

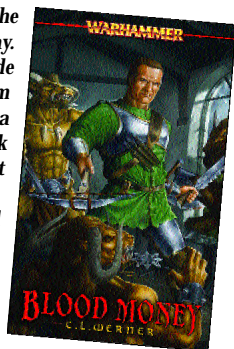
BLOOD MONEY

A Warhammer novel by C. L. Werner

A STUNNED SILENCE settled upon the street as the echoing report of the handgun slowly faded away. Brunner stalked across the mud, crouched down beside the body of the Tilean and pulled the large knife from his belt. The serrated edge gleamed in the light for a moment before he brought the blade against the neck of the dead man. A woman screamed as Brunner set about his gruesome labour.

'Always make sure that the man you want to kill is playing by the same rules,' the bounty hunter said as he lifted Savio's head from the corpse.

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from BLOOD MONEY

A LONE RIDER made his way through the timber gate that led into the town of Greymere. The guards atop the walls eyed the man with looks of suspicion, for in the realms of the Border Princes it paid to trust no stranger. War between men in these lawless regions was almost as common as war with the marauding tribes of orc and goblin. The rider paid his coin to the sergeant at the gate, and suspicion or no suspicion, the man was allowed to enter the town, leading a dappled grey pack horse behind his own black and brown bay.

The merchants and peasants that ambled about the muddy lanes of the town paused to favour the stranger with curious glances, for he presented a compelling, almost sinister, sight. The man wore armour about his lean frame, his head was encased in a helm of blackened steel, and knives and other blades hung all about his body. On either side of the man's saddle, sheaths had been attached: one bore a large crossbow, the other a wood and steel frame of a blackpowder weapon. His second horse laboured under assorted burdens, barrels, packs and rolls of cloth. But with one look at the man, all could tell that those packs did not contain merchandise, and that he was not some sort of wandering peddler.

The stranger stopped before the crude timber face of the town's only inn. He dismounted. Casting his visored gaze about the street, as if challenging any thieves who might be watching, he left his horses and stalked into the building. Although several sets of eyes cast covetous looks upon the animals and the gear they carried, none did more than look.

Shortly afterwards a man emerged from the inn, his face as white as a sheet. Quickly and cautiously the man slunk away from the building into the nearest alleyway, losing himself in the confusing spaces between the town's maze of huts and pigsties.

Brunner, the man thought, smoothing the front of his leather tunic and wiping the perspiration from his swarthy brow. The Tilean licked his lips and placed a reassuring hand on the sword at his side. Then, a sudden thought of just who it was he feared brought a fresh burst of speed to the man's steps. *By Ranald and Morr, what is he doing here? Whose head is he after?* The answer came to Vincenzo's mind almost immediately. The meagre price on his own head would not have dragged the bounty hunter away from the city states, but there was someone in Greymere who did merit such a price.

THE GREY-HEADED MAN swept a bone brush through the massive moustaches that crouched upon his lip, training them back into the upward-pointing horns fashionable among the nobles of the Empire. It was unwise, he knew, to affect such an appearance, but years of habit were hard to escape and the former Baron of Kleindorf was not about to give up the few, miserable trappings of his former station that he was able to maintain. Not for the first time, the man who had once been Bruno von Ostmark, and now called himself Drexler, considered his surroundings with a snort of disdain. The house he kept in Greymere was lavish by the standards of the Border Princes: it had a stone façade and wooden floors and roofing that did not consist of thatch and straw or logs thrown across support beams. Only the keep of the ruler of Greymere, Prince Waldemar, was more extravagant and sumptuous. Yet, the baron could not help but remember the castle that had once been his, the estates and private forests that had been his possessions. Even his kennels had been larger than his present home.

Drexler finished sweeping his moustaches into the desired shape and began to dress himself. Here, too, he thought of his fall. Once, three servants would have busied about his person,

preparing him to face the day in whatever raiment he chose from closets larger than the bedroom he now sat in. The exiled baron sighed loudly and slumped into a velvet-backed chair and slowly pulled a leather boot onto his foot. Such extravagance was beyond him now. The few servants that he could afford had more pressing duties – matters of business, that would keep Drexler from slipping down the ladder of life. For the nobleman was realistic enough to understand that, miserable as his surroundings might seem, there were far more wretched levels of squalor into which he could sink, and never emerge.

