

# BLOOD BOWL

A detailed illustration of a warrior from the Blood Bowl universe. The warrior is depicted from the chest up, wearing intricate, dark armor with numerous spikes and plates. The helmet is particularly prominent, featuring a large, curved spike on the left side and a visor with a jagged, tooth-like appearance. The warrior's face is partially visible through the visor, showing a grimacing mouth with sharp teeth. The background is a dark, textured grey, with several bright red splatters scattered across it, suggesting blood. The overall style is gritty and detailed, characteristic of the Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay art.

## A LAST SNIFF OF GLORY

DAVID GUYMER

# BLOOD BOWL

The illustration depicts a Blood Bowl player, likely a Dwarf, in a dark, metallic, and spiked armor. The player's face is partially obscured by a helmet with a visor, and their mouth is open, showing sharp teeth. The player is shown in a dynamic, forward-leaning pose. The background is a dark, textured grey. At the bottom of the image, there is a large, irregular red splatter that serves as a background for the title and author's name.

## A LAST SNIFF OF GLORY

DAVID GUYMER

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# A LAST SNIFF OF GLORY

*David Guymer*

*He stared, unblinking, at the silhouette on the other side of the candle flame. The air curdled with tension, marrow spilt too long ago from the bone. The candle flickered. He wondered what it was for: it stung his eyes, tickled his nose, and they could all see perfectly well in the dark without. Fur and rags rustled edgily on the bench beside him. Someone in the gloomy undercroft coughed.*

*‘Would you like me to repeat the question?’*

*Shadows licked at his clawed muzzle as Rurrk glared into the untidy flame.*

His trainer, Kato, squeaked in alarm.

The rat was padded throat to ankles in a cracked leather suit, arms and legs stiffened to either side, a piebald scruff of head and a twitch of tail sticking out from either end. He scrunched his eyes tight as Rurrk’s broad shoulder took him through his belly padding. Air fled clenched fangs in a foetid mewl, and his footpaws squirmed at the end of their pipe-like leg padding as they were snatched from the ground. By the time Rurrk had grunted off him and stuck a cleated kneepad into his throat Kato was squealing with fright.

‘Done-done!’ Kato squeaked, trying to clap a paw on the dirt and managing instead a maggot wriggle of his tackle suit. ‘Good-good. Very good. Time out. Enough practice for now, I think.’

Groggily, Rurrk released his grip on his knuckles. The cloying scents of dirt and droppings and fur moult panted in and out of his mouth. His lungs were still paying out on the debts they owed, and for a moment he'd been confused about who it was beneath him. Kato's supine muzzle swam in and out of focus and he lowered his fist, his knee issuing a protesting 'pop' as he released the pressure on Kato's throat and stood.

Kato struggled to get up too, but could not.

The temptation to kick a rat when it was down was difficult to resist, but Clan Moulder trainers didn't exactly grow out of the ground. By some miracle of better judgement he withheld even a correctional shot across the kidneys, and bent to haul Kato up by the collar.

While the clanrat squirmed out of his armour, Rurrk leant against the claw-cut wall of the practice field cavern system to wheeze, pretending to watch the other vermin train.

They were whelps mostly, practising scrimmage line-ups and tossing around under-inflated balls that had been filched (judging by the faded logos) from the training fields of Karak Izor and Miragliano. A black-furred Clan Rictus bully with a lumpen cudgel and a vest of rusty chainmail stood guard at the tunnel mouth. A plank of mouldering wood had been hammered into the wall behind him and scratched with the words:

*Skavenblight Scramblers training field – no ball games.  
Trespassers will be eaten.*

Some rats thought just anyone could be a Blood Bowl player.

Rubbing the old lump at the back of his skull, Rurrk recalled how it was that he had first come to the attention of the Scramblers' then head coach. The plague priest had given him a nasty crack, but he remembered taking three of his novices down first. He'd learned sometime afterwards that the team's apothecary had needed to cut the fourth in half to get him out from under Rurrk's arm before they could fix his head. The lump of bone sticking through the fur of his head was just another memento. Nothing that a pasting of skalm hadn't fixed at the time, but it ached like bathwater whenever he had to play above ground.

An intrusion by the present made him grimace, and he twisted some of

the stiffness from his wrist, elbow and shoulder.

He could have sworn it had hurt less back then.

‘You in good-good shape,’ Kato chittered, despite the evidence, hyperactive claws making a meal of unfastening the strapping of his vambrace. ‘You improve, yes-yes. Muscles good for their age-years. My regimen good, I think, yes. Yes, I think it is.’

Rurrk grunted.

‘You keep to my exercises?’ Kato asked, then brushed the vambrace off his arm and skipped around the strewn pads as though he had won and they had lost.

‘Every day.’

‘And the diet?’

He reached for his gut with a wince.

‘Good-good. Need every edge can get-steal, I think. Yes? Not so young as used to be. No. Stop playing with arm. Joint pains are side-effect, give-give.’

Kato’s expert claws kneaded the ache from Rurrk’s bicep before moving on to the joints. Rurrk’s eyelids flickered in pleasure. ‘Litter-brother of mine has slave who once had master who mucks out spawn cages for Hell Pit Harridans. He squeak-slips to slave that Princedom of Pain razed three Kislevite villages during off-season. Then had fun-way with dead-things after.’

Rurrk snarled. ‘Kislev village-places get razed all time. They not even trying any more.’

Kato frowned at him, claws working. ‘Ear to the ground, master. Squeak-talk of Underway is that the Inviolate Prince stronger than ever. Not too late to back out-down.’

