

# BLOOD OF THE DRAGON

*The third Brunner the Bounty Hunter adventure*

*A Warhammer novel by C L Werner*

IN THE LAWLESS wilds of the Old World, the ruthless bounty hunter Brunner hunts his quarry in return for a purse of gold. But when his hunt for the notorious highwayman Gobineau leads him to the blighted city of Mousillon, Brunner is caught between two warring factions and an ancient powerful dragon.



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

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### *from BLOOD OF THE DRAGON*

SICHO CRANED HIS neck about within the ring of coarse rope that encircled it. Was it not bad enough that they were going to hang him, did they have to drag it out as well? The rope was chafing his skin to the point where it was becoming unbearable, an itch that his hands, tied behind his back, couldn't scratch.

The poacher and sometime bandit looked over to where the warden continued to drone on and on about his crimes, the despicable nature of his soul, and how he was deserving of an end far more terrible than the simple hanging proscribed by the duc's law. Sicho rolled his eyes, turning his attention to the muddy, manure-strewn square and the ramshackle hovels that passed for the thriving hamlet of Veleon. The crowd that had gathered was much larger than he had anticipated, there were perhaps fifty people in the onlooking mob, far more than a puddle of pig piss like Veleon could support. Most likely the duc had declared a holiday so that the peasants of the neighbouring villages and hamlets might have the opportunity to see his execution. Most considerate of him, considering that Sicho's death might be the most exciting thing to intrude upon the dull drudgery of their lives for years. Of course, the duc was motivated more from hopes that seeing Sicho swing might throw cold water on the ambitions of any fledgling poachers and bandits among the peasantry.

Better to die quickly than take a slow death like those idiots, Sicho thought to himself. I'll wager half of them have never even tasted meat, the bandit added as he found a particularly wretched crone gawking at him with a mouth completely devoid of teeth. Sicho twisted about as much as he was able and glared at the bloated figure of the warden. The man was droning on now about an incident Sicho had nearly forgotten involving the theft of a knight's bones from a village outside Brionne.

'Can you hurry it up?' the bandit snarled through his split lip and bruised face. The militia men who had captured him had been quite enthusiastic in their work. The warden rolled up the leather scroll from which he had been reading, slapping it against his meaty palm. 'At the rate you're going, we'll be here half the night.'

The rotund official shook the rolled scroll at the condemned man, taking a menacing step toward the bandit. 'You might show a bit of contrition for all your filthy crimes, you snivelling cur!' the warden spat. 'For you'll answer to the Lady and the gods for your misdeeds, brigand! When that rope goes tight and the air is strangled out of you, the time for repentance will be past.' The warden looked past Sicho, locking eyes with the two brawny militia men who held the other end of the rope tied about the outlaw's neck. Between them stood the old signpost over which the middle section of the rope had been thrown.

'At least I'm an honest thief!' Sicho cursed. 'Tell me, what lets you keep that fat belly of yours full? Not millet and gruel I'd wager.'

The warden bristled under the insult, as much for its truth as the venom with which it was voiced. The fat man's face darkened until it was nearly the same hue of red as the worn leather tunic that struggled to encase his girth. 'We've been about this long enough, dog!' he hissed back. The warden looked again to his two men. He lifted the hand that held the scroll. 'When I lower my hand, pull the rope and send this animal to the gods.'

As the fat man's hand began to fall, however, there was a sharp snap and the sound of splintering wood. The downward

descent of the official's hand was arrested, the scroll it gripped fixed to the wall behind him, pinned in place by the dull steel of a crossbow bolt. Gasps broke out from the crowd and the warden turned away from a fruitless attempt to free the proclamation. The fat man's eyes went wide with surprise and apprehension as he saw the figure regarding him from the back of the milling mob of peasants.

The man was an imposing sight, his upper face hidden within the blackened steel of a foreign-style helmet, a suit of weathered brigandine armour enclosing his slim figure, a breastplate of dark metal encasing his chest. It was like looking at some shabby imitation of the knights the warden served, some crude and base mockery of the shining plate and colourful tabards of Bretonnia's great warriors. Even the horse upon which the man was seated was dark and grim, a far cry from the noble and valiant chargers of the knights.

