

Wolf Blood

An Eternal Crusade short story by Graham McNeill

The Wolfhold. The name conjured up the tales skjalds told of when Upplanders' first saw Asaheim's towering fortress of black rock. Hewn from the ancient bones of Fenris, the Fang dominated the snowbound wilderness for a thousand leagues in all directions.

Raudr Finnvulf knew the Wolfhold did not meet that expectation, not by a long way. A bleak fastness of crumbling stone and rusted steel locked to the side of a sullen mountain, it could not compare to the Fang's towering immensity.

Through frost-rimed armaglass he watched the frozen landscape flash below as Arngeir Halfrmund guided the Stormfang gunship fast and low over Arkhona's polar ice.

'Blue ice,' he said as the Iron Priest skimmed the glaciers and hugged the mist-shrouded peaks at the top of the world. 'This land has deep roots.'

'Not like Fenris,' said Arngeir, flexing the metal of his augmetic right hand on the controls. 'Where the ice will crush continents and swallow entire tribes in a single night.'

Raudr nodded. 'Aye, this land knows permanence.'

'You have been here before, Wolf Priest?'

'Once,' said Raudr, his mood darkening and his gauntlet tightening on the leather-wound haft of his skull-topped maul. 'A century ago. It is a red memory, but not a good one.'

'The Curse?'

'Aye, Arngeir Halfrmund,' said Raudr, pulling the lacquered leather mask down over his melancholy features. 'But do not ask me of those who fell to it. Some tales grow more painful with every retelling.'

'As you wish,' said Arngeir, 'but tell me one thing.'

'What?'

‘If this world brings out the Curse, why do we return?’

‘Because Leman Russ swore we always would,’ said Raudr.

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Gunnvardr Svartraska and his wolves were waiting as Raudr and Arngeir disembarked onto a frosted platform in the lee of the Wolfhold’s main bastion. Almost twice the height of the Wolf Guard, Gunnvardr’s Dreadnought chassis was frost blue and gunmetal grey. One arm was a four-bladed fist, the other a perforated, heat-blued multi-melta.

The thick, dappled-black hide of a thunderwolf slain and skinned by Gunnvardr in his youth, draped his claw arm, and the bronze knotwork adorning his scarred, dented sarcophagus was the work of a master artificer. Both his attendant wolves were frost white, with eyes of palest blue and skulls half-encased in cybernetics. Their steel jacketed fangs were bared, and their hackles were raised.

‘Welcome back to the Wolfhold, Brother Finnvulf,’ said Gunnvardr. ‘My brother yet slumbers below, but he will wake when he hears of your arrival.’

‘Your Aett brothers are glad to see you,’ answered Raudr.

‘Your wolves seem less sure of that welcome,’ said Arngeir.

‘Ach, ignore them, Iron Priest,’ said Gunnvardr. ‘This world brings out the Blood Claw in us all.’

The dreadnought turned back to Raudr. ‘Tell me, Wolf Priest, have you brought untempered flesh in need of this old warrior’s guidance?’

‘I have,’ said Raudr, as eight swaggering Blood Claws in gleaming battle plate marched from the Stormfang’s belly. ‘An ill-tempered pack sorely in need of beating into shape.’

Gunnvardr’s fist clenched and his augmitters crackled with laughter that cut through Raudr like a winter’s wind.

‘Then they have come to the right place.’

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Solvor Guthrikr’s fist cracked hard into Styrkar Skammlaus’s cheek, sending him crashing into the rock of the cliff. The furious Blood Claw stepped in for a second strike, but there was no need. Skammlaus wasn’t going to be getting up in a hurry.

‘By the Allfather, I think you killed him!’ said Trygg Vishalfr, bending to the fallen youth.

Arngeir Halfmund pushed the kneeling Blood Claw away and took the unconscious Styrkar’s chin in his augmented fist.

‘He’s alive,’ said the Iron Priest, ‘but I’ve half a mind to kill him anyway for going down so easily.’

‘Solvor hits hard,’ said Vikar Snaerhundr, the only one of their number not to be wearing his helm. The intense cold of the high peaks seemed not to bother the youth; a side-effect of the Canis Helix suspected Raudr, one that rendered him all but immune to extremes of temperature.

What other side-effects might he have?

Three weeks of intense training in the mountains and tempers had been fraying with every passing moment. Heated words were traded every hour, and Raudr was only surprised it had taken the pack this long to turn on one another.

This world does not want us here.

The very air was anathema, stoking discord and unrest in their souls. Even Raudr felt it, his legendary patience fraying at the Blood Claws’ lack of discipline. Arkhona was not a world suited to the temperament of Wolves.

On more than one occasion he'd had to hold his temper and fist in check. Memories of half-heard tales whispered around low-burning fires kept him from lashing out; tales of Aett brothers who had been on Arkhona too long and the bloodshed they had unleashed.

