

BLOOD & STEEL

A Warhammer novel by C. L. Werner

ENTER THE DARK and dangerous world of ruthless bounty hunter Brunner, as he hunts down the Old World's fugitives without respite or mercy! Allowing nothing to stand in his way, Brunner battles against goblins, vampires and all other manner of dark creature in order to catch his quarry and claim his reward. But lurking in the shadows is the mysterious Krogh, a rival bounty hunter with a grim reputation who will stand for nothing less than Brunner's demise.



C. L. Werner has written a number of Lovecraftian pastiches and 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.

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from BLOOD & STEEL

THE BOUNTY HUNTER'S destination came into view a half-day's ride from the snotling set. From the rise of a low hill, Brunner stared down, his keen gaze focused upon the great gaping hole in the side of the mountain.

It was a colossal, imposing portal that put the great city gates of Altdorf to shame. Nearly fifty feet wide, and just as tall, the massive doorway was supported by gigantic granite columns that were twenty feet broad at their base. The entire length of the columns was engraved and sculpted. Scrolling and runes had been carved with consummate skill into the tough, ancient stone. Several figures had once been carved into the sides of the columns, ordered in ranks like a silent company of guardsmen, but they had all been defaced and vandalised. Shards of their stone faces peered upward from the rubble that had collected beneath the archway between the columns. Crude symbols in blood and other rude pigments had been daubed over the figures, robbing them further of their silent dignity.

Between the hill and the doorway, the land was littered with boulders and heaps of stone, their sprawl quietly suggesting the outlines of long-collapsed buildings, of forgotten walls and ruined towers. From a small grassy knoll, part of a grim, bearded marble head glowered at the two riders, as though it were angered at this additional violation of the dead settlement. Brunner did not spare a second glance at the giant stone head. He did not honour his own gods, and he would not honour those of another race.

'Ranald's cloak!' exclaimed Brega. 'Where are we?' There was awe in his voice. He had visited some of the greatest cities of the

Empire such as Altdorf and Marienburg but the ponderous mass here belittled the walls and fortresses of men.

'It is our road through the mountains,' explained Brunner, eyes still prowling the wasted piles of rubble. His gaze sought to penetrate the dark, shadowy cavern between the columns. 'I learned of this road years ago, from a dwarf who once plied my trade. In ages past it was a great stronghold of the Ever-Kingdom. But it fell, like so many of the great dwarf cities. To fire and earthquake and goblin, it fell, nearly a thousand years ago.' Brunner's voice had dropped into a strange, sombre tone, as if the age of the ruins, and the weight of their history, had forced a measure of respect into his tones. 'Only a few of the dwarfs still use this road, for it is long and perilous. Even among their kind, there are not many brave enough to enter the darkness beneath the Vaults. Among men, there are even fewer.'

Brunner favoured Brega with a cold, icy smile. 'After the shadows of Karag-dar, you may find even the Reiksfang prison a comforting sight.'

The bounty hunter nudged Fiend with his spurs and the horse began to walk slowly down the hill, pulling his grey packhorse Paychest and Brega's steed after it.

'There are things in dark, forgotten places more fearsome than pain and agony and the red ruin of Judge Valkberg's mercy,' the bounty hunter said in a low voice.

Ahead, the great cavern-like door of Karag-dar yawned like the mouth of a giant beast, eager to consume them.

BEYOND THE GAPING doorway of Karag-dar, all was darkness and silence. The brooding antiquity seemed tangible; even the horses were ill at ease. Brega swallowed the lump in his throat, his breath turning to laboured gulps, as though the pressure of the weight of the Vaults was seeping into the tunnel and making even the air heavy. Ahead of him, Brunner dismounted, and made his way back to Paychest to remove a lantern and some oil from a pack fastened to the animal's back.

The light of the lantern revealed a gigantic chamber just beyond the great doorway. Tall rectangular columns reached up into the mountain, each of which was topped by a bearded dwarf whose outspread arms and arched back supported the ceiling high above. Each of the twenty pillars was thus adorned.

But no two of the giant statues were alike; each one was meticulously sculpted to preserve the likeness of some ancestor lord who had died before Karag-dar was founded.