But the warden saw these things only in passing, his attention fixed upon the strange weapon the warrior held at the ready. The warden had never seen a crossbow, though he had heard such a weapon described for him by a relative who had once travelled to Couronne. The curious, almost box-like device set upon the weapon puzzled him, he couldn't imagine how such a weapon might work. The fat man turned his eyes back to the expressionless steel face of the stranger's helm.

'I need to have a few words with that man whose neck you are about to stretch,' the warrior's cold voice told him.

The colour returned to the warden's features as he noted the assumed authority in the stranger's tones.

'You dare to interrupt an appointed representative of the Duc de Vertain in the execution of his official duties?' the fat official snarled. He might never have seen a crossbow before, but he had a good idea of how they worked, and this stranger had already fired his missile. He looked over at his militiamen. The two soldiers hastily tied off their end of the rope and began to stride forward, hands resting easily on the hilts of their swords.

The strange weapon gripped in the rider's hands jerked and the groan of the steel bowstring firing sounded again. The two militiamen froze as a pair of bolts dug into the ground at their

feet. The warden looked with horror from his subdued men back to the rider. He staggered back, cowering against the wall as he saw the repeating crossbow swing in his direction.

'Next time I aim higher,' the rider told him. 'But if you'll oblige me, I'll have a few words with your prisoner and then be on my way.'

The warden nodded his head slightly, slinking behind the nearest of the dirty, muttering crowd.

The bounty hunter urged his horse forward, pushing his way through the peasants until he looked down upon Sicho.

'You're a little late to collect the price on this head,' the bandit sneered, spitting a blob of phlegm into the dust. Brunner gave the condemned man an icy smile, reaching his gloved hand forward and letting his fingers grip the rope rising behind Sicho's neck. The brigand rose to his toe tips as Brunner pulled slightly at the noose.

'I had hoped you might be more co-operative,' he told Sicho, pulling once more on the rope, enough to make the bandit's next breath turn into a gasp. 'Maybe I'll have them cut you down after you've hung a bit. See if that loosens your tongue.' Brunner released his hold on the rope, leaning back in the saddle of Fiend, his warhorse. 'If that doesn't work, we can always try it again. As often as we need.' The bounty hunter reached beneath one of his vambraces, removing a rolled scrap of leather. 'They're going to hang you, Sicho. How many times they hang you, that's your decision.'

Sicho rotated his head in wide circles, trying to loosen the grip of the noose about his neck. The bandit curled his lip, snarling back at the bounty hunter. Then his eyes fell upon the object held in those gloved hands, and the portrait that had been drawn upon the wanted poster. The hostility drained away, replaced by a peal of laughter.

'Gobineau!' the condemned outlaw cried out. 'You are looking for Gobineau!' Tears were running down Sicho's grimy face as he continued to laugh.

Brunner rolled up the poster, stuffing it back into its place beneath his armour. He looked back at the laughing prisoner. 'You sometimes ran with Gobineau. I want to know where he could be now. When did you last see him?'

Sicho's face contorted into an ironic smile. 'When did I see him last?' he scoffed. 'He is the reason I am here! Trying to outrun this bloated toad and his half-witted swamp cats! The warden and his men were on our trail after we relieved a horse breeder of a few stallions he didn't need. Gobineau was worried that they would catch us on the open road, so as we were riding he reached over and slashed my saddle, dumping me into the road. Of course, this idiot,' Sicho gestured with his chin at the scowling warden, 'was so happy to catch me, he completely gave up chasing Gobineau.' The bandit spat into the dust once again. 'I'll be waiting for that bastard at the gates of Morr!'

'Tell me where Gobineau was heading and maybe I can give him your regards,' Brunner told the prisoner. Sicho's smile broadened and his features lit up as he contemplated how well his treacherous ally would fare with the notorious bounty hunter on his trail. The thought of such a revenge warmed the condemned man's doomed soul.