‘Seven years too late.’

‘You squeak-talk yet to Razzel?’

Rurrk sniffed. ‘Course I have,’ he lied.

*His eyes adapted to the wavering light. It became a slow sting around the eyes, a rim of golden-red that lanced the corners of the undercroft. His attention wandered. The smell of human fear permeated the stonework. Sweat and blood. Rust from ancient chains. From some distantly connected corridor there was a clink, as of iron on stone, and a whimper.*

*'You are held as one of the modern legends of skaven Blood Bowl. How hard has it been to make way for younger blood this season?' The word 'modern' was uttered with some spite, 'blood' as if it needed the tongue wrapped fully round it in order to encapsulate it.*

*Rurk drew his attention back from the architecture.*

*The eyes that stared back were red as his own, but cold, set like ice, while his flickered like a fly over frozen meat. The patrician figure was draped in a long black coat, the brassy glint of a CabalVision pin on his high collar.*

*'You must have been surprised to find your name on the roster for this match.'*

Grey Seer Razzel sat in the high, cushioned chair of his palanquin, borne on the backs of eight wiry skavenslaves to wheresoever whimsy dictated that the Horned Rat would, at any given moment, bestow his tactical acumen upon this willing servant. At this moment, that position was halfway up one of the decrepit spires of Skavenblight's Blood Bowl Quarter.

The Grey Seer peered near-sightedly through a crumbled window that overlooked a courtyard. The squeaks of drilling players and the sounds of balls being tossed and caught echoed up the mossy stonework. Razzel had been appointed to his current position off the back of some debacle or other, the installation of a new head coach to skavendom's most famous (and varyingly successful) Blood Bowl team being generally considered cheaper than assassination.

*'You never care about playing before now. What changes, hmmm?'*

For half a skaven heartbeat, Rurk managed to meet Razzel's gaze. The Grey Seer's black eyes shimmered like magic mirrors in the weak second-hand sorceries of the Clan Skyre foundries. The breeze caused the charms that bedecked his horns to tinkle. Rurk quickly looked away, his eyes feeling as though they had been removed, turned over a warpstone brazier and then carefully returned. With great relief, he found a safe place for them in the window behind the Grey Seer's back.

Age had gnawed it down so completely that, perversely, fissures of the original white stone had become visible where time's teeth had eaten through the grime. The decorative friezes that surrounded it had in most

part already fallen away. Rurrk gave the carpet of rubble a distracted stir with his footpaw, black and grey hair drizzling from his thigh as he did so. Some of the frame's carvings were still visible, effective-looking teams of man and dwarf wearing kits that looked like archaic versions of modern Tilean squads. This had been a place of Blood Bowl, even in the distant whenever when the credulous would have it that the ancestors of men and dwarfs had had the run of Skavenblight's warrens. For some reason that was comforting. He could almost feel the spirits of past glories snarling supportively from over his shoulder.

From the window came the shrill note of a coach's whistle, the skitter of rearranging footpaws.

Could Razzel really not know why this mattered?

'I can still play. I fit-ready.'

'I let you play season opener, did I not, hmmm? Against Mootland Raiders? Did the Horned Rat not show great faith in mighty Rurrk?'

Rurrk glowered. Always he had to dig that up. 'You want-need big rat like me against the Inviolate.'

'I want-need the young Red Claw Rurrk. This one can't run. His knees like maggoty cheeses. He out of breath just from come-climb up here.'

Rurrk self-consciously puffed out his chest as Razzel burrowed under a cushion. The next thing he knew, something that felt like a nut had plinked off his forehead. He snarled at the air in surprise.

'And his eyes!' Razzel threw up his paws in despair, and addressed his next words to the horned idol atop his staff. 'Who want-need Blood Bowl player than cannot run-scurry and cannot catch, hmmm?'

Rurrk's tail lashed as if from its own irritation. His fists clenched in imaginary gauntlets behind his back, the feel of metal on fur on skin so familiar that he felt it even when his paws were bare or the morning numbness made them tingle.

'Red Claw never run. He never catch. Put me on scrimmage line and you not want me move. I train hard. I...'

He patted his chest with one clenched fist, tongue fumbling with words his heart did not know how to convey. Like this tower, age had caught up with him. He had felt for a while that he had been on the way out, but the Raiders game had been the moment when everyone else had realised he was no longer the player he had used to be. He should have retired then,

when he still had the chance.

But then he'd seen the teams entered into this season's Eight Point Star Cup

And he'd come to a different decision.

In a part of his mind it would always be Erengard: it was wintry, his muscles shivered with fitness and youth, the scent of wet astrogranite excited his nose with his first sniff of glory. And on the other side of the painted line... He closed his eyes as if to clothe himself in the fur of his younger self... Prince Amaranth the Inviolate, star player of the Princedom of Pain, never in his three-hundred-year career on the losing side of a Blood Bowl match.

Until that day.

'I... feel it. I still Red Claw Rurrk.'

'Pah!'

A chorus of panicked squeals sprang up from the courtyard. It appeared that there was still a kink or two in the new 'poisoned wind' ball for the team's warlock engineers to work through.

'Semi-final of Eight Point Star is biggest-big match of my glorious leadership.' And an unexpected opportunity to grab one more year's breath, Rurrk thought. 'And you expect great Razzel to tinker with the Horned One's winning formula because Rurrk say he *think* he no longer rubbish-meat? No-no!' The Grey Seer shook his head, setting off a discord of clanging charms.

