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DEFENDER OF HONOUR

*A short story by Cavan Scott*



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**Cavan Scott**

The smell of blood was all it took.

Turin Strongheart was back on the battlefield, ears ringing from the explosion. The blast had sent him crashing into the burned-out husk of a Whirlwind tank. He'd slid into the mire, slick fingers wrestling with his twisted helm. With a cry of frustration he ripped the now useless lump of ceramite from his head, throwing it aside.

Brother Ironblade had been in front of him, running full pelt at the ork lines, when his body had been enveloped in a brilliant flash of light. The damned greenskins had buried mines in the very ground they were walking upon themselves. Suicidal xenos wretches. Ironblade's body took the brunt of the explosion, shielding Strongheart. Another brother was fallen.

The Space Wolf reached up, grabbing hold of the side of the Whirlwind and hauling himself back to his feet, the sounds of the battle rising to a crescendo. Screams, bolter fire, the roar of demolisher cannons, merging together, flattened out into one cacophonous note. Strongheart scanned the ground for his bolter. Where had it fallen? He would not end up like Ironblade. He would not die a worthless death.

Something glinted in the mud before him, illuminated by the sudden flash of a frag grenade. There it was, sinking steadily in the bog. Strongheart was pushing himself away from the Whirlwind when he was hit in the chest with the force of a pile driver.

The impact sent him spinning away from his bolter. Strongheart crashed to the ground, tumbling over and over, praying that he wouldn't trigger another of the hidden mines. When he finally came to rest, the monstrosity that had fired the weapon at him was filling his vision, a mass of wires and crudely implanted robotic appendages. The ork charged, steam billowing from every cybernetic joint, bile streaming from a maw crammed with far too many metal teeth.

Without a weapon, Strongheart dropped down and put his shoulder into the beast's plated chest. He would use the brute's momentum against itself.

At least that was the plan. It was like hitting a Rhino. Strongheart's feet slipped back in the wet mud and he tumbled forward, throwing out an arm to avoid plunging face-down in the muck. Before he could recover, the ork was upon him, metallic claws attempting to prise the armour from his back. His left cheek exploded in pain as barbed steel met exposed flesh. Try as he might, he couldn't get a purchase, couldn't shove the fiend from him. The attack was animalistic, frenzied. Overpowering.

This couldn't be the end. Not here. Not like this.

'Brother?'

Strongheart blinked and snapped back to the here and now. The heat of the battle was instantly replaced by biting cold, a sickening smell of copper and rust filling his nostrils.

'Brother Strongheart?'

He looked up into the grizzled face before him. The features were heavily scarred, and the eyes that glared out from beneath a strong brow intense. A face that every member of the Space Wolves knew, a face that was carved into their very hearts. As much the reason they fought as their devotion to the All-Father.

Logan Grimnar, the Great Wolf.

'I am sorry, Fangfather,' Strongheart said, crouched on his haunches. 'I was distracted.'

'You were thinking of battle,' Grimnar growled, his voice like a pack of Fenrisian wolves, the very same creatures that were emblazoned on their heavy pauldrons. 'I could see it in your eyes.'

'The battle of Mactalas,' Strongheart acknowledged, shifting uncomfortably beneath the Great Wolf's steady gaze.

Grimnar nodded, snow tumbling from his long, greying beard.

'Understandable. We lost many that day, but we took more in Russ's name. A hundred orks for every brother who lost his life.'

'Victory, Jarl.'

'Victory,' Grimnar repeated, quieter than before, his keen eyes now resting on the large, metal fang that hung around Strongheart's neck. His trophy.

*The breath of the ork on his face. The beast bearing down on him, crushing him. Scrabbling in the mud for his gun, feeling its grip in his hand.*

'So, brother,' Grimnar prompted, 'the carcass...'

Strongheart glanced at the body he was crouched beside, the spilled guts of the great white bear steaming in the sub-zero temperatures. The smell was overwhelming. Rust and copper. A stink Strongheart had smelled a hundred, if not a thousand, times before.

‘A fresh kill.’

‘But not fresh enough. The killer’s tracks have been covered.’

Strongheart nodded. The snow was coming down hard, hissing against the heat of their power armour. Winter in Asaheim. Fenris at her most brutal.

‘But we know what slew the beast?’

At any other time, Strongheart would have smiled at the question. As if Grimnar didn’t know the answer. He was the greatest hunter the Space Wolves had ever produced, save Russ himself. A test then.

‘The bones here are broken, but these...’ Strongheart indicated the bloodstained ribs jutting from the bear’s open torso.

‘Melted,’ Grimnar rumbled, flexing his fingers against the Axe Morkai, his legendary weapon, ‘as if by acid.’