'We were stealing the horses to outfit a new band Gobineau is gathering together in the hamlet of Perpoleon in the realm of Montfort,' the bandit provided. 'I am sure, if you were to hurry, you'd catch him there.'

Brunner nodded his head, turning Fiend away. 'Oh, I'll catch him,' the bounty hunter assured Sicho. 'You've troubles enough without worrying about that.' The bounty hunter walked his horse slowly back through the crowd. He glanced over at the warden as he passed the still subdued official. Brunner touched a finger to the brim of his helm in a clipped and somewhat nonchalant salute. 'Thank you for your consideration, warden. I won't be needing anything else from your prisoner. You may see to your duty now.'

THERE WERE MANY trails that wound their way between the pastures and fields of Montfort, skirting the edges of the forests and detouring around the scattered patches of moor and swamp that dotted the realm's landscape. The largest and most prominent of these were the roads that connected the more important towns and villages to the few cities that rose amid the green farmlands and savage wilds of

Brettonnia. Though little more than dirt paths by the standards of more cultured lands such as the Empire and Tilea, the roads of Brettonnia served the same function, moving people and goods from one place to another, nurturing the few tradesmen of the kingdom, assisting the devotions of pious pilgrims and facilitating the wanderlust of the knights out to earn their colours and their name, and those who employed them to darker pursuits.

The road that wound past the holdings of the Marquis de Galfort on its way to the distant Grey Mountains and the fortified city of Parravon was well known to be the haunt of highwaymen and brigands. Bretonnian peasants called it 'the Widow's Way' and did not deign to travel its course, instead detouring through the many game trails and cattle runs that meandered through the wooded hills. Still, there were some few, strangers to the district or aristocrats secure in their own aura of invulnerability, who were foolish enough to tempt fate and travel along the ill-rumoured length of road.

It was for just such foolish prey that three men had concealed themselves within the thick bushes that fronted upon a bend in the course of the Widow's Way. They were kindred spirits, members of a cruel and lawless breed, their faces as brutal and bestial as the filthy furs they wore about their lean, wolfish frames. The leader among the three openly flaunted his contempt for the rulers of the land and their laws, the torn tabard of a knight of the realm tied about his waist like the loin-wrap of a Southlands primitive.

The tall bandit leader grinned as he saw the small mule-drawn cart plodding toward them upon the road. It had been several weeks since they had eaten the last of their horses. No matter how humble, whatever loot the cart might hold would be most welcome.

Dogvael looked over at his companions, motioning for them to draw their swords. The brigand leader stared at the notched, rusty blade in his hands. It was at times like this that he most missed the reassuring feel of the powerful hand-cannon he had liberated from one of the Viscount de Chegney's foreign mercenaries. But it was no good brooding

on more pleasant times. Now, a bit of mutton would be exotic enough for the bandit's tastes.

The three men waited until the mule cart was only a few yards away before they exploded from behind the bushes. The man to Dogvael's left rushed forward and seized the bridle of the animal while the other two bandits menaced the man seated on the cart behind it with their swords.

'Stand and deliver, scum!' Dogvael snarled. It was all traditional, of course, like reciting lines in a play. Dogvael had no intention of letting his victim live, no matter how forthcoming he was.

The man seated on the cart drew back in horror, dropping his whip in his fright. Dogvael smiled at the peasant's cowardice.

'Bandits!' the man shuddered. 'Whatever shall I do?'

Dogvael's eyes narrowed as he noticed the almost comic extreme of the cart master's fear, the curled hands clenching at the youthful face. Then he noticed the black leather boots that protruded from the hem of the shabby homespun cloak worn by the driver, boots far too fine for any simple peasant. The bandit drew away in alarm, eyes darting to either side of the road. Even as he did so, the whine of arrows slashing through the air sounded in Dogvael's ears. The brigand holding the bridle of the mule cried out as a shaft crunched into his breastbone. The stricken man fell to the muddy earth, the agitated mule adding to his misery as its hooves pulped his left knee and shattered both of his arms. A moment later Dogvael's other minion cried out, hands clutching impotently at the arrow sticking in his belly. The man pitched to the earth and rolled onto his side, body shuddering as it bled out into the mire of the pathway.