A sharp knock at the door interrupted the nobleman turned merchant as he stuffed a stocking-covered foot into his other boot. He turned towards the door, snarling at this intrusion upon his routine. Drexler stifled the impulse to hurl the shoe at the door as it opened. The men now serving him were hardly domesticated, and hardly as meek as those who had cowered before the Baron von Ostmark. One had to be careful about berating and insulting them, lest the dogs snap at the hand of their master.

The wiry, dark-skinned shape of Vincenzo, Drexler's Tilean aide, assistant and confidant slipped through the portal, slowly closing it behind him. Drexler stared at the Tilean, suspicious of his furtive manner and quiet steps. The merchant reached under the fur blankets of his bed, fingering the dagger hidden within the bedding.

'Well?' the merchant demanded. 'What news is so important as to drive you to disturb me before I have properly risen? What troubles you that you cannot await a more decent time to speak to me?' Drexler tensed his grip on hilt of the dagger as Vincenzo slithered across the floor towards him. The Tilean licked his lips and a cold sweat glistened on his face. Drexler could practically smell the fear dripping off the man.

'Have you ever heard of a man named Brunner?' the Tilean said at last. Drexler shook his head, staring at the thief and smuggler with a questioning gaze.

'He is the most notorious bounty hunter in all of Tilea,' Vincenzo explained.

Drexler pursed his lips in thought. 'And you think this killer, this Brunner has come to Greymere looking for the Baron von Ostmark?'

'The reward offered by the Count of Stirland is quite substantial,' Vincenzo pointed out. 'What other reason could there be for the bounty hunter to come to Greymere?'

A troubled expression grew upon Drexler's features. He pounded his fist in his palm. 'No, of course. Somehow he heard of me, found me. But he won't get me!'

'I could ask Savio to attend to it,' Vincenzo offered. Drexler smiled.

'Yes, do that,' the merchant said. 'I have never seen a man who could match Savio's blade. Now, leave me. We have to negotiate with the dwarfs again regarding the transport of their beer to the Moot and I want to look my best.'

THE STRANGER SAT at a small table in the rear of the large tavern that dominated the ground floor of the two-storey structure. A few off-duty soldiers from the prince's guard eyed the armed bounty hunter with thinly veiled antipathy. Mercenaries were a common sight in Greymere, and their arrival often heralded the replacement of one of the other soldiers in the pay of Prince Waldemar. The other occupants of the tavern, a trio of dishevelled peasants who were nursing their beers in order to savour the expensive luxury for as long as they could, did their best to avoid looking at the black-helmed man.

A buxom barmaid made her way between the largely empty tables and set a stein of beer before the bounty hunter. The visored head lowered, staring at the frothy mug for a moment before setting a few copper coins on the table. The woman leaned forward, scooping up the coins with one hand, while her eyes maintained their hold on the face. The cloth covering her massive chest hung loose as she bent over the table, and the woman licked her lips with a wet, pink tongue. She hesitated a moment, lingering over the table, watching for any sign of interest the warrior might exhibit.

The bounty hunter reached a gloved hand forward, closing about the body of the clay stein. He drew his hand back and raised the frothy drink to his lips. The barmaid stood, shaking

her head in an angry gesture and stalked away – hopes of supplementing her wages diminished by his indifferent air. As she turned, Brunner let a slight smile play on his face. It had been a long ride here from Remas, but not that long.

The door of the inn opened, bearing with it the smell of dust and excrement from the street outside. A single man entered: short, but with wide shoulders and muscular arms. He was wearing a foppish-looking cap of red silk, with a purple falcon's feather sticking out from a gold button on its left side. A shirt of chainmail encased his body, the skirt falling to his thighs, where green leggings completed his costume. Leather shoes with bright brass buckles set a jingling echo across the tavern's earthen floor with each step the man took.

Bright blue eyes set in the dark-skinned face of a Tilean considered the tavern and its inhabitants. The face of the man was dominated by a bristly black beard, cut to a point. When his eyes closed upon the figure of the bounty hunter, the beard became distorted as his mouth curled into a predatory smile. The Tilean let his gloved hands caress the hilts of the long-bladed dagger and rapier that hung from his belt. He shrugged and the red cape he wore fell from his shoulders and onto his back. The man strode across the room, each face in the tavern watching his every step – save the bounty hunter, who continued to quietly sip at his drink.

The Tilean stopped beside the table, staring down at the seated warrior. Slowly, Brunner set the stein down, and peered up at the Tilean through his visor.

'Your name is Brunner?' the Tilean asked, his tone arrogant, his accent that of the merchant princes of Tobaró. Brunner let his left hand emerge from beneath the table, his small crossbow pistol now visible in his gloved hand.