Rurrk looked through the window as scattering claws cleared the yard below.

Smog clotted the breaks between towers and rat-runs, crumbling stonework held together by bits of wood and the prayers of rats like a teetering mountain of cards. He stared dimly through the sporadic flash of warp lightning, his mind an unobtrusive blank, while the Grey Seer prattled on about providence and favour.

'... paid right bribes in right paws to speak-squeak to Headsplitter's handler-rats about two-match contract. Expensive. But worth it when I win.' He snickered, gazing into the idolatrous carving on his staff as though he looked admiringly on his own reflection. 'Let rat-ogre take-handle Prince Amaranth. I see it already. The stadium chant-sings my name. It will be feted in every corner of skavendom. Razzel and the Great

Horned Rat! Yes-yes, the Great One loves this plan of mine.’ He turned back to Rurrk as if just then remembering he was not alone. ‘Whole pawful of stormvermin before need call Old-Meat Red Claw.’

He covered his mouth with the paw that he already had held up to demonstrate the many rats in his mighty paw, and tittered at his cleverness. ‘He of the all-smelling nose loves this plan too much to let something befall them *all* in two weeks.’

*‘I covered your debut game in Erengard for CabalVision and I was impressed. But that was nearly seven years ago, a lifetime for...’ The smile was predatory. ‘For your kind. With the success you have seen in your career, I wonder if you’ve given any thought to retirement? There is still an hour or two...’*

The Reeks was a squalid mire of permanently flooded warrens and a tangle of mouldering pontoons that hazarded into the forest of cattails and sawgrass that sucked on the borders of the Blighted Marshes. The local economy consisted of petty piracy directed against the punt-craft that took the marsh channels from the Tilean Sea to Skavenlight’s scrap-pushers, and stealing one another’s slaves. Even the agents of Clan Eshin moved in packs. The clanless rats that dwelt there were better than slaves only in name. Slaves, at least, got fed. Or in less denigrated parts of Skavenblight, they sometimes did. Here they were the food. It was a cesspool without bottom into which any rat without eyes or wits about him might slip, and from which attempts at escape only put more slime on increasingly despairing claws.

It had been a choice that had put Rurrk here.

The entrance to his burrow was high enough above the swamp to be dry at least some of the time, rain kept out by a curtain of marshweed for which he had traded an old shoulder pad scratch-marked by Hakflem Skuttlespike. The four malnourished heavies he had paid to guard his things put away their fangs when they saw it was him. He dropped a quarter-token into each rat’s paw, then brushed aside the waxy sheet and ducked into his burrow.

It was musky and dank, and he scuttled into the darkness by scent and familiarity alone. His back hunched, tension seeping out of his muscles as

he left the game of being a bigger, stronger rat than he was at the curtain.

A manskin bag had been left on the three-legged table he kept in the middle of the burrow. It was sealed with a string tie. Rurk hurried to it, a spring in his scurry that made his ankle click.

He undid the tie and a green light smeared the underside of his muzzle and printed the walls of his burrow with shadows without the prior courtesy of light. Saliva dripped from his jaws and onto the tabletop. A gut-ache of craving formed a knot there. He massaged it away and with a long out-breath he re-did the tie.

The unlight went out.

Kato's supplier had good warpstone, but it wasn't cheap. Pushing his way back to the top had cost him everything. But it would be worth it. What else was there?

He clutched the bag to his breast and checked over his shoulder.

Satisfied that none of his guards had snuck in or listened too closely at the curtain, he scurried over to the naked firepit in the loamy muck by the burrow's back wall. Getting stiffly onto all fours, he clawed through ash, pausing once in a while to suck the cooking fat off a bone scrap, to dig up a metal vial with a screw lid.

With much less enthusiasm, he unscrewed the vial and sniffed inside.

Empty. Expected, but dispiriting all the same.

You could say this for skaven – they're optimists.

Stuffing the vial into the same paw with which he held the bag, he scurried towards another apparently random spot and began to dig. After a few minutes his claws struck wood. He cleared it, digging round the edges, until he looked down on a worm-eaten wood chest of the sort that might have been lifted from the wreck of a Sartosan galley. Taking a deep breath he dug his claws around the short sides and, bracing thighs and shoulders, hauled the thing out of the hole.

Brackish water gushed from its seals and from a hundred tiny wormholes as he brought it above the water table and squelched it onto the floor. Lowering himself onto crossed legs, he flipped the catch and creaked back the lid.

He paused for a moment, paw on the lid, staring down, as if caught by the sort of petrifying enchantment that would have saved him a warptoken a day on guards if he had been able to afford it.

The chest was filled with memories.

Trophies, medals, other mementos he had not yet traded or sold, all packed in with reverence and care. A tooth from the infamous squig thrower, Grubba Greenback, the red paint from Rurrk's gauntlet still on it. The deflated matchball from the famous 10-10 draw with the Har Ganeth Executioners. A scratching of astrogranite from that day in Erengard.

Nostalgia wrapped around his heart like a clinging mother.

Putting it to one side, he reached instead for another bag. It was depressingly flat, and gave a light clink as he lifted it out. He sniffed at it, and took another quick look over his shoulder.

The guards stamped their footpaws and complained about the damp in subdued squeaks. At least he wouldn't have to fork out on sentries for much longer.

He counted out twenty full warptokens. Almost everything he had left. Then he put the twenty into the vial, screwed the cap, and re-buried it in the firepit where he'd found it. He swept the ash back over it, stamped it in, and then scuffed it back up to look acceptably unintentional before scurrying back to the chest.