Dogvael turned to run, not knowing who had fired upon his men, nor caring to find out. Even as he turned, however, a third arrow flew from the shadows, striking him in the small of the back and spinning him back around so that he once more faced the cart that had lured him and his companions to their doom.

The owner of the cart was leaning forward, soothing the mule with soft words and a reassuring hand. The man

looked up from his labour, staring at Dogvael, all trace of fear, real or exaggerated, now absent from the man's handsome, rakish face. He smiled at the injured bandit, dark eyes twinkling with a roguish mischief, then stood, casting the shabby cloak from his shoulders and displaying a lean, muscular frame encased in a black leather tunic and dark leather breeches. An expensive-looking belt trimmed in fur and edged in gold completed his outfit, save for the slender longsword hanging from said belt.

'I'm afraid that you were a bit... tardy,' the young rogue told Dogvael. He spread his arms in a lavish gesture to encompass the mule cart. 'You see, this cart has already run afoul of bandits.' The rogue smiled again, swinging down from the seat of the mule cart, his booted heels landing upon the now still form of the man who had taken hold of the mule's bridle. The grinning thief looked down at the corpse under his feet, then daintily hopped across the spreading pool of gore emanating from it.

'Rather sloppy operation, you know,' the rogue told Dogvael, stepping closer to give the wounded brigand a reassuring pat on the shoulder. 'I mean... you really should be using bows.' He turned his head, staring at each of Dogvael's dead companions. 'Probably get a few more men, too,' he advised the bandit in an almost conspiratorial whisper.

Men were now emerging from the woods behind the mule cart, advancing upon the violent scene. The rogue gave an airy flick of his hand to indicate the approaching men.

'I have five men in my little company,' he told Dogvael. 'With bows,' he added almost as an afterthought. 'We do quite well for ourselves.' A harsh, hostile note slipped into the rogue's voice. 'Which is why we did not take too kindly to finding out that a pack of sloppy amateurs had set up shop in our hunting grounds. The ducs aren't the only ones can't abide poaching, you know.'

The bowmen were striding forward now, inspecting the bodies of Dogvael's men, rolling them over with the toes of their fur boots, rummaging about their clothing for any scrap of loot.

The cart master watched as his companions went about their ghoulish work, giving another wink of conspiracy to the injured man sitting near him. 'They're quite thorough, you know. Clean those boys as nice as a pig with a soup bone.' One of the archers, a big brute with a full black beard and a filthy hauberk loped toward Dogvael, pushing the injured man onto his back with a sharp kick.

'I was conversing with that fellow,' the leather-clad rogue called out in mock outrage as the bearded man began to search Dogvael's person.

'You can play around on your own time, Gobineau,' snarled the bearded brigand as his massive hands ripped brass buttons from Dogvael's tunic and patted down his chest in search of any hidden pockets.

'Neither manners nor memory,' Gobineau chided the other bandit. 'Our friend there has a bit of a reputation. Don't you recognise him?'

'By the Lady?' gasped one of the other bowmen. 'That's Dogvael!' Gobineau spun about stabbing a triumphant finger at the man who had called out.

'Precisely! One of the Black Prince's old custom collectors,' Gobineau said. 'I'm sure everybody here hasn't forgotten paying their tithe to that old tyrant.'

'If Dogvael is here,' another of the brigands observed, 'then the rumours must be true. The Black Prince is dead!'

'That seems a distinct possibility when one of his old lieutenants starts playing at honest work again,' agreed Gobineau. He turned away from the discussion however as he saw the bearded archer remove something from Dogvael's body. The bulky man gazed at it intently a moment, then made to stuff it within his tunic.

'Hello, Manfret,' Gobineau called out. 'What is it that you have there? Not holding back on your fellows, are you?' The tone of warning did not go unnoticed by the others, and fingers began to play with bowstrings and arrows.

'Bit of scrimshaw the pig had on him,' Manfret snarled. 'I took a fancy to it, is all.'

