castle. The ashes of his ally he had already attended to. Now he intended to put the remains of Sibbechai's errant thrall to use.

Carandini held his breath as he sensed a change in the air of the room. The light of the corpse candles dimmed, the atmosphere became colder. A black mist gathered around the casket, and was sucked down inside the coffin. Then the moment passed, warmth began to creep back into the room, and the candles returned to their former brilliance.

A pale hand rose from within the coffin, closing around the edge of the box. Carandini watched in fascinated triumph as a body slowly rose from the casket, a pallid shape that exuded an aura of strength and power despite its sickly hue. The creature turned a once handsome face in the necromancer's direction, the patrician features drawn and haggard, eyes at once both empty and hungry.

Slowly, awkwardly, the thing pulled itself up from the coffin, struggling to get out. The necromancer watched its efforts with pride, revelling in his own accomplishment. After a moment, the undead thing stood upon its own feet. It glared at Carandini and the necromancer could see a spark of awareness behind the vampire's hunger. He felt no fear, however. The wards he had placed on the floor would contain the vampire until he was ready to release it.

'Gregor Klausner, I believe,' Carandini laughed, the sound filled with all the mockery and scorn of Old Night and the Dark Gods.

Witch Killer can be purchased in all better bookstores, Games Workshop and other hobby stores, or direct from this website and GW mail order.

Price: £6.99 (UK) / \$7.99 (US) / \$10.99 (CAN)

ISBN 13: 978 1 84416 395 3

ISBN 10: 1 84416 395 4

Bookshops: Distributed in the UK by Hodder.

Distributed in the US by Simon & Schuster Books.

Games & hobby stores: Distributed in UK and US by Games Workshop.

UK mail order: 0115-91 40 000

US mail order: 1-800-394-GAME

Online: Buy direct at www.blacklibrary.com