He was about to shut it again and drop it back in its hole when the nostalgic ache in his chest tightened, leading him instead to remove his paws from the lid and rummage inside. Reaching through the keepsakes, he drew out something large and heavy, but jointed in the middle so as to fit inside, and coarsely wrapped in burlap.

He held it in both paws as if weighing it up before deciding whether to open it.

Reverently, he unwrapped it.

There in his paws, bundled up like the meanest offspring of the union between rat and machine, was a wearable steel claw. It was three times the size of his own. The foreclaw in particular was long and terminated in a flared muzzle with a swollen knuckle of copper wires and rusted valves. Eldritch glyphs and technosorcerous symbols decorated the gauntlet, chief amongst them the emblem of Clan Skyre on the cuff and on the muzzle of the big talon.

He had been given the gauntlet when the name 'Red Claw' had been big enough to earn the sponsorship of one of the Greater Clans.

Not the Skavenblight Scramblers.

Him.

Above the gauntlet was a rickety scaffold of pulleys and rods custom-built for his arm. He slid the arm in with a soft squeak of pleasure, then wormed his claws into the control glove. He flexed his fingers, and made a fist. The old gauntlet emitted a plaintive squeal as mechanisms left to drown and choke on their own rust struggled to ape it. He chattered satisfaction nonetheless and looked to the bag of warpstone still held clutched to his breast, provoking a spasm of unnatural hunger.

Just one nibble now wouldn't hurt. There would still be more left for later.

He wiggled his fingers and the mechanical steam-claw cried for mercy. He could almost hear the crowds scream 'Red Claw' again.

*'Let's turn our attention to the match at hand.'*

*Rurrk licked his lips and grunted assent.*

*'The Eight Point Star is so beloved because it features only the eight most evil teams in Blood Bowl, as voted for by the fans. I confess to a little bias, but with the tournament finals right here in Drakenhof this year, the Drakenhof Templars are everyone's favourite to lift the trophy. Are you nervous about the prospect of facing them, or are you hoping that the Evil Gitz will do you a favour in tonight's other match?'*

*Rurrk stared blankly.*

*The interviewer shook his head, amused.*

*'Moving on then. Again. The talk outside the ground right now is all about your first head-to-head with Prince Amaranth since that famous night in Erengard. Your careers have taken very different trajectories since then. Can the fans really look forward to a re-match? Will you meet him head on as you did seven years ago?'*

*Razzel leaned forwards, blinking rapidly as the candle's flickering glow was turned towards him.*

*'Our plan-scheme for Prince Amaranth is between the Great Horned Rat and me.'*

Clanking in his armour, Rurrk huffed up the tunnel from the away team dugout. The silence that cheered him from the solitary wooden stand as he emerged into the night was as thin as the moonlight that draped it in

Mannslieb's home colours. Astrogranite crunched under his footpaws as he neared the sideline and took a sniff of the open space. The lump in his head ached.

With a week to go, Grey Seer Razzel had grudgingly paid out for a training session in what some local official had disingenuously described as a similar arena.

Rurk suspected that the stadium of the Waldenhof Pipers had never been anything but the runt of the Drakenhof litter, but even what there was had smelled better days. The seating in the wooden skeleton of a stand was long gone. The field was cracked and furry with flowering weeds. And Kato had gleefully reported something large living in the away arming chamber before venturing in with a grabber and a net.

Puffing out his cheeks, Rurk slugged the final few yards to the field.

He'd never been the quickest. There was even a joke about it.

'Who quicker, Red Claw Rurk or treeman? Depends, is treeman still sleeping?'

Now though, it was obscene. He was immense, put-on muscle squeezed into his old armour as though a warlock had stuck him with a needle and inflated him. Every step shot pain up his shins. It felt as if his legs would have given by now if not for the triple-winding of strapping holding in his knees.

A couple of stormvermin were warming up on the sideline with some light relays and they laughed, jogging on the spot, as he clunked towards them.

'Thirteen!' squeaked one, a three-season veteran called Bisk, and tittered in mock amazement. 'It move-moves!'

'Quiet. Do not be rude-bad.' His relay partner, Grist. 'Do you not see-smell? Great Red Claw is back.'

'You mean Rust Claw,' said Bisk and exploded with chattering laughter. Rurk made no reply as he clumped past, but did pause long enough to punch Bisk in the chest.

The stormvermin folded around his steam-claw with a pathetic mewling noise, then collapsed on the ground, whimpering with pain. Rurk would have trodden on him too if he could have lifted his knee so high, but could not, and so settled for crushing the other skaven's tail. You couldn't have everything.

Grist, meanwhile, wisely shut his muzzle and scampered for the safety of his teammates with his tail between his legs.

‘Starting places! Not have all night!’ Razzel waved his staff, tinkling like a wind chime. His white fur and puritan robes lit the Grey Seer like a brazier in the moonlight. He had been in a bad mood ever since Likkish and Skat had failed to turn up for the team’s sedan convoy from Skavenblight.

Rurk patted his gurgling belly.

Add to Kato’s many talents, he was a splendid cook.

Kato pointed excitedly to Bisk’s splayed figure from the decrepit little stand, a pocket of furry bodies comprising the team’s treasurers, cooks, engineers and assorted hangers-on. He mimed a ‘sleeping’ gesture, and then squeaked something encouraging that Rurk couldn’t wholly make out.

The players positioned themselves over the field to the squeaked instructions of the coaches. Both teams had been drawn from the Scramblers’ roster, with the team expected to line up against the Princedom of Pain in a week’s time facing off against the rest.