'Who would like to know?' his icy voice asked.

The Tilean pulled a velvet glove from his hand. 'My name is Savio,' the man said, dropping the glove on the table. A light of recognition blazed in Brunner's cold eyes as the Tilean spoke. 'I make my challenge. If you are a man, you will face me.'

'Not in here!' bawled the massive bald-headed innkeeper from behind the bar. 'It stinks bad enough without blood

seeping into the floor.' The off-duty guards seemed to share the innkeeper's thoughts, and Brunner let his grip on the crossbow relax when he heard the men draw their swords.

'It seems here is not the best place,' the bounty hunter said. The duellist nodded back at him.

'I shall await your pleasure outside then,' the man said, spinning about and retracing his steps across the tavern. Brunner watched him go. As soon as the door had shut behind him, the innkeeper strode to the bounty hunter's side.

'Whatever you have done to earn the notice of Savio,' the man shook his head. 'He is the most feared swordsman in all the Border Princes. He has killed more people in Greymere than dysentery.' The man's expression changed to one of mock regret. 'Could you please settle your bill before you go outside? And if you will add a little extra, I can send a boy to fetch the priest from the shrine.'

'That won't be necessary,' the bounty hunter said. He reached below the bench he sat on, and pulled a leather-wrapped object onto the table. The innkeeper stared as the bounty hunter removed a heavy object of steel and wood.

'If you don't pay for the priest, they won't bury you,' the innkeeper muttered. 'They'll just strip your body and toss it over the side of the wall for the wolves and the crows to pick at.'

'Well, they have to eat too,' the bounty hunter said, not looking at the bald man. He removed a small tube of paper from a pouch on his belt. The ends of the paper tube had been twisted closed. The gloved hands tore one end of the tube open and up-ended the paper cylinder over the mouth of the steel weapon. A foul-smelling black grain-like substance poured into the barrel. 'And if I can choose, I'd rather feed wolves than worms.'

'I am happy that you can joke about it,' the innkeeper said, wringing his hands on his apron and looking anything but happy. 'But if you think you can match swords with Savio, then you have no idea who you are facing.'

The bounty hunter packed down the grain in the barrel with a long wooden rod. He set the rod down and removed an iron ball from another pouch on his belt. 'I know who Savio is,' he

said. He dropped the steel ball into the weapon, packing it down again with the wooden rod. 'In Tobarò, in Miragliano, in Luccini, his name is reckoned as that of the greatest duellist to ever practise the art of the vendetta.'

The innkeeper's eyes grew wide with alarm as he heard Savio's name associated with such great cities. Suddenly the professional swordsman had become more frightening than even the innkeeper had imagined. 'There is a back door,' the bald man said. 'You could slip through it and be out of Greymere without Savio seeing you go.'

A loud voice called from the street, demanding that Brunner emerge, and berating the bounty hunter as a rogue and a coward without honour.

'And keep him waiting even longer?' Brunner asked. He removed another packet of paper from a third pouch on his belt. He tapped the light, flour-like powder from the folded square of paper into a covered pan at the rear of the gun, just below the steel latch of the hammer. The bounty hunter rose from the table, bearing the loaded handgun with him.

'What are you going to do?' the bald man asked, voicing the question on the mind of everyone in the tavern.

'Before he left Tilea, Savio killed the son of one of Luccini's most prosperous guildmasters,' the bounty hunter replied, snatching up a shabby cloak from a hook beside the door, and draping it over his right arm to hide the weapon he now carried. 'More than enough to pay for the replacement of a bullet and some powder.'

Savio stood in the centre of the muddy lane, men and animals giving him a wide berth as they passed. The thin-bladed, lightweight sword was gripped in his still-gloved hand. His other arm was covered by the heavy fabric of the red cape, the slender fang of his dagger gleaming from the fist that emerged from the folds of the cape. As the duellist saw Brunner emerge from the tavern, he uttered a short, sharp laugh.

'I was thinking that maybe I would have to go inside and drag you out,' he laughed. 'Many is the time when some churlish cur would refuse to answer the demands of honour and unman himself before the duel even began.' The Tilean's blue eyes focused on the shabby cloak draped about the bounty

hunter's right arm. 'Oh? You think to fight me in the style of a Tilean streetfighter?' The duellist laughed again. 'The trick is to employ the cape as not only shield but weapon. Catch your enemy's blade in its folds, if you can, but there is many another trick.'

