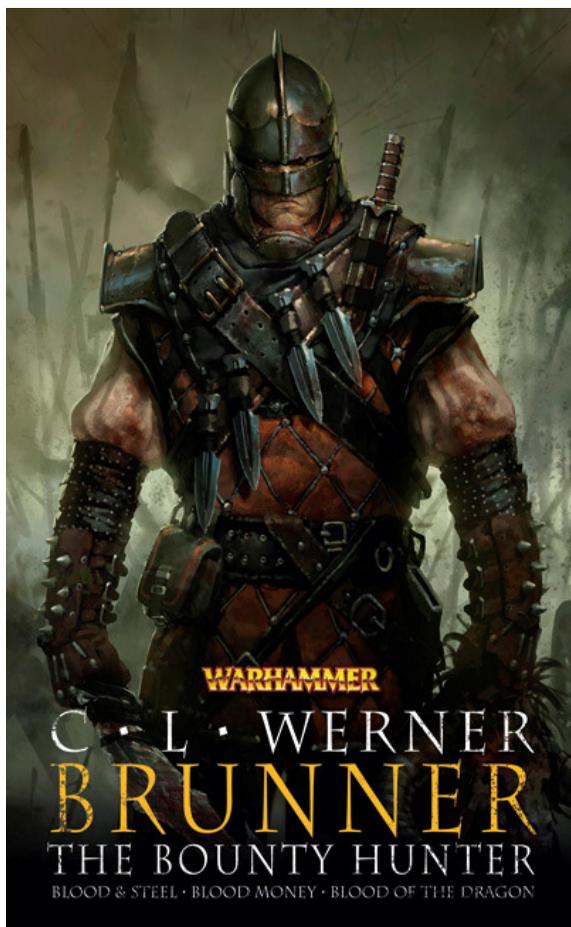




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BRUNNER THE BOUNTY HUNTER

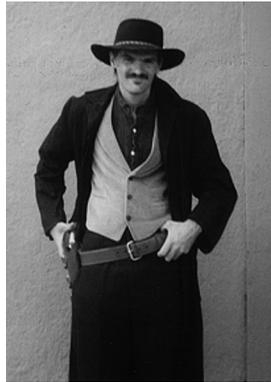
A Warhammer Fantasy Omnibus

By C. L. Werner

This is the dark saga of the ruthless bounty hunter who goes by the name of Brunner. Goblins, vampires, outlaws and even dragons – they're all fair game for this dark hero's blade. Across the length and breadth of the grim Warhammer Old World, Brunner plies his trade, tracking down and killing monsters. But he also faces challenges from within his own dubious profession as a rival hunter stakes a claim to his bounty.

About the Author

C. L. Werner was a diseased servant of the Horned Rat long before his first story in *Inferno!* magazine. His Black Library credits include the Chaos Wastes books *Palace of the Plague*, *Lord and Blood for the Blood God*, *Mathias Thulmann: Witch Hunter*, *Runefang* and the *Brunner the Bounty Hunter* trilogy. 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 WOLF HOWL dogged Brunner through the long hours of the night, sometimes closer, sometimes farther, but always there. The persistence of the howl had made Paychest all but unmanageable, and even Fiend was on edge. As for his captive, he had been forced to tie Viktor to his own saddle to prevent the fear-crazed man from trying to scramble into a tree every time he heard the howl. A broken leg would make getting him to the Reikland a good sight more difficult and Brunner would just as soon avoid such complication.

It was when the howling dropped off entirely that the bounty hunter came on edge. Viktor, oblivious to Brunner's increased wariness, took the silence as sign that the wolf had forsaken them to find less formidable prey. The continuing agitation of the horses made it clear that the predator was still close.

When the attack came, it was of such speed and ferocity that even the bounty killer was caught unprepared. One instant there was the darkness of the path, the brambles and thickets pressing close to the overgrown trail. The next a pair of red eyes shone from the blackness. Brunner drew his pistol even as a terrible growl rumbled through the night. Branches snapped as something lithe and powerful lunged from its hiding place.

Brunner had an instant to observe the sleek black shape as it leapt upon him, bowling him from the saddle and smashing him to the ground. It was a wolf, a huge specimen of its breed.

Its jaws flashed white in the moonlight, froth dripping from its jowls. Brunner fired his pistol into the beast as its leap brought it crashing against him, shocked when the brute did not so much as yelp when the weapon discharged inches from its snapping fangs. A misfire was always a possibility, but the smoke and fire should have been enough to scare the animal off.

His second shock came as he struck the ground, the beast atop him. Brunner felt fingers close around his wrists, pinning him to the ground. As he stared up at his attacker, he saw only the canine snout and black-furred head of a wolf, its eyes gleaming with a cruel intelligence. Nursery fables and half-remembered legends flooded into Brunner's mind as he felt the baleful gaze of the wolf fixed upon him. He fought down his superstitious dread with more difficulty than he had in his encounter with the witch. Natural or child of Old Night, the surest way to die beneath a predator's jaws was to show fear.

Unfortunately, the same lesson had not been taught to Viktor Schwartz. The outlaw pulled at his tether, shrieking and wailing like a lost lamb. The noise of his terror brought the wolf's head snapping about. Whatever intellect might lurk within the beast, it had no mastery over its savage instincts. Brunner felt a heavy weight press down on him, then the wolf was away, springing off of him and pouncing upon the screaming Viktor.

