

AGE OF CONAN: BLOOD OF WOLVES: Legends of Kern, Volume 1

By

Loren L. Coleman

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Kern Wolf-Eye's breathing came in sharp huffs and thin, frozen wisps. Leather harness straps dug into his shoulders. He nodded Daol around a wattle-and-daub shack, steering clear of Gaud's trodden paths as the two clansmen kept the flat-bottomed sled, piled high with fresh-split logs and a pair of scrawny rabbits thrown on top, to a frosted patch of untrodden snow.

Icy crust broke underfoot. The old snow packed down with a dry, squelching sound that reminded Kern of stepping on dead fire coals.

Daol labored next to him even though the young hunter could have brought the rabbits back hours before. Both broad-shouldered Cimmerians leaned into the strain, counting the last hundred paces to the village lodge. Their final pull fell over a short downhill slope. Kern put the last of his strength into it, stomping through the snow crust.

The sled caught, hitched, then broke free into a short, fast glide that eased their burden for a few seconds. Too late, Kern realized the sled wouldn't stop in time. He and Daol scrambled to either side, pulling on their harnesses, but the heavy weight simply jerked them forward, and the sled hammered into the wood already stacked carefully under the lodge's overhanging eaves. There was a sharp crack from the sled, and the end pile of seasoned split-rounds collapsed in a slow-moving avalanche.

Daol massaged his shoulder, stared down at the tumbled wood.

"Have to carry some in, anyway," Kern said. He examined the front of the sled. One of the carefully sawn planks had split. "I'll get that fixed in the morning, before going out again."

He stood, kicked away snow clumping to his fur-lined boots. A bright patch behind the gray cloud cover warned the sun was close to the western Teeth, ready to slip behind the massive peak of Ben Morgh.

Kern looked back the way they'd come, at the crests of tall evergreens standing above straw-thatched roofs of Gaudic homes. Two leagues, he gauged. Maybe three. And they had beaten nightfall by an hour at least.

"Good pull." He thanked his friend. Daol had not been obliged to help, but the dark-haired hunter would not accept stronger praise.

"Kept me warm."

Still, Daol refused to meet Kern's eyes. He grabbed the rabbits by the thong binding their back legs together. They looked even scrawnier, dangling from the hunter's callused hands. Draping them over his left shoulder, he retrieved Kern's axe and his own bow and birch-bark quiver off the back of the sled.

"You'll drop off an armful of wood?"

He wasn't asking for himself. Kern nodded, setting the axe aside. "You will save Reave some meat?"

Daol's gray eyes flicked up, briefly, then he glanced down at the rabbit hanging over his shoulder. "Hindquarters. And any fat scraped off the pelt."

Nothing would go to waste. Especially with winter's stranglehold on Conall Valley pushing so deep into what should have been the beginning of spring. The fur would be

cured, entrails boiled down into a fatty broth, and most of the meat stripped for the chieftain. Even the bones, often thrown to the dogs in summer's excess, would be ground up to mix in with oat meal.

If there was any oat meal left in Gaud.

"Find you tomorrow," Kern said. He snagged the carrying strap left hanging on the corner post of the small lodge. Nothing more than a pair of wide leather belts stitched together, with wooden handles sewn onto either end. Spreading it over cleared ground protected by the eaves, he piled wood onto the strap.

"Kern?"

Daol still stood near the back of the sled, wrapping his fur cloak tightly around him now that the warmth of exertion faded. A chill wind played with the hem of his cloak and stirred his knife-cut hair. He suddenly looked much younger than his eighteen summers. That same uncertainty that had marked him before he'd made his first kill in battle with Clan Galla. Daol's gray eyes searched the skies, the rush-laden rooftop, the side of the clan lodge. Anywhere but looking toward the man he called a friend.

"Do you believe Reave has a chance?" he finally asked.