The bounty hunter played the light of the lantern across the length of the chamber. Once this had been a sort of trading post, where the dwarfs had swapped weapons of steel for grain and meat with the primitive tribes who would one day become the Tilean people. Great doors of steel had once towered within the doorway, protecting this hall from any outside invader. But those doors were now broken and dismantled, their steel scavenged by goblins and orcs to craft crude implements of slaughter. Brunner considered the empty doorway for a moment, the light of the sun streaming between the columns, past the ranks of defaced stone sentinels. Then he trained the light towards the interior of the mountain.

The stalls of the dwarf merchants were long gone, the stone cast down and carried away, the wood rotted and decayed into dust. Only the great flute of the canal that had run from deep within the stronghold to this chamber broke the emptiness of the hall. A thin trickle of water still flowed along it, feeding into a simple granite cistern, the fish and cave frogs carved upon it broken and defaced, and covered with a spongy yellow mould.

Playing the light of the lantern still further into the hall, Brunner could see the far wall, flanked by columns just as ponderous and elaborate as those at the entrance to the mountain. There, he knew, was the true beginning of the stronghold, the true entrance to the night world that had once been Karag-dar. He stared for some time at the dark, gaping opening between the columns where a second set of steel doors had once stood. At last, he was content that there was no furtive shape lingering in the darkness. Nevertheless he listened for a moment more, then turned his attention back to Paychest. He removed a bundle from the packhorse and strode back towards Brega.

'You're mad,' the smuggler gasped. 'We'll die! You can't take me in there!'

The bounty hunter ignored him and removed the foul-smelling sack tied behind Brega's saddle. Then he strode back toward Fiend. Undoing the first bundle, Brunner removed some crude hide leggings, slit along their backs. He tied four of these to Fiend's legs. Then he dipped his hand into the bag of

snotling filth. Fiend snorted in protest as the bounty hunter lifted the dung from the sack. Brunner patted the animal's flank by way of apology, then began to smear the muck on the hide leggings.

'I've used this road before,' Brunner commented as he rose from his task and repeated his labour on Paychest. 'And come out alive.' The bounty hunter looked over at his prisoner. 'Keep your head, and you will too.' Brega found the chuckle that accompanied Brunner's remark almost as unsettling as the tunnel itself.

'Look, I have quite a bit of gold stashed away...' Brega pleaded. Brunner strode toward the smuggler's horse. He looked at the man for a moment, as though considering his proposal. Then, without warning, he pushed Brega from the saddle. The bound man struck the floor hard, crying out as he landed. Brunner ignored the man's painful moans and tied the remaining hide leggings to Brega's steed.

'I warned you once before that I would gag you if you made that offer to me again,' the bounty hunter said, not looking at his prisoner. 'I have a mind to fill your mouth with this before I shut it,' he added as he rubbed a handful of snotling dung into the hide leggings. Brega whined in terror as Brunner rose from his task and stalked toward him. He began to scramble away on his hands and knees, but the bounty hunter's foot pinned down the end of the rope that bound his hands together, causing him to fall and crash his chin against the unyielding floor. Brega rolled onto his back, yelling in protest as Brunner loomed over him, his gloved hand filled with reeking filth. The bounty hunter smiled and rubbed the excrement on Brega's tunic.

'Can't have some critter down here thinking that you are for eating, can I?' Brunner laughed. He bent down, picked up the rope and began to walk off. Brega scrambled on his knees after the bounty hunter, trying to keep from being dragged by his captor.

Brunner fastened the rope to the saddle on Fiend's back, then calmly checked the magazine of his repeating crossbow as he drew it from its holster on the saddle.

'The gun's not loaded,' he said, indicating the weapon sheathed on the other side of the horse. 'And I thought it best if I kept hold of this.'

'You can't take me in there without any protection!' cried Brega.

'I'm your protection,' the bounty hunter replied. 'You're worth a lot to me... alive. I don't intend to let anything happen to you.' Brunner smiled at his prisoner. 'Not until I'm paid, anyway.'

The bounty hunter turned away, narrowing the beam of the lantern to a slender dagger of light. Taking hold of Fiend's reins, he began to walk both the animals and Brega toward the deeper darkness beyond the inner doorway.