Rurk’s number was with ‘the rest’, which for today suited him perfectly.

Wheezing like a bellows with a hole in it, Rurk shoved a stormvermin with a sleek coat of black fur and shiny red-brown armour off his favoured spot right in the middle of the scrimmage line. He bared fangs then brandished his claw, and the whelp quickly found himself another place on the line. Ignoring the shrill appeals of his side’s coach, he turned round and passed his gaze along the opposing line-up.

They were all familiar faces. Household names even. Big stormvermin in spiked guards. Line-rats grizzled by white eyes and torn ears and more scars apiece than years between them. Their hunches were loose, confident.

At the end of the opposition flank was a brooding rat-ogre part-armoured in green plate bearing its owners’ emblems. Its rough hide was tattooed with further advertisements and covered with scorched cankers and sores. It glared stupidly at its handler as the skaven chattered at it, pointed at the terrified line-rats in front of it and occasionally emphasised a salient point with a slap across the snout.

A braver rat than Rurk.

It wasn't Headsplitter.

That was one more reason for Razzel's current searing temper. The legendary rat-ogre had, despite the near-magical disappearance of a fortune in bribes and agents' fees, been otherwise employed on the other side of the world in Lustria for some months. All of which meant that the Grey Seer could now add a difficult-to-explain hole in the team treasuries to his end-of-season summons before the Council of Thirteen. The last-minute find of a halfway like-for-like replacement in Manwrecker (what its sponsors had in mind touring the provincial Sylvanian leagues Rurrk didn't know and Razzel had been in no position to ask) had calmed the head coach down enough to squeal coherent instructions, but no more.

An assistant coach in black and white checked rags standing in as referee scurried back from the scrimmage line and blew his whistle.

Like a slave conditioned to his master's call, Rurrk's mind switched on.

The blinkers came down. The excited squeaks of the understaffers became a muted backdrop, the dull creak of a tunnel. The moon disappeared from view, a source of light, nothing else, as the world shrunk to a hundred and twenty tail-lengths by fifty-four and with him at its middle. He felt the kicker run up to the ball as he would an itch up his tail. The line-rat smacked his footpaw through it, the meat-slap clarion rang along Rurrk's whiskers, bypassed his brain, and scurried down his spine to his arm.

The stormvermin on the other side of the painted line was still watching for the kick-off when Rurrk's rusted claw smashed through his snout. With a squeal, the big rat went down, and with a dozen more shrill cries just like it the two scrimmage lines crashed together.

Skaven hissed and squealed. Claws scratched on metal. Tails clobbered heads and poked for eyes. Moonlight glinted on a previously concealed blade.

Even in 'friendlies', skaven weren't renowned for fair play.

From somewhere, the ecstatic squeak of the thrower. 'Long-long! Run-quick!'

A stormvermin with something to prove went down under the challenge of a heavier model with better armour, and short-sightedness be damned, Rurrk got a good look as the black-furred behemoth followed through and came at him.

The blitzing player cannoned off Rurrk's shoulder and rolled muzzle-over-tail back across the scrimmage line. With both a gape and a giggle making their own shapes of his muzzle, he watched the stormvermin's head disappear in a tuft of weeds. His iron claw whistled out greenish steam as his bulging bicep prematurely activated against the mechanism.

He could have hugged Kato!

The rat he had laid out during kick-off issued a groan and scratched meekly at Rurrk's greaves. He stamped on the stormvermin's helmet, crushing it like a stage prop. Blood and brain juices splattered through the flattened opening in the front, a spray pattern darkening the silvered ground.

With a squeaked roar, Rurrk struggled to free his footpaw from the ruined helmet.

His heart ran like a bull centaur on fire. His gut roared, hungry as a warpstone furnace, but strength pumped through his old muscles with the willing fizz of power.

With a shrieking tear of metal, he got his footpaw out.

He should have done this years ago.

He could hear Kato's squeaks of excitement from the stands, the roar of the crowd in his mind, the thump of their drums and the blare of their horns pushing blood through his ears.

He swung his claw in a hiss of gadgetry and near-beheaded a line-rat that tried to jink past him. The rat's footpaws skidded under him and he crashed onto his back and performed a boneless reverse somersault.

Rurrk looked down on him, and so caught the flight of the ball late as it sailed over his head. He made a half-hearted flap at it with his unaugmented arm, but was too outrageously top-heavy to make a proper jump and the ball zipped past.

He hardly needed to make his thick neck turn to see the ball sink soundlessly into the arms of the gutter-runner, Silkpaw. The black-shrouded runner smoothed the ball into the folds of his sleeve as though it were a bawling man-thing infant held for ransom, then spun on a warptoken and broke through the cage of squealing line-rats that had thought him marked.

And then he decided to start running.

Tinny cheers broke out from the minuscule crowd as Silkpaw took a lap

of the end zone while his pursuers caught up. Then he tossed the ball nonchalantly over his shoulders and wove back to his own half as the line-rats folded over knackered legs and gasped like fish caught out of water and made to play Blood Bowl. His circuitous victory lap took him by Rurrk and he winked as he scampered by.

Rurrk gave a wave of his bloody gauntlet.

The fans loved Silkpaw. Everyone else wanted his legs broken. Another place where Rurrk's opinions took tangents. He appreciated a good player, and they didn't come better. That and their utterly contrasting playing styles left a jealousy-shaped absence in which a friendship of mutual ambivalence could prosper.