Every day spent on this planet made them more susceptible to the curse woven into the very fabric of their gene-sire's legacy.

Trygg said, 'At Solvor's naming, the skjald's sang how he bore every block of masonry in his father's hearth-hall upon his back.'

Raudr remembered that tale, and looking at Solvor's powerful form, he could well believe it. The battle-hunger was ebbing from the young warrior, and he shook off his earlier fury.

'A blow like that and he'll be as ugly as Ljotr,' said Trygg, the bastard son of an Ascomani chieftain, a lanky youth who'd been forced to fight tooth and nail for every scrap of food from his father's table.

Ljotr Hookbeard's face was obscured by his helm, but Radur knew Trygg's comment wasn't far from the mark. A brawler with a fiery temper, Ljotr had taken more than his fair share of blows over the years and was notoriously ugly.

'None are as ugly as me,' said Ljotr, fiercely proud of his battle-scars and battered features.

Styrkar Skammlaus groaned and pushed himself up onto his elbows. He rubbed a hand over his jaw and blinked away the aftereffects of Solvor's blow.

'Did Brother Gunnvardr hit me?' he said.

'No,' said Solvor Guthrikr, offering his hand. 'I did.'

'Why?'

'I...I don't remember,' said Solvor.

'Strange,' replied Styrkar. 'Neither do I.'

'Blood Claws,' said Arngeir Halfmund. 'Only they would start a fight and forget why.'

More than ever, Raudr wanted to be done with this world. Whatever buried hate was making them turn on one another was growing stronger, and it was only a matter of time until one of them drew real blood. Before he could answer Arngeir, his helm vox chimed with an incoming transmission.

‘Brother Gunnvardr?’ said Radur. ‘Is something amiss?’

‘Aye, Wolf Priest, something’s amiss,’ said Gunnvardr, his booming, augmented voice undiminished over the vox. ‘Get your squabbling whelps back to the Stormfang.’

‘Our training mission is incomplete,’ said Raudr.

‘Their training is over,’ said the dreadnought. ‘We have an enemy to slay.’

‘What enemy?’

‘Orks,’ spat the dreadnought.

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The refinery was on fire. Raudr had smelled the burning promethium from fifty kilometres out. Not long after, he’d smelled the orks. Even a burning refinery couldn’t mask the unclean smell of the greenskins.

Five kilometres out he saw the smoke and the ember undersides of chem-stained clouds as they roiled over the Imperial facility. A minute later, they were circling the burning complex; tangled, asymmetrical congeries of steel pipes, towers and silos, spherical reactors and blocky, Mechanicus-stamped forge temples.

A raging battle between the greenskins and a host of mortal soldiers was being fought amid the flames. Thousands of orks were on the rampage, wreaking bloody havoc on the ArkhonianPDF and in-situ skitarii defending the site.

‘They’re losing,’ said Arngeir, launching the gunship’s stormstrike missiles into the host with uncanny precision. Explosions pounded through the orks, leaving the structures to either side untouched by the blasts.

‘Fine strikes,’ said Raudr.

The Iron Priest’s agumetic hand clenched to a fist as he watched the orks burn. ‘It’s not enough, the greenskins are too numerous.’

Raudr had already reached that conclusion. The ork forces numbered in the thousands; howling warriors, stomping war machines and wildly careening vehicles.

‘A rabble of a host,’ sneered Ljotr Hookbeard.

‘So it appears to the untutored eye of youth,’ said Raudr, ‘but I have fought the greenskins more than any warrior here, and you are mistaken. This horde has a master, and without him, the rest will fall to disorder.’

‘So we find this master and slay him!’ roared Vikar Snaerhundr, grasping the hilt of his chainsword.

‘Aye, that we will,’ promised Raudr.

‘Then we’ll need to hurry,’ said Arngeir Halfrmund, angling the Stormfang’s prow towards the refinery. The aircraft’s frame shuddered as the Iron Priest unleashed a storm of mass-reactive shells from the heavy bolters.

‘Bones of Russ!’ said Raudr, seeing what Arngeir had seen.

A towering warlord at the forefront of the horde; monstrously powerful and scaffolded in a smoke-belching frame of mechanised armour that encased its enormous body. Easily the biggest ork Raudr had ever seen. It bore a roaring cleaver blade on one arm and thundering cannon upon the other.

And crashing through the horde towards the warlord were two frost-white wolves and a howling dreadnought.

‘Take us down, Arngeir!’ ordered Raudr. ‘Take us down now!’

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The stormstrikes had created a landing zone, and salvos of heavy bolter fire tore up any ork weapon-teams looking to bring the gunship down in its terminal manoeuvre. Howling packs of orks rushed the descending gunship, blasting wild shots from their junk-guns. Impacts spanked the hull like a Fenrisian shard storm, but the armour was proof against such primitive weapons.