'The dwarf tunnels run clean through the mountain,' the bounty hunter said. 'It will take us a week to reach the far side. Keep quiet. Keep alert. Listen for the slightest noise.' Brunner cast a final look back at Brega.

'Remember,' he warned, 'if I die, you're goblin food.'

IT WAS SOME time before the bounty hunter at last found a place for them to rest. They had trudged for long hours through the darkness. Brega had been impressed by the mammoth size of the main tunnel while they had remained within it. It seemed to grow even more massive as they journeyed deeper into the mountain; rising into the very heights above. A few stretches had crumbled and collapsed, leaving giant boulders and huge chunks of worked stone strewn about the tunnel floor. For a time, Brunner had navigated a path through the debris, relying more upon the light of his lantern than the feeble sunlight that trickled downward from cracks in the ceiling.

Brega noted the mouths of other tunnels branching off from the main hall, but the bounty hunter had ignored them, never pausing to look at the intricate carvings, nor the often defaced statues that loomed beside them.

All was silence save for the muffled sound of the horses' hooves. Brunner had fastened fur boots around the feet of the animals to soften the sound. Only the gentle babble of the faint stream of water flowing along the old channel added to the noise of their progress.

Brunner paused but once, stopping to examine more closely a crude banner wedged into a pile of rock. He stared at it for some time, so Brega had a chance to look as well. It was a homely thing, a length of poorly cured hide stretched between two braces fashioned from the bones of some creature.

The glyph upon it was a simple representation of a snarling

mouth, with black fanged teeth bared for violence and battle. Soon after, Brunner had diverted their route into a side tunnel. The ceiling in the second passage dropped alarmingly – from the towering height of the main hall to only fifteen or twenty feet. It was only then that Brega became aware once more of the heavy brooding pressure of the mountain above.

Brunner had explained the detour after Brega had pestered him for some time about it. ‘This area was controlled by the Sharp Nose clan the last time I passed through these halls. Over the years, I’ve come to a sort of understanding with the Sharp Nose goblins. They leave me alone and I don’t kill them.’

‘Then why the detour?’ Brega asked.

‘Because that totem we found was from the Black Fangs. Nasty bastards, even by goblin standards. I’d prefer to steer clear of them. We’ve never come to any sort of understanding, you see.’

They had continued on along the side tunnel, taking several turns until Brega could not be certain if they were running parallel to the main hall or were now working their way back toward the entrance. They passed numerous rooms and chambers, the bounty hunter pausing to make sure the rooms were empty as they passed. Once, Brega heard something huge moving in the darkness. Brunner had grown tense, creeping forward to investigate the sound. He had soon returned, wiping sweat from his brow, before replacing the helmet.

‘Only a stone troll,’ he said with relief. ‘We’ll wait here until it moves on.’

‘What did you think it was?’ Brega asked nervously. The bounty hunter just shook his head.

‘Something that should be very far from here, a thing the dwarfs named Arijogk.’ Brunner uttered a nervous laugh. ‘In Khazalid, as I understand, it means “Slaughter”. A Chaos troll, from the Wastes themselves. Come down during the Great War Against Chaos, or so the dwarfs say.’

‘Have you ever seen it?’ Brega wondered, fear creeping into his voice.

‘I’ve seen what it can do,’ Brunner replied. ‘That was enough for me.’

At length, when the bounty hunter decided that the stone troll had moved on, he began to lead the way onward into the blackness.

THEY MADE CAMP at last in a small room that branched off from the tunnel. Brunner chose the site because it had two entrances, which would make it more easy to defend and would give them an escape route if they were set upon by enemies or wild beasts. There was also the fact that he heard water running in the room and a quick examination revealed an old cistern fed by iron pipes. Brunner tasted the water, deciding that it was relatively pure, so the thirsty horses could drink.

The bounty hunter slipped Brega's rope from Fiend's saddle. Keeping the smuggler's hands tied, he let his captive drink at the cistern while he retrieved a coarse blanket from Paychest's load and settled himself on the floor.