A bold question, when their clan chieftain lay dying not twenty feet away. And why ask Kern? His support for Reave to eventually replace Burok Bear-slayer meant little, except some firewood and a few roots scavenged from a forgotten cave.

"By Crom, I hope he does," Kern answered. It was the best he could offer.

Daol nodded, then strode off toward the slaughter pens on the south side of the village. He'd likely have the large lean-to and its bloodstained tables all to himself. No one had taken down a deer in weeks, and Kern knew the clan could not afford to slaughter any more of its small cattle herd.

Then again, how much longer could they afford to wait? Winter still refused to release its grip. The sun had turned in the sky on midwinter's day, but had yet to bring its warming touch back to Cimmeria. "Grimnir's curse," they called it, evoking the name of Vanaheim's great warrior-chief. Hardly a week went by without refugees traipsing through from a burned-out village or farmstead, all with that name on their lips. Grimnir the invincible. The immortal. The Great Devil.

Real or no, able to control the seasons or no, Conall Valley remained cloaked under winter's shroud. No new snow this night, Kern judged by the taste of the air, dry and raw, but no rain to hammer away the ice and no spring sun the next day either. So, more waiting.

In the meantime, Kern had his work to finish.

The village lodge wasn't large. Thirty feet to a side, and two small rooms off the back where the chieftain's family lived. The main room served as the clan's meeting hall, and as a place of refuge during attacks or severe storms that at times drove the folk of Clan Gaud into the common shelter for warmth and safety. In the winter, it was usually a place of stories and toasts around a blazing fire set on the hearth.

For the last few weeks, it had been instead a place of sickness and mourning.

Pinning the strap of split wood against the doorframe with one strong arm and the bulk of his weight, Kern slapped at the latch with his free hand and kicked open the heavy door. Regaining his grip on the wear-polished handles, he shouldered his way through the entry. The scent of corruption assailed him immediately, hidden under the scent of lye and smoked rushes. It had a taste to it, like meat left to rot in a damp cellar. Wet and warm and putrid.

The lodge hall was warmer than outside, but not by much. Heavy, black bearskins hung from the rough-hewn rafters, forming a square tent around the center of the room, shielding the hearth and blocking in most of its warmth to keep the chieftain comfortable. Barren tables had been pushed up against the outside walls. Casks and kegs sat piled in the corners, too many of them empty as the clan rationed what little they had left from their autumn stores. Skewed benches and overturned stools, all empty save one where the chieftain's daughter worked.

Maev rose from her seat beneath one of the narrow windows, setting aside the dagger she'd been honing against a smooth stone. It joined a small pile of freshly sharpened blades, all glistening with a light touch of oil. Another half dozen small blades, each showing some rust from disuse, lay in a second, smaller pile.

Shutting the door with a solid shove, she cut the light down to a dimness challenged only by two unshuttered windows and a small oil lamp hung near the doors.

Maev shared similar features with most of Clan Gaud's villagers. With most Cimmerians in fact. Like Daol she had coal black hair, ragged-cut below the shoulders where she simply hacked it off every month or so with a sharp edge. Her eyes were bright, sapphire blue, and her skin just a shade darker than fair.

Next to her, next to most of them, Kern was a pale reflection. His frosted blond mane, fairer even than the Nordheim tribes to the north. Such a light, ivory yellow to be almost white. The color of old frost. His pale, cold skin that never tanned, no matter how long he worked outdoors in the summer.

And the amber yellow eyes so few would look into. Night eyes.

Wolf eyes.

Maev had no problem meeting his gaze. Her strength did not allow her to bend under the hall's smothering presence. Searching Kern's face, her eyes blazed with a fierceness Kern often found disconcerting. Now he welcomed them for their defiant gleam. So many Gaudic villagers had given up, walking around with a defeated slump in their shoulders and attending the clan's daily needs with less and less energy. The harsh, unending winter sapped their strength, and Burok's injury corrupted their will as surely as the gangrene ate away at their chieftain's flesh.