The duellist made a quick swipe with his sword into the empty air, then pranced a pace forward, whipping the edge of the cape forward, like a boy cracking a wet towel. 'Strike the hand of some handsome noble and watch them recoil from so minor a blow, dropping dagger or sword from fingers stung by so little a thing.' The Tilean withdrew, then danced forward a step, unfurling the cape and casting it about an invisible foe, as the sword lashed out again. 'Then one can always cast one's cloak about the enemy. He will panic, trying to fend off your cloak, and exposing himself for one instant to the steel in your hand.'

'Your swordplay is as extravagant as your mouth,' Brunner's voice sneered. The Tilean lost the playful expression, and his words their jocular tone.

'I have never met my equal with the sword,' the duellist said, staring at the armoured figure of the bounty hunter.

'And you never will,' Brunner stated. He lowered the gun held upright at his side. The hammer responded to the tug of the trigger, smashing into the pan and the powder contained there. The powder lighted under the impact, in turn igniting the gunpowder in the barrel. The black powder exploded with a flash and boom, forcing the iron ball from the weapon. The bullet shot across the few yards separating the two men and crashed into Savio's breast, tearing through the chainmail shirt as though it were not there. The duellist toppled backward, his head crashing into a pool of mud and horse urine.

A stunned silence settled upon the street as the echoing report of the handgun slowly faded away. Brunner stalked across the mud, crouched down beside the body of the Tilean and pulled the large knife from his belt. The serrated edge gleamed in the light for a moment before he brought the blade against the neck of the dead man. A woman screamed as Brunner set about his gruesome labour.

'Always make sure that the man you want to kill is playing by the same rules,' the bounty hunter said as he lifted Savio's head from the corpse.

Brunner looked about the street, his gaze canvassing the horrified onlookers. He settled upon a young boy standing near the door of the inn, and tossed a gold coin to him.

'Fetch me a sack of salt,' he told the boy. 'Keep a few coppers for yourself, but bring the rest back to me.' The boy rushed off, the menace in the bounty hunter's voice ensuring that he would return as speedily as his young feet would allow. Brunner pushed open the door of the tavern with the still-smoking barrel of his gun and disappeared into the darkness with his trophy.

ON THE EDGE of Greymere, a crude amphitheatre of wooden tiers had been erected for what passed as cultural pursuits in the brutal and savage realm of Prince Waldemar. Vincenzo quietly made his way through the noisy, raucous crowd seated in the wooden benches that rose above the muddy ground. Far below the wooden tiers, in a stone-lined hole, a nearly naked man held a shortsword in a massive fist, his other hand encased in a razor-sharp cestus. Five wiry creatures circled the man, their red eyes gleaming in the light of the torches set about the pit. Vincenzo ignored the sight below and made his way toward the front of the viewing stand. He could see several soldiers clustered about the front seats, heedless of how their armoured figures might intrude upon the view of those sitting behind them. Vincenzo kept his hands at his side, in plain sight, as he advanced upon the warriors and the two men seated in the middle of them.

Prince Waldemar was young, his frame powerful and muscular. He wore a robe of wolfskin, his dark red hair bare save for the simplest circlet of gold. A slim scabbarded sword was resting across his knees as he craned his sharp-featured face forward to look at the spectacle unfolding below. Beside the prince, Drexler roared his enjoyment of the fight. But his roar faded as he spied Vincenzo worming his way toward them.

'Excuse me, your lordship,' Vincenzo said to the prince. Waldemar hardly paid the merchant a second thought as

Drexler rose. Down below, one of the slender-limbed green-skinned creatures darted towards the pitfighter's belly with a wicked sickle of steel. The goblin's face exploded into a mash of green paste as the gladiator smashed the studded arm-guard of his cestus into the monster's long, narrow nose. The spatter of dark green blood flew to where the prince was seated and Waldemar howled his appreciation.

'You are making a habit of appearing where you are not wanted,' Drexler told his underling as they stepped away from the royal box, if such a formation of guards could be so called.

'It is Savio,' the Tilean said, his voice low and grave.

'Tell him to wait. I'll pay him after the fight,' Drexler turned to return to his seat.

A gasp of shock rose from the crowd behind the two men. Down in the pit, the goblins had worked their way around the gladiator. Three of them jabbed at him from the front and to his left while the fourth circled the man's back. The sinister titter of the greenskins echoed gruesomely from the stone walls of the pit.