'This not game-play!' Razzel shrieked. His eyes were beginning to turn fully black and his palanquin bearers were beginning to squirt fear musk. Dark magic flowed through the Grey Seer's voluminous robes and licked about his horns. 'You get ball, you score fast-quick. And remember.' Those throbbing disks fixed on Rurrk as if they might, on another day, have willed him to ignite. 'This practice-play!'

Warlock apothecaries lugged pots of skalm onto the field. One of them, red-cloaked against the night cold and with a green-lensed monocle, squatted by the flattened line-rat. He wafted a jar of warpstone snuff under his snout, then cocked an ear before pronouncing the rat dead. A pair of kitchen hirelings came along with shovels to scrape the first stormvermin off the astrogranite. It did not take an apothecary to tell anyone he was dead. Elsewhere, Manwrecker's gore-slicked snout was coaxed out of the entrails of a line-rat whose eviscerated remains the clear-up crew were keeping way back from. The rat-ogre's handler waved some kind of lure attached to a long stick and then, once he had the mutant beast's attention, walked the goad back up the field to its position in the line-up.

Rurrk watched, lips pursed, and came to a decision. He clanked slowly down the scrimmage line. Razzel watched his approach towards Manwrecker with an explosive expression.

If rats could sweat...

The referee took a quick tail-count to make sure no one had snuck on an extra player during the restart, then brought his whistle to his muzzle. He took a deep breath. His cheeks inflated.

And Razzel cracked.

‘Fine! Fine! You play next week.’ The Grey Seer pointed a trembling finger at Rurrk. ‘But no more practice for you!’

*The interviewer nodded in feigned understanding, and Razzel fidgeted back down, chittering under his breath. He returned his attention to Rurrk and the candle flame shifted with it.*

*‘I was fortunate enough to be at the Skavenblight Scramblers’ season opener and saw you knocked out by the previously unheralded Stovel Jamsalad. May he rest in peace. I can’t help but notice the improvement in your physique since then: a grey hair here and there, but you almost look like the Red Claw of old.’ He gestured to the rusted iron harness about his right arm and smiled, something practised and yet very far from perfect. ‘I’m sure every mortal of a certain age wants to hear your secret. Perhaps you can tell us something about your training?’ He leaned in, his smile conspiratorial.*

*‘Anything... special?’*

Kato rubbed down Rurrk’s fur. The wires of his brush were already thick with his fur, and the menial’s tongue lolled from the side of his mouth as he tried to clear them out. They had both given up on trying to get Rurrk out of his armour. Kato had undone the buckles at the back of his greave only for the muscles of his lower leg to hold the plate exactly in place. ‘Have to keep them on for the week,’ Kato had shrugged. It suited Rurrk.

He never wanted to take them off again.

‘They squeak-say that Amaranth possessed by daemon, that why he so strong.’

The voice had come from behind him, and Rurrk twisted round with a snarl. Silkpaw was there, sitting on the crumbling ruin of a wash basin. Its stone fascia was gone or had never been fitted, and there were cobwebs where there should have been water.

‘How you get in here?’ said Rurrk. He’d been facing the tunnel.

The gutter-runner idly kicked the air with his footpaws. ‘I need no practice-play. Like you.’ He tilted his muzzle and looked at Rurrk piercingly. ‘I no old-meat, but I around long enough to know signs of warpstone poison. Fur loss. Hunger pain—’

Rurrk bared his teeth.

‘–Temper.’

‘Sneak-rat should mind his own business. He still has glory ahead. Mine already far behind. Maybe... maybe just one more day.’ His eyes turned gauzy and he unclenched his fist. His gauntlet let off the steam it had built up with an acrid wheeze. ‘You not there that day in Erengrad-place.’

Silkpaw lowered his snout and bared his throat. Just for a moment, but all the same. He gestured with his nose to the arming chamber’s dirt ceiling. ‘I was there. In crowd. I saw you play that day.’ He sat back then, flicked out his tail. ‘Not care about warpstone. All stormvermin need-take. Most line-rats too. But this? This too much.’ He shrugged, sorrowful. ‘You going to die, Red Claw, before whistle blows if you not careful.’

*‘I don’t know about the people watching, but I’m excited.’ He smiled coldly, teeth sharpened by candlelight. ‘CabalVision and our official tournament betting partner, Other Side, have now stopped taking wagers on your dying today after a flurry of betting in the run-up to the match. What do you have to say to those people who’ve already voted with their money pouches?’*

*Rurk sprung from the bench with a high-pitched growl.*

*Aggression filling his muscles, he lashed out his tail and snapped the damned candlestick in half. It was still sputtering out on the floor when he pounced onto the stone-lidded sarcophagus it had been fixed upon and raised his claw to strike at the man sitting behind it.*

*He squealed wordless fury as a pair of ghoulish heavies took him under each arm and lifted him back off the slab. He snapped for them, green-flecked and faintly luminescent froth spraying their dead faces, and thrashed his tail in a useless rage. He squealed an insanity of sounds which even in his head hadn’t begun as words.*

*Throughout the episode, the interviewer did not bat an eye.*

*He glanced over his shoulder to the cowed mummer who was magically transmitting the interview live, mimed a ‘cut’ across his throat and then turned back to Rurk. He winked.*

*‘I like the temper. The fans will love it.’ For a moment, the measured facade slipped and the vampire bared fangs. ‘If you should die then try to do it neatly. Arrangements are already in place for your remains.’*

The crowd roared as the hunched figures of the Skavenblight Scramblers and the broken knights of the Princedom of Pain marched onto the Drakenhof's famous field, and everything that had come before was forgotten. Rurrk's too-short life became a broken tableau of loosely connected moments: the crash of a tackle; metal on leather; teeth flying; a ball in his hand; banners rippling, in the stands, held across scores of febrile paws and emblazoned in glittering claw-scratch with the name *Red Claw*. The only shared feature was him, growing progressively then noticeably and then unmistakably older as they passed.