She said nothing to him, measuring Kern the way one might size up a boar in the slaughter pens. The strap of wood grew heavy, and Kern's muscles ached with a dull throb, but he waited. For her approval or her denouncement, he wasn't certain.

Finally, she stepped around Kern and led him back to the hanging tent, drawing aside one of the heavy bearskins, allowing him to pass.

The scent of decay nearly throttled Kern as he stooped beneath the hanging skin. It burned into his sinuses and clawed with oily fingers at the back of his throat. He coughed once, then swallowed against the slick taste coating his tongue. He nodded at Jocund, the village healer, who hovered over the chieftain's exposed leg and glanced up only briefly. A modest fire crackled and spit on the hearth, but it was still intensely hot within the curtain of bearskins. The shaggy walls trapped the heat most effectively. Kern set his strap of wood near the ever-needful pile, then fed the fire with a split-round, careful not to throw too many sparks. By the dancing light Burok's face held some color above his thick, black beard, but it was all a reflection of the licking flames. Kern saw past the false health, at the ashen pallor and the face drawn under weeks of pain and suffering.

Burok Bear-slayer grimaced, stared up at the ceiling where the covered smoke hole wept an occasional drop of moisture that fell sizzling into the fire's hot coals. He appeared

even thinner today, skin pulled taut over angular cheekbones and yet too soft around the eyes.

“Easy, woman!”

The chieftain’s voice was hoarse and angry, and he sounded very much like his namesake. A light sheen of sweat stood out on Jocund’s forehead, creased with her decades of concern for the village and its people. Below her nose she had rubbed a glistening salve, likely to deaden the scent. She held a wooden peg in each hand. A fine wire stretched between them. In sharp sawing motions she stripped away more of the corrupted, gangrenous flesh which crept up toward the tourniquet.

Above the strap of leather more veins stood out, already swollen with infection. The healer had to know the leg, and the life, were beyond saving. Kern knew.

By the haunted look in Burok Bear-slayer’s eyes, the chieftain obviously knew it as well. All because of an accident. Stepping through a crust of snow and breaking his leg in a marmot hole. Kern had been there, heard it happen. The wet snap and hardly a grunt of pain to tell of it. And the bone splinter, sticking out through the skin. No one else had been close enough to signal, and certainly they couldn’t call out just then for worry of Clan Taur.

“Get me home, Kern.” That had been the chieftain’s only order. He didn’t call Kern “Wolf-Eye.” He never had.

Ten miles on an improvised litter, in the face of a frigid, easterly wind, Kern dragged Burok back to Gaud with barely a stop to ease his flagging muscles. Another Gaudic warrior would never have made it. There were others stronger than Kern, more able with a sword or battle-axe, certainly, but none had his resistance to winter’s touch. Even so, both men had frostbite waxing their cheeks when Kern staggered into the village, and the wound itself had frozen around the edges despite Kern’s wrapping his own cloak about the village leader.

Without his aid, Burok would never have come home at all. But every day since, in the faces of those clan kin who looked on Kern, he saw that most wished it had been he injured.

And likely left to die.

“Need anything more?” Kern asked, settling the split log into a good rest, in the cradle of two burning rounds.

“New leg,” the chieftain growled. His words slurred a bit with fever. “Good meat. Ability to piss on a tree, not’n some bucket my daughter empties f’r me.”

“Peace and quiet.” Jocund worried at the septic wound some more. She hid her grimace from the chieftain, but not from Kern. Didn’t matter. He saw for himself it had turned from dry gangrene to a spoiled black. No poultice could cure it. Burok Bear-slayer wasn’t long among the clan.

“Kern.” The chieftain struggled up onto one elbow, face sweating with the effort. He squinted, as if having trouble focusing on the younger man’s face. But no one else in the village had such pale hair. “You trekked toward t’ Noose today?”

Three days ago, actually, but Kern nodded anyway. “To the foot of the Snowy River country.”