The Stormfang came in low and hard, throwing up icy vortices as Arngeir Halfrmund held it two metres off the ground and brought his most potent weapon to bear.

The Helfrost destructor was a weapon the Iron Priests spoke of in fearful whispers. They claimed it drew its power from the darkest recesses of the Underverse, a frozen, hollow place even the Machine God of Mars feared.

An anguished wail built in the belly of the gunship, a tormented shriek torn straight from hel's maw. The armaglass plates of the cockpit misted with a mechanised intake of frozen breath.

'From hel's heart I stab at thee!' he said.

A streaming howl of freezing energy roared from the gunship's prow in a blue-white fist of cryo-energy. As cold as the breath of an ice drake from the permafrost glaciers, as merciless as the blizzards of Asaheim, it plummeted the region of the blast to sub-zero temperatures in an instant.

Those orks that weren't instantly encased in ice were flash frozen beyond even their fearsome metabolism's ability to survive. Thermal shock ruptured flesh and iron with equal ease and roaring vehicles shattered like dirty glass.

'Lead them out, Raudr Finnvulf!' he yelled. 'For Russ and the Allfather!'

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Raudr dropped from the gunship, hunkered low and with his skull-topped maul held in both hands. The Blood Claws dropped with him, blades bared and howling like newborn *hrosshvalur*.

'Hold to me!' ordered Raudr, ducking out from under the Stormfang and racing along its length with the Blood Claws flanking him.

Roiling blasts of toxin-laden mushroom clouds illuminated the cold mist wreathing the gunship, and the ground shook with nearby detonations. Raudr smelled reeking propellant and crude, fungal explosives. He heard muffled war shouts and the rallying sound of Imperial horns.

Shapes moved in the freezing fog surrounding the gunship. Raudr put them down with snap-fired blasts of his fetish-hung plasma pistol. The blue-hot bolts left voids in the mist, and Raudr saw hulking, iron-bulked monsters with flaming grates in their bellies.

Anything that could live through a helfrost blast was a threat to be taken seriously.

He rounded the hovering prow of the Stormfang, the bronze carvings and intakes hung with daggered shards of ice. Even through his runic armour, Raudr felt the cold of the Underverse and heard lingering echoes of hel's spiteful laughter. Glittering idols of frozen greenskins stood arrayed like statuary lining a triumphal way, and the Blood Claws smashed them apart as they charged past.

'There!' shouted Raudr, hearing the thunderous sound of metal on metal and the howling of Fenrisian wolves.

The mists were thinning, burned away by the heat of the burning refinery, and more orks were closing on their position, drawn by the prospect of an epic brawl. Hundreds of braying greenskins were fighting to reach them, but the ice of the helstorm blast was working in the Space Wolves favour.

Born to the ice, Raudr and the Blood Claws were as surefooted as ever, where the orks slipped and tumbled over one another across the ice-slick ground. With Raudr at the tip of the wedge, the Space Wolves carved through the struggling aliens, shooting and hacking a path towards Gunnvardr Svartraska.

Raudr vaulted from the icy canyon gouged by the helfrost and the breath caught in his lungs at the sight before him; a sight that could have come straight from Skallagrimsson's legendary sagas.

Gunnvardr Svartraska fought the titanic warlord of the horde like Bodulfr the War-Wolf facing the one-armed monster, Sceadugenga. Surrounded by a host of bellowing greenskins, the towering dreadnought was more than matched in size by the ironclad warlord.

They hammered body blows against one another, each impact sounding like the beating of the mighty forge hammers in the depths of the Aett. Both of Gunnvardr's wolves were dead, one torn in two and discarded like butcher meat, the other riddled with explosive shells and shrapnel.

Gunnvardr's claw arm tore the greenskin's belly armour, sending torn, molten-edged shards of iron flying. In return, the ork's roaring blade carved through the dreadnought's sarcophagus in a plume of orange sparks.

'To the Old One!' ordered Raudr, but the Blood Claws were already in motion. They smashed into the greenskins with all the fury of a Thunderwolf charge. Roaring chainblades hacked greenskin flesh and close-range mass-reactives detonated within their repulsive alien bodies.

Raudr took the fight to the orks with his skull-topped maul, bludgeoning the aliens from his path with crushing impacts that split skulls and shattered their crude armour. He howled as though Russ himself fought at his side, exhorting the Blood Claws to heights of fury they had never known and never would again. He let the rage take him, like a berserker of old, as he killed the foe with no thought to his own defence. Scores died beneath the thunder of his maul, reduced to broken meat and bone.