‘The blood of a snow troll. It must have been injured in the fight.’

‘And is no doubt licking its wounds as we speak.’

Grimnar threw his head back and took a deep breath through his hooked nose, the bones beaded into his mane clattered together. ‘We have its scent,’ the venerable Space Wolf stated flatly, looking up at the mountain that rose into low cloud, ‘and soon shall have our prize.’

‘A good hunt,’ Strongheart acknowledged, rising to his feet.

Had his voice just wavered? He couldn’t be sure. The Great Wolf turned to face him, ancient eyes narrowing.

‘A good hunt,’ the Jarl repeated, before his face split into a grin, long canines flashing. Laughing, Grimnar slapped Strongheart’s arm with a blow that would have shattered a human’s arm. ‘Worthy of a hero, eh, Strongheart? Come, let us finish this.’

The two Space Marines started towards the foot of the mountain.

It had happened at the feast. By the time the company had returned to Fenris, preparations for the customary celebrations were already underway. Yes, they had lost many taking the city of Mactalas back from the orks, but they had been triumphant. The cost had been high, but the enemy had been vanquished.

It was always the same. Grimnar decreed that the fallen would be honoured, not with bowed heads and mournful hymns, but meat and ale and hearty songs.

They had died warriors. Heroes forevermore. Their names would be remembered.

Strongheart had been a hero too, albeit one of the living, breathing variety. The story of his victory had spread, how he had slain the berserker ork that had tried to kill him, a brute twice the size of a Space Marine. His brothers gathered around, eager to see the metal fang that hung from Strongheart's neck, to hear how he'd reached into the alien's filthy mouth and ripped it free with his bare hands.

And the stories had reached Jarl Grimnar's table. The Fangfather had appeared in front of Strongheart, praising the Space Marine for his valour, inviting him on a hunting expedition. Just the two of them. Strongheart had seen the envy in his brothers' eyes. Unworthy of them. Unworthy of the Chapter.

Not that he could see anything now. The blizzard had hit as they'd started their ascent, clinging onto the side of the mountain. A complete whiteout.

'Jarl Grimnar,' Strongheart called, but there was no answer. The Fangfather had shouted, once, moments before and then there had been silence. Thoughts raced through Strongheart's mind. What if the Great Wolf had fallen? What if the mountain had succeeded where the enemies of the Imperium had failed for centuries? What if Grimnar was dead?

*The ork's eyes blazing with hatred. Its body crushing him. Unable to even breathe.*

Strongheart took a step forward, raising his hand as if he could somehow swat away the storm. Then the ground disappeared beneath him. He was falling, bouncing off rock and ice, down into *hel* itself.

The Space Wolf crashed into the ground, his power armour absorbing most of the impact. He blinked, his augmented eyes adjusting immediately to the gloom of the cavern, weak light spilling down from the crack he had fallen through, high above.

Had Grimnar suffered the same fate?

*The report of a bolt being fired. Something warm splattering over him, burning against his slashed cheek. The stench of violent death.*

Strongheart took a breath, tasting the scent that permeated the cave. A vile musk, mixed with excrement and blood. Near. Very near.

The growl from his left had Strongheart on his feet in an instant. He reached down for his chainsword, but his gloved hand found only rock. It could have fallen anywhere as he had tumbled into the cave. Left with his fists then. That would be enough.

Movement from behind. Strongheart turned, but a moment too late. A massive paw caught him in the face, scythe-like claws gouging out his right eye, opening his cheek, finishing what the ork started.

*Like steel through flesh.*

The force of the blow sent Strongheart spinning, and he felt something crack in his spine as his massive body twisted.

Then he was falling back, the weight of his armour dragging him down. The back of his head cracked painfully against a boulder. Above him the snow troll blared, lips drawn back to reveal monumental teeth, its coarse fur the colour of Strongheart's own power armour, stained red by the blood that flowed from deep gashes in its side and arms. The bear had fought well. Better than he.

A roar filled the cave, not from the snow troll but from behind the monster. As Strongheart recoiled, the giant turned, but not fast enough. One minute it was whole, a mountain of rage, muscle and hair, and the next its head had split down the middle, blood gushing like a fountain.

Grimnar drove Morkai down, cleaving deep into the snow troll's chest, the two sides of its body peeling away to frame the imposing bulk of the Great Wolf, magnificent in a haze of blood.

And then the corpse was crashing to the ground, Grimnar stepping over the twitching body, Morkai swinging back into the air, ready to bite for a second time.