A hand shot out from under a thick, woven blanket, grabbing Kern by the wrist. Burok’s touch blazed with fever. “Saw? You saw?”

The older man shivered as Jocund loosened the tourniquet, letting blood seep from the fresh cuts and into a pile of stained rags. She nodded quickly at Kern to answer, wanting to keep her patient's mind—such as it was—on other things.

“Two fingers of ice on the lower ponds. No new green on the alpine.” The stunted evergreens would be first to show the coming of spring with fresh needles. “No elk sign. No tracks from the returning herds at all.”

Driven far to the south by the harsh winter, they were unlikely to return until fresh shoots sprouted. But the village hoped.

Burok released Kern's wrist, settled back onto his straw mattress. Perhaps easing the tourniquet quieted him. Jocund refastened a tight bandage and her best poultice, smelling bitter and black and moist as the corrupted flesh beneath. The healer took her leave as quietly as she had worked.

The chieftain sighed. “Bad days ahead.”

Very. Dried meats had given out the month before, and there were very few of autumn's roots left in the dry pits under the lodge. Hard bread and moldy oats and a few winter rabbits wouldn't keep the village alive for much longer. Clansfolk would be turned out of the village soon to fend for themselves, preserving what was left for the others. The old and the weak would be first cast out.

And Kern. A dying clan had no need for its outcast.

“No tracks. No tracks not good.” The chieftain closed his eyes, shook his head with great deliberation. He opened one eye again. “None?”

Kern heard the lodge's main door open again, and close. He rocked back on his heels.

“Only small game. And men. Not enough to be a Vanir raiding party,” he promised, when Burok's eyes snapped alert.

“Scouts. Might be scouts. Following the mountain line. Tell . . . tell Cul.”

Kern already had, though the self-named village “guardian” claimed to already know. Maybe so. Cul spent days roaming the countryside, well provisioned from Gaud's shrinking larders, scouting for Vanir. There was a great worry among many clan villages that the harsh winter would encourage more raiding. It had happened two years before, when winter lingered. That was not long after King Conan, newly crowned, pulled occupation troops back to Aquilonia trying to do well by his birthland.

The gesture came at just the wrong time. Unchecked, Vanir raiders—some led by the Great Devil himself—charged across Cimmeria in a frenzied bloodlust. Entire villages disappeared. Grimmir never made it as far as Gaud, but the Vanir warlord's reputation had been fierce and bloody.

Vanir raiders still attacked with impunity throughout Conall Valley and as far south as the forests of Murrogh. They did not take prisoners as the Cimmerian tribes did when raiding for sport or for “ransom.” They took slaves. Worse, what they could not carry away as plunder they spoiled for those who remained.

There wasn't much left in Gaud for the raiders to claim, but that wouldn't stop them from destroying whatever remained.

The new wood caught fire, frozen pitch thawing and snapping with new life on the hearth. A green smoke scent told Kern that it hadn't aged well, but there wasn't much choice. The clan survived as best it could. He stoked the fire, hoping the flames would warm some life back into Burok's wounded leg. He stacked the strap of wood onto the pile, dusted bark and splinters into the climbing fire, and stood to leave.

Facing Cul, who stood at a break in the curtains, shoving aside the insulating blankets rather than stooping beneath.

Two summers Kern's senior, Cul stood only a finger's width over Kern's height but massed an extra stone's weight, easily. His dark hair fell back in a wavy crest, spilling around his shoulders in thick curls. He had the blue-gray eyes of a peregrine and a proud chin. Cul's war sword lay strapped across his back, cord-wound handle sticking up over his right shoulder. He looked ready to draw it on a moment's notice.

"Finished with your work, Wolf-Eye?"

Kern nodded.

"You can deliver a strap of wood to my hut, then."

He would not.