His armour was slathered in gore to the waist, coated in the enemy's unclean, caustic blood. He heard the shouts of fighting men and women, the percussive vibrations of explosions and the howling roar of the orks. Rotary cannons blazed somewhere nearby and the snap of lasguns filled the air with fizzing bolts of crimson light.

Then he heard it.

A stricken howl, as pained and as bitter as though ripped from the twin throats of Morkai himself.

Raudr blinked away the red haze of slaughter, drawing a hot breath into his lungs as he saw something he never dreamed he might see.

Gunnvarðr Svartraska crashed to the ground, his claw arm ripped from its shoulder mount and one leg buckled to ruin. The monstrous greekskin warlord stood triumphant with one enormous foot planted on the dreadnought's ash-stained body.

'No!' bellowed Raudr as the warlord's screaming cleaver finally punched through the sundered sarcophagus. A geysering spray of frothed pink amniotic fluids gushed from the wound, and Gunnvarðr Svartraska's thread was abruptly cut.

Raudr vaulted from the back of a fallen greenskin, swinging his maul like a felling axe at the warlord's iron-jawed head. His aim was true, his mind's eye already seeing the utter destruction of the his enemy's skull.

Its arc complete, the maul slammed home.

And shattered into fragments as a blazing green aura of energy exploded around the warlord. Raudr tasted blood and metal as he was hurled back by the blast. He slammed down hard and skidded over the ice, tumbling as he tasted the burned ruin of his flesh.

He spat blood, feeling heat gather within his chest as his genhanced body fought to reknit itself. His arm was broken into shards, and flashing runes on his visor told a grim tale of armour breaches and organ failure on a massive scale.

What in the name of Freki and Geri?

He looked up to see a hunched ork swathed in rags and bearing a bent copper staff. Bursts of green corposant flickered and writhed around the creature, and its manic grin was that of a lunatic zealot. Its staff burned hot with green fire, and it turned that abhorrent power on the Blood Claws.

Trygg Vishalfr vanished in a stream of coruscating psychic fire, his armour peeled back like cinders in a hurricane. His flesh melted an instant later, seared from his bones like melted wax. Ljotr Hookbeard followed him to the Allfather's side a second later, his body wreathed in emerald light and crushed as if by an invisible fist.

'*Maleficarum...*' hissed Raudr, struggling to regain his feet. One of his legs was broken, the other a burned shank of fused bone and seared flesh. Rough hands hauled him to his feet, and he saw Styrrkar Skammlaus and Vikar Snaerhundr either side of him.

‘I can stand, damn you!’ he barked.

They nodded and released him. The pain was immense, tearing at the barriers erected by his battle plate’s restorative systems. The sounds of battle swelled around him, a deafening cacophony of war that only greenskins could make; destruction for destruction’s sake, war for the sheer joy of the fight.

Raudr turned in a slow circle, seeing only an unbroken wall of bloodthirsty orks, barking a guttural sound over and over.

‘What is that?’ said Styrkar. ‘A war-chant?’

Years of fighting the greenskins had given Raudr a rudimentary understanding of their grunting language and he shook his head.

‘No. It is their warlord’s name,’ he said. ‘The nearest translation is...*Skarblitz*.’

Vikar spat on the ground, helmetless once again.

‘What happened to Solvor?’ he asked, hefting his chainsword and rolling his shoulders.

‘Dead,’ said Styrkar in disgust. ‘Defiled.’

The fury that had all but blinded Raudr earlier returned. He drew his plasma pistol as the warlord turned to face them, and looked into eyes that were the red of coals plucked from an Iron Father’s furnace. The creature still held Gunnvardr Svartraska’s claw arm, and over its shoulder were draped the disembowelled corpses of his frost-pelted wolves.

How could any warrior stand against such a foe and live?

Raudr shook off such unworthy thoughts.

This would be a death any warrior ought to relish. A good death would earn a warrior a place at the Allfather’s side when Leman Russ returned for the Wolf Time.

Such an ending was to be sought.

His helm-vox spat static.

'Brother Raudr!' called Arngeir Halfrmund aboard the Stormwolf. *'Hold firm, I am coming about for an extraction.'*

'Do not,' replied Raudr.

'I can—'

'No,' repeated Raudr. 'For we are already dead and I will not see your thread cut with ours.'

'I will not abandon you!'

'You must. Fly to the Wolfhold,' said Raudr. 'Wake Gunnvardr Svartraska's brother then bear word of what has happened here to Fenris.'

'I cannot leave...'

'Do as I order, Arngeir Halfrmund!' yelled Raudr, as the greenskin warlord raised Gunnvardr's splintered dreadnought arm to the sky and loosed an earth-shaking bellow of primal rage.

'Return to Arkhona with our brothers,' said Raudr, taking aim at the warlord as the mass of greenskins charged with their master's name bellowing from every tusked jaw.

'Return and avenge us...'