The crowd roared.

He closed his eyes and let the tide of adulation carry him from past to present, onto the pitch and his place in the lineout. He had no idea how he had got here. The moment. He was a dead-thing, called from unlife only to play, with only the dimmest recollection of what passed in the times between. And nor did he care.

He was alive now. He opened his eyes.

And despite everything, he had always known exactly what he would see.

Prince Amaranth the Inviolate was near enough to reach out and shove, and it was a triumph of match discipline that he did not do so.

The champion of Chaos was half again his height, and must have been three times his weight or more. He was clad in plate steel, reddish purple, cast as if moulded to the contours of his gargantuan physique so that he appeared to bulge with muscle like a beast of shining hellmetal. A fluted helm enclosed his face behind a mask of perfect condescension, but Rurrk saw through the slits of his eyes. They were jaded.

'You have aged,' said the prince. The voice that rang from the sealed helm was so similar to the euphoria of the crowd that he could scarcely tell them apart. 'There will be precious little sport in this, but the people want what they want.'

Rurrk snarled for an answer.

The whistle blew and he barely heard it. A teammate he could not name hoofed the ball downfield and he did not care. He swung for Amaranth's head.

At last.

The Chaos champion arched back, a moment of sublime grace that belied his monstrosity, and Rurrk's steam-powered claw chuntered across his

muscled plate. Purring with aggression, the Amaranthine Prince came in high over Rurrk's swing, his heavy gauntlet cracking Rurrk's lighter shoulder armour like a warhammer.

Rurrk gasped in sudden searing pain, then snarled, shouldered Amaranth back a pace and shoved him off. He turned with the momentum of his bull-like forward charge, not exactly quick, not for a skaven, but he had grown into his new bulk and was still a sight quicker than Prince Amaranth. Like his muscles, his tail too had been hardened and tautened and it lashed across Amaranth's ridged neck guards like a severed cable.

Amaranth reeled, his arms whirling, but his boots were weighted like anvils. It would take a cannonball to knock him down.

The crowd brayed and in Rurrk's head it was all for him.

He was nevertheless half aware when a beastman with fur painted bright purple and with pennons of the same fluttering from his goat-like horns picked up the ball and began to run. In what was clearly a training ground routine, heavily armoured Chaos warriors beat back the opposing formation of line-rats and stormvermin to clear their runner a path. The rat-ogre, Manwrecker, blundered into the flank of the drive like a cave-in with claws. A bellow caused teeth to rattle against fangshields, and a blow from the monster's fist smashed a Chaos warrior into the stands. Crude fireworks popped the sky, and the rat-ogre sniffed at the unexpectedly vacant patch of astrogranite in confusion as the beastman clattered past with the ball.

And Prince Amaranth came back for more.

'I am immortal,' he roared, to the melodic belligerence of a horde of chanting fans. Hate had burned the listlessness from his eyes and now he glowered like a thing possessed.

Their arms tangled, attacking one another with knees and tail. Metal scraped against metal as they fought. Amaranth smashed his sneering mask through Rurrk's half-armoured snout and brought it away bloody. Rurrk slid from the brawlers' embrace, head filled with singing, and shook his head. He clapped his paw to his head, but the singing only got stronger.

Amaranth spat out a final verse that brought sparks from the tip of his tongue, and as though his armour were doused in daemonic oils, he erupted in screaming flame. He laughed, and his next punch lifted Rurrk from his footpaws and threw him a dozen tail-lengths back into his own

half.

The Inviolate was far too couth for anything so boorish as spitting on the ground, but condescension dripped from his armour like libations to insatiate gods.

‘You think you have recovered your strength of old, but it will not be enough. I have refined my skills since last we met.’ The unnatural flames spat balefully and receded back into his armour. ‘This is no longer diverting.’

Rurk squealed in fury as Amaranth turned to run after the ball-carrier. He levelled his claw, steam escaping through whatever thing it was had come loose when he had hit the ground as the chambers built to pressure. It shook his arm, ready as a volcano, and then in a great, whistling geyser, emptied its reservoirs over the Amaranthine Prince. The Champion’s armour took on a glow, crimson, like the backs of eyelids held too long on the surface world. He roared in scalded ecstasy and Rurk chattered gleefully.

‘Ball-thing!’ Razzel shrieked at him from the sidelines.

Rurk saw the beastman clattering towards him on cloven feet, panic in its ungulate stare at the sight of him in its path, but then shrugged his shoulder to it and bouldered instead into the reeling Prince Amaranth.

Razzel clawed at his horn chimes in a rage.

The Grey Seer had arguably the perfect temperament for a Blood Bowl coach, an incendiary cocktail of thwarted ambitions, sudden, pious furies and a sorcerous temper.

Admirable traits in the dugout.

The air throbbed with rising power, as if one half of a canal lock to the Realm of Chaos had just been opened. The Grey Seer’s eyes turned black as sordid gemstones and with an implosive clap that rippled out from his idolatrous staff a spear of purple-green lightning struck from the sideline to envelop the ball-carrier in a flash of unlight. For a moment, Rurk could see the beastman’s deformed bones, white against its furry body’s black, and then the whole disintegrated into ash.