As boys, Cul had feared Kern's strangeness. As young men, he used it to disparage Kern and those few who befriended him. It had taken Daol and Reave working together to buy Kern some little peace. Kern remembered many nights, lying awake, hoping for a faster bear or a slippery rock to rid the village of his tormentor, no matter the loss to Gaud. How great a loss, of course, depended on whom you asked. Kern had heard Cul sneer at the Conan legends one fireside night, then compare his exploits with those of the Cimmerian-turned-king the next. Now, only Reave stood between Cul and the certainty of being Gaud's next chieftain.

So there would be no firewood. Not by his hand. Kern might not have much say in the clan, but he showed his support for Reave in whatever way he could. Cul would know for certain that someone else was ready to challenge if Kern did not do as bidden, and that person had Kern's loyalty if no one else's, but Kern had to think Cul already knew. The man was not stupid, more be the pity.

He almost told Cul nay to his face, in fact, to have it out in the open. But Burok Bear-slayer interrupted.

"Snowy River?"

Cul's gaze darted away, and the moment was lost. The warrior stepped fully into the tented room, puzzled at the outburst and at the clan's chieftain, who sat fully upright on his mattress. The furs Burok had been smothered in lay balled to either side. He looked almost normal, if one could ignore the scent of rotting death that hung over the tented room like a funeral shroud. His blue eyes—the same vibrant color he shared with his daughter, Maev—were clear and full of sudden strength.

"What were you doing as far east as the Snowy River lands?"

Dropping to one knee next to the chieftain's bedside, Kern wondered if a miracle had occurred. But the fever still burned in the man's flesh, warm enough to make the fire pale, and Burok's face was white as the blanket of snow outside. His speech, though, was clear, and there was real thought behind it.

"It was only three days' trek," Kern said, dismissing the leagues and the nights spent huddled in a thin bedroll. "I checked for herd sign, and ran our southern trapline on the way back."

"Too far, with this blasted winter hanging on. By Crom's stiff pike, Kern, Clan Taur was too far at half the distance."

Or not far enough, judging by the way Cul's expression soured at their chieftain's rallying strength. But Cul was not close enough to smell Burok's fetid breath, or see the cloudy film in the older man's eyes. Kern shrugged aside the caution.

Cul would not let it pass, however. "Clan Taur will not forget your daring for another generation," he said in rare praise of Burok's winter raid against the northern valley clan. "And Wolf-Eye does not fear winter. He's made a pact with it, after all."

That's what an elder had once said of him, anyway. That winter settled into Kern's bones as a child. His frost-tipped hair and amber eyes were proof enough for most. Even Kern's only friends, Daol and Reave, thought him a bit . . . odd. He felt chills under summer's strongest sun, yet could withstand the harshest storm with his cloak thrown wide and chest bared to the elements.

Another good reason to give Kern over into the care of the village foragers. His chances of accident were smaller than another man's, and it kept him busy and away from the village for most days.

"It was worth the trouble," Kern said simply, seeing his chieftain's newfound strength already beginning to sag. "Or would have been, if I had spotted sign."

Burok shook his head. "Too far. Never should have gone." But if he was talking about Kern's search for the herds or the chieftain's own bravado to conduct a midwinter raid for ransom, there was no telling. His rally was dying as fast as it had come on. And Kern was certain Maev would like to say good-bye to her father. He doubted the older man would last the night.

He grabbed the chieftain's shoulder. "Strength to you, Burok Bear-slayer."

Then he rose without so much as a nod or glance at Cul, grabbing his carry strap and ducking under the skins to find Maev already moving toward the sound of her father's voice.

He's strong, Kern wanted to tell her. But as usual, in Maev's presence he found himself struck dumb. He stood there, waiting for her to pass by, waiting to see if she'd say anything that recognized he existed. She did.

"It should be you," Maev said. Sharp and direct.

The first person in all of Clan Gaud to say it to his face, wishing him under death's watch rather than her father.

It was what Kern had come to expect. And they were the obvious words to carry with him out the door, and into Cimmeria's long, cold night.