'Perhaps I should have a look at it,' Gobineau pressed. 'I've been known to fancy scrimshaw too.' He held one hand out

toward the sullen Manfret, the other hand closed about the hilt of the sword sheathed at his side.

'Damn you!' snarled Manfret. 'I killed the pig, so I get first pick of whatever he's got on him!' The bandit's hand closed a bit more tightly about the object he had lifted from his victim. Gobineau could see that it appeared to be a cylinder, perhaps six inches in length, apparently crafted from bone, its surface elaborately carved.

'I thought that we agreed that all loot was to be divided evenly,' Gobineau said, more for the benefit of the other bandits than the defiant Manfret. He peered sternly into the bandit's eyes. 'I suppose you know exactly how much that bauble of yours is worth, and where you can sell it?'

'Go hang yourself!' roared Manfret. 'I've heard enough from that slippery tongue of yours, Gobineau! I killed him, so it's mine. You lot can split the rest of it!'

Gobineau shook his head, laughing with disdain. 'No, no, no. I don't think that would be very wise. That little bit you're holding might just be worth more than the rest of this garbage put together.' Gobineau's voice dropped lower, into a scandalised whisper. 'You wouldn't be trying to cheat your mates now, would you?'

With another low curse, Manfret drew his own sword, backing away from Gobineau. The other bandit sighed with disappointment and, with one swift move pulled his own sword from its sheath, darting forward with the quickness of a viper. Manfret's blade fell into the mud as Gobineau's sword slashed open his hand. Before the bearded brigand could finish his cry of pain, Gobineau struck again, this time thrusting the point of his weapon into the other man's throat. The stricken Manfret fell, joining his discarded blade in the muck, a sickening gurgle sounding from his punctured vocals. Gobineau casually wiped the blood from his sword and returned it to its sheath.

'Never could abide a man who would cheat his friends,' Gobineau commented, spitting on the dying Manfret. Reaching down, he removed the engraved cylinder from the dying man's hand. He was immediately struck by the craftsmanship of the object, the interlocking symbols that wound

about its surface and the elaborate silver base that sealed one end of the cylinder. His earlier observation that it was bone proved false, for it was crafted from ivory, a substance he had only ever encountered before adorning the jewellery boxes of lonely countesses and duchesses in Bretonnia's great cities. Gobineau looked away from his study of the object as he heard the other members of his band approaching.

'A fine piece, lads,' he told them, holding the cylinder up so that all of them could see it. 'No wonder Manfret took a fancy to it!'

'I've taken a fancy to that silver on it!' cried out one of the brigands, bringing soft laughter from the others.

'Some good drinking money to be had when we chip that off and sell it!' commented another.

Gobineau turned an incredulous look on his companions. 'Chip it off? Can't you lads see the craftsmanship, the quality of this piece of art? Why the entire thing must be worth far more than the price of the silver on its base!'

'The silver will be good enough for me,' grunted a balding man with a lean, wolf-like face.

'That is why you are still a bandit,' Gobineau told the man. 'You don't ever think things through, don't look to see the grander scheme of things.'

'You're talking like some sort of boss-man now,' complained the wolf-faced man.

'We agreed that we wouldn't have no leader!' chimed in one of the others. Gobineau spun about, pointing at the second man who had spoken.

'That's right! We agreed to have no leader,' he said. 'So listen to me and do what I say. We can get a lot more for this piece if we don't break it up and try to sell it whole.'

'And who would buy it?' groused wolf-face.

Gobineau smiled, holding up his hand like an instructor who sees an opportunity to press home his point. 'Ah, first we need to know exactly what it is, then we can find out how much it is worth and who might want to buy it.' Gobineau pointed at the symbols carved across the surface of the cylinder. 'These fancy letters my friends, were written by elves.' The other bandits drew a step back as they heard Gobineau men-

tion the fearsome fey folk. 'Now we all know that elves are rich in magic. So it follows that we should take this artefact to somebody who knows a thing or three about magic.'

'You know such a man?' asked one of the brigands.