The prone Space Wolf raised a hand, a futile defence against the legendary frost blades. The Fangfather bellowed, bringing the axe down where it bedded into the boulder behind Strongheart with a sound like thunder. Strongheart's shout of alarm caught in a throat thick with blood. He just stared, with his one remaining eye, up into a face twisted into a mask of pure disgust.

'What was his name?' Grimnar's voice was calm and measured and all the more dreadful because of it. Only his eyes betrayed the fury that boiled in his chest. 'Tell me you know his name.'

Strongheart choked, desperately trying to speak. 'Jarl, I...'

'Tell me!'

He shook his head, waves of pain accompanying the gesture. 'I don't know who you mean.'

Grimnar bent over the Space Wolf, leaning heavily on Morkai, eyes like blazing coals. 'I was there,' he snarled, 'when the ork attacked. I saw you fight. I saw you fall.'

'My lord...'

‘I was too far away to offer assistance, had my own battles to win, but saw him rush forward, emptying his pistol into the beast. The Blood Claw who saved your miserable hide.’

All at once, Strongheart could see the new recruit’s face. The pale skin free of scars, the shock of red hair. Unseeing eyes, staring up into the rain.

‘And that’s not all I saw that day, is it, Strongheart?’

The scene replayed in Strongheart’s mind. The confusion. The noise. The ork bucking in its death-throes, slashing out with those infernal claws, striking the Blood Claw across the throat, damn near severing his neck. Strongheart would never know if the bolt from the Blood Claw’s gun was the result of his hand spasming in death, or a last act of defiance.

Grimnar reached down, fingers curling around the metal tooth that rested on Strongheart’s heaving chest.

‘What did you do?’ the Fangfather asked, his strong voice quiet. ‘Pulled your memento from the ork’s corpse as your brother lay dying beside you?’

Grimnar glanced down at the bisected carcass at his feet.

‘Will you claim this kill as well?’

Bubbles of blood burst on Strongheart’s lips as his mouth worked silently. Grimnar didn’t wait for an answer. He drew himself up, the chain snapping around Strongheart’s neck.

‘I will seek out the name of the Blood Claw,’ he promised, holding the tooth in his hand, ‘and hang this trophy in the Great Hall in his memory. Those who praised you will know the truth. They will know how *worthy* you are. And you will face them, Turin Strongheart. You shall face them, when you return from this place.’

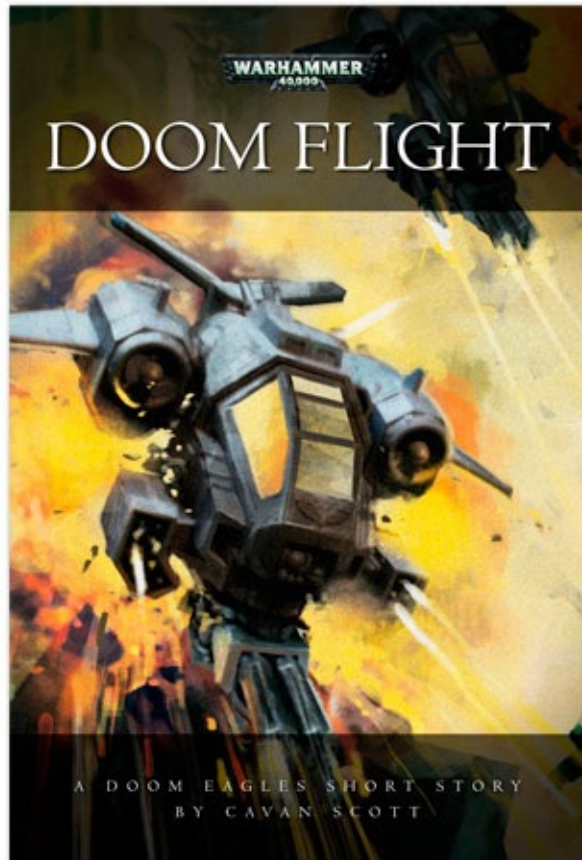
‘My lord,’ Strongheart managed finally. ‘It was one battle, one mistake. I—’

Shards of rock stung Strongheart’s cheek as Grimnar pulled Morkai free, cutting his excuses dead. Without another word, the Fangfather turned and strode from the cave, the expression etched into his face far worse than any rebuke. Strongheart listened to his heavy footsteps fade, snow drifting down steadily from the fissure high above.

Covering their tracks.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

CAVAN SCOTT's writing for Black Library includes the short stories 'Doom Flight' and 'Trophies', with lots more on the way. He has written novels, audio dramas, short stories and comics based on many popular series. He lives and works in Bristol.



In the skies above Quadcana Prime, Doom Eagles Sergeant Kerikus pilots his Stormtalon gunship, the Wrath of Aquila, against the haphazard Dakkajets of the orks.

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