The gladiator chanced a look over his shoulder and was rewarded by a sharp stab of pain as one of the goblins, armed with a spear, dealt him a slash across his side as payment for his inattention. The pitfighter snarled in pain and batted away the goblin's weapon. The goblin behind him took the opportunity to leap onto the man's back, raking his naked flesh with its black-nailed hands, and digging runnels into his skin. The goblin's grip held as it locked its legs around the man's waist and soon the greenskin's fanged mouth was snapping at the man's shoulder.

The gladiator bellowed his rage, the sound causing the other three goblins to nervously retreat back from their adversary. The goblin on the man's back looked up, its green mouth smeared red with blood. A look of horror worked itself into the inhuman features as the goblin saw its fellows back away. Had they remained steadfast, they could have easily penetrated the gladiator's guard, but now, due to their craven souls, the opportunity had been lost. Moreover, the goblin on the man's back would pay for that lost opportunity.

The pitfighter let a savage war cry rumble from his throat as he launched himself into motion. Running at full speed, the man charged backwards, smashing into the stone wall of the pit. A sickly liquid sounding crunch rose from the arena. The gladiator stepped away from the wall, not bothering to look at the dark green smear marring the rocks, nor at the limp and broken thing that slipped from his back to twitch pathetically as life fled its broken, shattered form.

'No, you don't understand,' Vincenzo muttered. 'Savio is dead!'

An incredulous look gripped Drexler's features. 'Dead?' As Vincenzo nodded his head in affirmation of the fact, the exiled baron slumped against the low wall bordering the pit. His limbs trembled as though a chill wind licked at them. 'Dead?' He shook his head. Then he stared at Vincenzo. 'The bounty hunter killed him?'

'Shot him down in the street like a wild dog,' the Tilean replied. 'Savio challenged him. Brunner put a bullet in his heart, then cut off his head.'

'Cut off his head!' Drexler put his hand to his mouth, biting down on the horror that welled up within him.

'There is quite a bounty for Savio in Luccini,' Vincenzo explained.

In the pit down below, the remaining goblins tittered maliciously as they jabbed at the barrel-chested gladiator with their weapons. The scar-faced man fended off the more well-directed blows, knocking away the point of one goblin's spear, and smashing back the sword of a second with the return sweep of his blade. A wicked smile spread across the leathery face of a third goblin, displaying a massive set of needle-sharp teeth. The goblin rushed in, a notched iron axe gripped in his green hands. But as the creature came close enough to strike, the pitfighter's booted foot rose and delivered a savage sideways kick to the small monstrosity.

There was a loud crack and the goblin's leg snapped at the knee. The greenskin howled in agony, letting his axe fall from his hand. Eyes upon the still armed goblins, the pitfighter circled around the pit until he stood above the wailing creature. He brought his booted foot down once again,

smashing the goblin's neck beneath his heel. There was a final snap of bone and a froth of dark green liquid bubbled from the goblin's over-sized mouth. The laughter of the last goblins turned nervous as the cheering of the spectators rose to a thunderous clamour.

'Perhaps it was Savio he was after?' offered Drexler, weakly. Vincenzo shook his head.

'Were that so, then why is he still here?' the Tilean asked. 'Savio was a bonus to him. But whoever Brunner is after, he has yet to collect them.' A crafty look entered the Tilean's eyes. 'I have an idea,' he said, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. 'I know of a man in Adlerhof. We could hire him. He could be here in three days.'

Drexler ignored his companion, looking down into the arena below. The gladiator was charging at his remaining greenskin foes. The goblin with the spear shrieked, threw his weapon at the massive pitfighter and raced to the nearest wall, black-nailed hands scrabbling desperately for purchase on the smooth stones. The other goblin swung his sword, trying to hamstring his human opponent. The gladiator leapt over the goblin's blade. The man's shortsword gleamed in the light as he brought it down to the goblin's head. The creature did not even have time to scream as the force of the man's blow split his skull in two, green blood and greasy brain matter spilling from the goblin's head.

The last goblin cast a terrified look at his comrade's demise and scratched at the wall with an even greater frenzy. The gladiator sneered at the little creature. He bent down and picked up the goblin's discarded spear. With a snort of contempt, the man hurled the spear across the pit, smashing its point into the goblin's back, pinning the greenskin to the wall. Sparing the dead no further thought, the pitfighter raised his arms over his head and revelled in the joyous roar of the crowd.

'Do as you like, Vincenzo,' Drexler said, his eyes glittering with cunning as he cheered the triumphant pitfighter. 'But an idea has just occurred to me as well.'

Brunner's struggle for justice continues in
BLOOD MONEY

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from C. L. WERNER

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