'Indeed I do,' Gobineau replied with a look not unlike that of a cat who has just swallowed a songbird. 'There's a little town near here, Valbonnec, and in that town they have a wizard, a conjurer they call Mad Rudol. We'll go and see this wizard and see what he can tell us about this treasure we've come upon.' The other bandits nodded their heads, seeing the sense in Gobineau's proposal. The outlaw continued to smile, regarding the ivory cylinder one last time before tucking it through his belt.

Perhaps it had been some badge of office given to Dogvael by the Black Prince. Perhaps it was some piece of the Black Prince's own treasure that had been looted by Dogvael when his employer had been slain. Or perhaps it was simply a piece of the bandit's own plunder, taken from some wandering knight returning from some quest to distant and exotic lands. Whatever the history behind it and how it had come to find its way into the dead man's possession, it was Gobineau's now, and he would see to it that he wrenched every last groat from it before he was through.

THE CHILL OF night tugged at the dying man as he dragged himself from the road. He did not accept the fact that he was dying, any more than he understood why it was so important to reach the shadows of the trees. There was little enough of reason left in his mind, fogged over by the pain wracking his frame and the indignity of how easily he had been brought down. Dogvael, once one of the Black Prince's trusted servants taken by a simple bandit's trick every brigand from Kislev to Araby learned before he was out of swaddling. The blow to his pride pained him even more than the hole in his back. He'd allowed himself to get sloppy, allowed his wit and cunning to be dulled by the miserable poverty to which he had been forced into after his lord's demise.

The sound of horse's hooves slowly clopping along the mud and dirt lent a new strength to Dogvael's fading vitality and

like some grotesque turtle, he tried to scramble at speed toward the safety of the shadows. He heard the animal turn towards him, walking with slow and deliberate steps to place itself between the stricken bandit and the refuge he sought. Dogvael could see the coal-black socks of the animal looming before him, the horse's hair spattered grey with the muck of its travel. A black boot rested in the stirrup of the saddle and as Dogvael craned his head upward, he found himself staring into the cold steel mask of a Reiklander's sallet helm. The bandit gasped in fright, for that helm and the man who wore it were not unknown to him.

'I am looking for someone,' Brunner called down to the wounded brigand. 'From the looks of things, I think you may have run into him.'

Dogvael scrambled in the mud, turning his pained body and tried to scuttle away. With a slow and deliberate contempt, Brunner directed his steed to once more impose itself between the bandit and the refuge of the brush. Dogvael stared up once more into the cold, stern countenance of the bounty hunter and, with a sigh of resignation, slumped down into the muck.

'Who did this?' the bounty killer demanded, pointing the barrel of the pistol gripped in his hand at the arrow protruding from Dogvael's body. The bandit licked his lips, trying to force some moisture into his voice as he tried to answer.

'Gaw... Gaw...' the bandit tried to speak, trying to voice the name he had heard his killers use to address the smiling, mocking rogue who had been in the cart.

'Gobineau?' Brunner prodded. Dogvael nodded his head slightly. The bounty hunter leaned forward. 'Do you know where he went?'

Dogvael nodded his head again, gulping down a mouthful of air in hopes that it would help his words. 'Walbec... Valbec... Wiza...'

'Gone to Valbonnec to look for a wizard,' the bounty hunter mused aloud. 'Most interesting.' Brunner replaced his pistol in its holster and looked down at Dogvael, studying the wretch for a moment. 'You've been most helpful, Dogvael,' the bounty hunter's words were like frost clawing at glass. His gloved

hand fell toward the huge knife hanging from his belt, a butcher's tool which he had morbidly termed 'the Headsman' long ago.

'Just one more thing you can help me with,' Brunner told the bandit as Dogvael tried once more to drag his paralysed body off the road. The giant knife with its serrated blade gleamed in the moonlight as Brunner gripped it in his gloved fist and dismounted. 'A little matter of fifty gold crowns,' the bounty hunter stated as he closed upon the squirming Dogvael.

*Brunner is hard on the trail of the highwayman Gobineau, but what dangers still lie in the way of his target? Find out in:*

### **BLOOD OF THE DRAGON**

*Also by C L Werner*

## **BLOOD MONEY**

*Brunner the Bounty Hunter book 1*

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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