Brega greedily drank the water. It had a stale, metallic taste to it, but it was welcome just the same. The smuggler rose from the cistern and began to move about the room, inspecting his surroundings.

'Don't go wandering off,' Brunner advised, not rising from the blanket. 'Something might find you before I do.'

Brega ignored the threat, and gazed at the carvings cut into the walls. He was struck by the craftsmanship of even the smallest details, the gently whirling scrollwork at the base of the walls, the savage, flowing cuts of the dwarf runes. If any of it was portable, it could probably fetch a tidy sum in Altdorf or Marienburg. The smuggler walked the length of the room, stopping when he encountered a small statue in the corner opposite the cistern.

'The dwarfs certainly do good work,' Brega declared. He reached forward, his hand sliding along the smooth surface of the small statue. 'I doubt if any sculptor in Tilea could match this statue. It almost seems alive.' Brunner did not pay the smuggler any attention. He was busy cleaning his sword.

'Why, you can even see the folds in the statue's cloak, the chips in its teeth,' Brega continued his observations. 'Such detail. And on a statue of a goblin, of all things.'

Brunner leapt from his seat on the floor, advancing swiftly toward Brega, his longsword, an ancient blade named Drakesmalice, gripped tightly in his hand. The bounty hunter placed great value on the sword, and never removed it from its sheath without good reason. Brega cringed back from the bounty hunter's fearsome advance, but Brunner had his eyes focused upon the stone goblin.

'It's alright,' the smuggler muttered weakly. 'It's only a statue.'

Brunner pointed at the goblin. 'More details you didn't notice. See these shiny things along its nose? They are steel spikes, mark of the Sharp Nose clan. That knife thrust through its belt is steel as well. How do you imagine a sculptor managed that?' Brega stared in a mix of wonder and horror at the goblin, pondering the bounty hunter's question. The bounty hunter nodded. There might be some risk in examining the statue, but it was slight compared to the possibility of running into its creator.

Brunner pulled a hatchet from his belt and smashed its blunt end against the statue. The statue rocked in place, then crumbled apart with a second blow of the hatchet. The sound of the stone breaking echoed from the chamber walls. The smuggler winced at the sound, wondering what sort of things might be drawn to the din.

Brega smelled the foul odour of rotten meat even over the stench of the snotling dung. Brunner replaced his hatchet and drew a knife. On the floor, the broken pieces of the goblin lay in a heap. The seemingly solid statue had been revealed to be hollow, its interior filled with grey, decayed flesh. Brunner stabbed the meat with the tip of his knife.

'Dead a few weeks, at least,' he said, rising from the petrified corpse. 'Hopefully what did this is far away by now.'

Brega cringed from the gruesome remains, now understanding that the statue had once been a real goblin, a creature of flesh changed to stone by some hideous sorcery. The skin on the back of his neck began to crawl as he considered the horror of such an unnatural death.

'Like I said,' Brunner called out to his prisoner as he sat back down, moving his crossbow to a more readily available position beside him. 'Don't wander off.'

A FEW HOURS later the bounty hunter was back on the march, making his way through the darkness of the abandoned dwarf stronghold. Brega was at a loss to understand how the man was able to navigate with nothing but the slender beam of light emanating from the lantern. It seemed an almost unnatural skill, as if some sixth sense was guiding Brunner through the forgotten passages, showing him a path through the vacant halls and silent chambers.

Brunner stopped abruptly. Crouching, he examined something on the floor and nodded his armoured head. He trained his lantern on the walls, and examined them closely. Then he turned, stalking past Brega to the packs and sacks lashed to Paychest's back. The bounty hunter removed a long pole of about four feet in length. He moved back to the fore of his little train and slowly urged Fiend to back up. When he had made the animals retreat a satisfactory distance, he returned his attention to the object he had spotted on the floor.

Brega watched in silence as Brunner carefully worked the tip of the pole underneath a tripwire – a length of tough sinew – stretched across the corridor. The bounty hunter slowly lifted the wire until at last it snapped. There was a flash and a large crude blade of steel fell from a crack in the wall, scything across the corridor just in front of Brunner like an Estalian pendulum. The pole snapped with a loud crack as the blade struck it. The murderous length of steel ended its fatal swing by crashing against the other wall, the metal trembling from the force of the impact.