The prisoner fell beneath the beast's weight, crushed to the earth with savage violence. Blood spattered the bushes as the wolf's claws tore into him, each of its hand-like paws clawing into his body with feral brutality. Viktor's high-pitched screams degenerated into a bubbly gargle as the wolf's fangs snapped close around his neck and began to worry at his throat. Arterial spray, almost black in the moonlight, spurting from the wound, bathing prey and predator in Viktor's blood.

Brunner staggered to his feet, his chest still feeling the crushing weight of the wolf against it. He drew the crossbow pistols from his belt, taking aim even as he watched the beast slaughter his prisoner like a wayward calf.

‘Your pelt better be worth three hundred crowns, cur!’ Brunner snarled, loosing the bolts from his pistols into the wolf’s back. Both missiles struck home, stabbing into the beast. Brunner took a step back, once again struck with shock and horror. The bolts had struck true, but their effect could have been no more useless had he loosed them into a side of beef. The wolf barely deigned to notice their impact, but continued to savage the quivering body of its prey. As it snapped and slavered, the bolts seemed to work themselves loose from its body, falling into the mush of dead leaves on the ground.

Brunner tried to tell himself it was some trick of light and shadow, but the effort was too great. It was no wolf that held its prey in pawlike hands, and no beastman who defied bullets and bolts. It was something else, something that, as the witch had warned, did not respect steel and lead.

The bounty hunter pulled his tinderbox from a pouch on his belt, hurriedly trying to light the withered weeds the old woman had thrust upon him. The wolf-beast seemed to take notice the instant he began. It dropped Viktor’s gory carcass, its muzzled pulled into a snarl as it fixed him with its scarlet eyes. The creature slowly crept towards him, an angry growl rumbling through its powerful frame, keeping itself upright upon two legs, its clawed hands closing and opening in their eagerness for violence.

The weeds had just begun to smoulder, the first faint hint of noxious smoke rising from them, when the wolf-beast lowered its head and coiled its body into a crouch. Brunner dropped his tinderbox and dragged the hatchet from his belt. The move was only just in time as the wolf lunged for him, uncoiling in a black-furred streak of bestial fury. The bounty hunter twisted as it jumped, staggering from the glancing impact instead of being crushed beneath the beast’s body as he had before. As the wolf dove past him, he lashed out with the axe, slashing its edge through fur and flesh, hearing the steel scrape against bone. But when the beast was past and he looked at his axe, he found the blade unmarked by blood. He

did not need to be a witch to know that the wolf's hide was similarly unmarked, preserved by whatever unholy forces gave it power.

The wolf coiled to spring again, but as it did so, it began to shake its head, snuffling loudly. It brought a forearm scratching against its muzzle, then rolled its face in the dirt. Brunner could see that the bundle of weeds was now smoking fiercely, the pungent reek almost overwhelming. Its effect on the wolf-beast was even worse, and with a mournful wail, like the whine of a child, the brute darted towards the trees.

Before it could vanish, Brunner was pulling his sword from its scabbard. If the weed could wreak such havoc on the beast, perhaps they had also foiled its invulnerability to steel. He started after the wolf, but the familiar sound of an explosive crack caused him to drop. The trunk of a nearby tree exploded with splinters as a bullet slammed into it.

Brunner rolled onto his belly, watching for the hidden shooter, the wolf already vanished into the undergrowth. After a few moments, he could hear the unmistakable sound of a rider ploughing his way through the undergrowth. The glow of a lantern appeared in the murk of the forest, soon followed by the one who held it.

The rider was a well-dressed man, the doublet beneath his engraved breastplate was extravagant and colourful, his stiff cavalry boots monogrammed with gilded letters, his rounded helm sporting outrageous plumes of ostrich feathers. The sword that hung from his belt was thin and rakish, with a jewelled hilt and silver etchings along its scabbard. The man's face was clean, handsome in the classical Imperial style, with well-tended moustaches waxed into twisted curls. Pale blue eyes regarded Brunner with alarm and a smoking pistol almost fell from the rider's beringed fingers.

'Taal's Mercy!' the rider gasped. 'I didn't see you there! Morr's oath, I saw only the wolf!'

'Then you missed,' Brunner said, picking himself from the ground and gesturing at the injured tree. The bounty hunter's

eyes were narrowed and filled with menace, scrutinising the horseman and his weapons.

The rider's face flushed somewhat at the remark and he shoved the pistol back into its holster with an embarrassed motion. 'I am truly sorry,' he said. 'I didn't know there were other hunters abroad tonight. Those damn Kislevites will be whoring and drinking by this time and, well, they are burying Otto in the morning.'

Brunner stalked over to his horses, trying to quiet them down. Only the fact that it was tied to Fiend's saddle had prevented Paychest from bolting during the ghastly encounter. He paused to regard the rider, his interest piqued not by apologies for slovenly marksmanship, but by mention of hunters and a hunt.

'What's this about a hunt?' he asked.

The rider seemed to be taken aback by the question. 'Then you weren't engaged by my father?'

'I don't even know who your father is,' Brunner said, patting and rubbing the neck of his packhorse.

The rider straightened in his saddle, throwing out his chest in a manner that would have looked out of place even in a Sierck play. 'I am the Baronet Dietrich Hartog, son of his lordship the Baron Friederick Hartog.'

'An awful lot of barons for one stretch of forest,' Brunner muttered under his breath, looking sadly at the gory wreckage of Viktor Schwartz.

'I am sorry about your friend,' Dietrich said. 'I will help you take him back to the village for burial.'

Brunner turned away, shaking his head and pulling himself into Fiend's saddle. He cut away the tether and threw it onto the ground beside the body. 'Leave him,' the bounty hunter said, his voice cold. He cast a last glance at the mangled corpse. 'He's no good to anyone... now.'

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