Miraculously unscathed, the ball sailed free. It squirmed through the grasping paws of the Chaos warriors and line-rats that dived to claim it, and then bobbed between Rurk and Amaranth. Both ignored it, except occasionally to knock it one way or the other as they fought, but never far

enough to get it out from between their legs.

The crowd roared their appreciation for the absurd, the stricken body language of the other players causing them to hoot and holler. The game stuttered to an incongruous pause as players weighed their odds of retrieving the ball from the scrum against that of the brawl burning itself out some time before the half-time whistle and coming down in favour of the latter. The two sets of coaches remonstrated with each other and with their players' cowardice, but no one shifted except to yell back, and the crowd's ironic cheers grew louder.

Relishing the noise, Rurrk smashed his steam-claw into Amaranth's breastplate, right over the heart, and knocked the prince onto his heels. The Slaaneshi fended him off, open palm pushed under Rurrk's snapping jaws, and bunched his other fist tight.

With a beatific shriek he called again on the daemonic patron for whom he was host.

The astrogranite began to shake, cracks opening up and spreading out from beneath Amaranth's boots. Again flames licked his armour, but this time they were multi-hued and urgent, orgiastic coils that squeezed around the princeling's clenched fist and boiled.

Rurrk backed away, claw raised to ward against the intense light.

The metal and skin of Amaranth's hand began to run together, and though the Inviolate was clearly in agony he seemed to be enjoying it. Through twitching whiskers and raised, iron claws, Rurrk saw Amaranth's gauntlet lengthen until it was a blade of flesh-coloured hellsteel. It stiffened as it cooled. Daemon fire simmered gaily along its dripping edge, and Amaranth the Inviolate laughed with a thousand voices.

Rurrk fainted with his tail and backed quickly away, or meant to.

He felt a gentle push against his back, without strength, but enough and at exactly the right time with his heels off the ground to send him stumbling forwards when he had wanted to be scuttling back.

He gasped.

A sudden, moist pain spread through his chest and arrived at his back. Blood appeared in his mouth. It spilled over his fur as he looked down to find Amaranth's throbbing spike in his chest. He chittered up a gurgle of fresh blood as he finally noticed Silkpaw, near invisible even up close, scavenge up the loose ball and sprint for the end zone. The gutter-runner

flitted through the still-unresponsive Princedom players to score what would have to go down as one of the most effortless touchdowns of a celebrated career.

Rurrk could hear Razzel's squeals of delight, riding on the roar of blood like a raft.

But the crowd did not join in. They had not noticed, transfixed by the endgame being played out on the scrimmage line

He slid back off the fist spike and fell.

It seemed to last an eternity, until he realised he was already on the ground and just had not felt it. A chitter of laughter bubbled up from his throat as the first shouts of 'Red Claw!' rose around the stands. The first of many. He felt warm, as if he had found a burrow in which he might close his eyes and sleep in safety. And so he did.

And dreamt one last dream of glory.

*'So how does it feel to have signed for the Drakenhof Templars, and before such a massive occasion as the Eight Point Star final?'*

*Rurrk issued a foetid gasp, a moan that rattled up from the depths of his throat. With glassy eyes he stared, unblinking, at the silhouette on the other side of the candle flame. His whiskers were brittle, his fur already beginning to come away in patches. His muzzle opened slackly. A smile.*

*The CabalVision mage caught it.*

*'He very-very excited,' said Kato, preening in the flickering light. 'Is what he would have wanted. Legend like Red Claw should not-never end with defeat and he looks forward to lots-many more games.'*

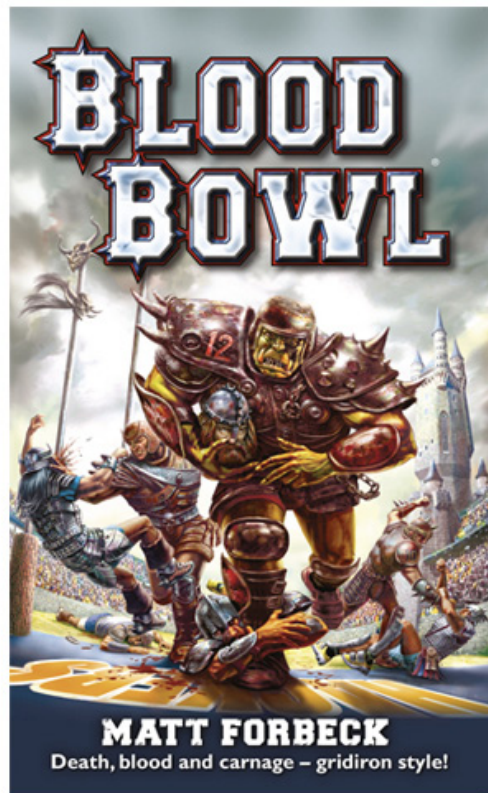
*Rurrk's lips gristled in silent agreement.*

*'Well it sounds as if the crowds are entering the stadium and I'm sure Prince Amaranth is looking forward to an early rematch.' The interviewer smiled keenly. 'Let's play some Blood Bowl.'*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**David Guymer** is the author of the Gotrek & Felix novels *Slayer*, *Kinslayer* and *City of the Damned*, along with the novella *Thorgrim*. He has also written The Beast Arises novel *Echoes of the Long War*, and a plethora of short stories set in the worlds of Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000. He is a freelance writer and occasional scientist based in the East Riding, and was a finalist in the 2014 David Gemmell Legend Awards for his novel *Headtaker*.

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