'We're lucky you saw it!' Brega exclaimed. By way of response the bounty hunter readied his crossbow.

'I've been expecting something like that,' he said, eyes scanning the darkness.

'Expecting it?' Brega asked, his voice nervous.

'It explains why they've been waiting,' Brunner said. 'We've been followed for the last mile,' he added.

Before Brega could ask his captor what he was talking about, shapes launched themselves from the shadows, shrieking and snarling with shrill, gibbering voices. The bounty hunter aimed back along the length of the horses and fired. There was a meaty sound of steel punching into flesh and a high-pitched scream. Brega heard a body fall and something metal clatter along the stone floor.

Brunner turned and faced the passage before them. Red eyes gleamed in the darkness, and small shadowy shapes raced forward. The bounty hunter did not wait – he fired two more bolts into the oncoming creatures. Two sets of red eyes pitched to the floor, whining in pain. Brunner turned once more, firing another bolt into one of the creatures closing upon the horses. There was another shriek of pain as the bolt found its mark. The horses were agitated now, snorting and moving about the narrow corridor. Brega braced himself, certain that the bounty hunter's

huge steed was going to crush him against the wall.

Brunner drew his sword as the first of their attackers began to close upon him. With his other hand, he threw open the lantern, allowing its light to engulf the corridor. The light revealed their attackers. There were at least a dozen of them, each no larger than a small child. The creatures wore dark hooded cloaks, ropes of dried animal gut tied about their waists. They had short, bandy legs and long, spidery arms. The faces that grinned from beneath the hoods were twisted and malicious. Each of the goblins' long noses was marked by a set of small steel spikes driven into the spongy flesh.

As the light of the lantern was released, the goblins drew short their charge, raising their arms to their faces to protect their eyes from the sudden light. Brunner did not hesitate, for that might give the greenskins a chance to recover, an opportunity to decide if they would use the axes and clubs gripped in their hands or turn tail and flee before the light. The bounty hunter's sword slashed through the face of the first goblin he closed upon. The creature was flung aside by the force of the blow and crumpled into a shrieking heap against the wall.

A second goblin was disembowelled, its green-black blood spraying the walls. A third was decapitated, the head still mouthing a shriek as it sailed from its shoulders. A fourth goblin found Brunner's steel crunching through its chest. The bounty hunter kicked his foot against the mutilated goblin, tearing its body from his blade.

Still blinded by the unexpected brilliance of the lantern, the other goblins could hear the rapid and brutal demise of their fellows, their deaths all the more horrible because they couldn't be seen. The remaining goblins dropped their weapons, crying and wailing in piteous, simpering tones as they began to retreat. Blinded, the goblins crashed into one another in their reckless haste to escape the fearsome man they had hoped to claim as their prey. To speed them on their way, Brunner grabbed hold of the slowest by its hood and smashed its skull against the murderous steel pendulum.

Brunner turned from the carnage he had wrought, and stooped to clean his blade with the cloak of a slain goblin.

Brega stared in awe at the scattered goblin bodies. The entire fight had taken perhaps two minutes, yet the bounty hunter had managed to kill nine of the creatures in that time.

'Sharp Noses,' Brunner declared as he stepped forward to take Fiend's reins. 'Fortunately they don't have any skill with a bow, otherwise they might have given me some trouble. That probably explains why their clan is so small.'

Brega fixed an angry glare at the bounty hunter. 'I thought you said you had an understanding with the Sharp Noses!' he accused.

'I do,' Brunner said. 'But sometimes you have to kill a few of the young ones. Remind them why they should listen to their elders.'

Brunner's struggle for justice continues in

BLOOD & STEEL

MORE BRUNNER THE BOUNTY HUNTER
from C. L. WERNER

IN THE GRIM and medieval Old World, few are feared and hated as much as the bounty hunter. Their world is one of deceit, treachery and random violence, where words are cheap and life even more so. Survival depends upon a unique blend of intelligence, animal cunning and brute force, with pain and the promise of pain maintaining their aura of fear. Brunner is one such man, a ruthless individual who will stop at nothing to catch his prey and claim his reward.



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