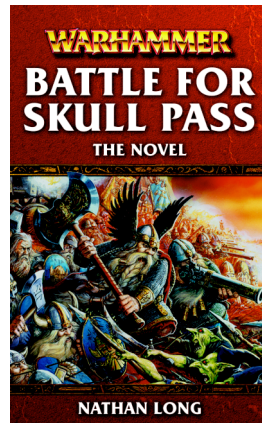


BATTLE FOR SKULL PASS

A Warhammer novel

by Nathan Long

High in the mountains, the dwarfs fight an eternal battle against their greenskin enemies, the orcs and the goblins. When the ambitious Dagskar Earscrapper sets his sights on taking Skull Pass, the conflict between goblin and dwarf is re-ignited. Can the stoic dwarfs, led by Godri Thunderbrand, fend off the greenskin invaders and save the fledgling settlement of Karak Grom? Or will the banner of the Crooked Moon boys fly high above Skull Pass?



About the Author

Nathan Long was a struggling screenwriter for fifteen years, during which time he had three movies made and a handful of live-action and animated TV episodes produced. Now he is a novelist, and is enjoying it much more. For Black Library he has written three Warhammer novels featuring the Blackhearts, and has taken over the Gotrek and Felix series with three novels to his name. He lives in Hollywood.

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ELFSLAYER

Nathan Long

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Dagskar Earscrapper surveyed the carnage in the cave.

There were dead Crooked Moon boys everywhere, bleeding on the cave floor, impaled on stalagmites, and bits and pieces of chopped-up ones tossed about like squig droppings. But that was all right, because there were twice as many dead Red Chin boys lying next to them. The surviving Crooked Moon boys were running about, looting the corpses and cutting the necks of any Red Chins who were still breathing, while cave squigs fed indiscriminately on the dead of both sides.

Dagskar turned to his leader, Big Boss Budgoz Three-Teeth, and grinned. ‘Good scrap, hey, boss? Showed dem Red Chins who da Crooked Moons are, didn’t we? Calls for a drink, I think.’ He pulled a skin from his belt and held it out to Budgoz. ‘Swig a’ toadstool brew?’

Three-Teeth smiled, showing his three teeth, and shook his lumpy head. ‘Yer a good boy, Earscrapper, smart in a fight and quick t’lash yer lads into shape, but I trust ya as far as I can throw a big ’un.’ He lifted his own skin and uncorked it. ‘I’ll drink my own, thanks all the same.’

‘Alright by me,’ said Dagskar as the two goblins drank deep, then wiped their mouths on the crusty sleeves of their black robes. ‘Coz I didn’t poison mine.’

Budgoz turned, frowning. ‘Whaddaya mean by—?’ But before he could finish the sentence he suddenly doubled up, groaning and retching. ‘You double crossin’ little—’ A convulsion interrupted him, and he heaved up a thick stream of black vomit.

‘’S what ya get for not trustin’ me, boss,’ said Dagskar, stepping back from the spreading pool.

Budgoz heaved again, his head turning an alarming shade of purple, and puked out his own intestines. They sloshed across the floor like sausages in black stew. He fell to his knees, then toppled face-first into the mess, dead as a rock.

Dagskar shook his head, clucking his tongue. ‘Such a shame. Terrible, terrible.’ He stepped up onto Budgoz’s armoured back and turned to the horde of goblins that were gathering around him. ‘A great victory, boys!’ he shouted. ‘But I has some sad news. Our wise and powerful big boss Budgoz has accidentally drunk some bad brew and ain’t expected t’recover.’

There was an ugly murmuring from some of the goblins. ‘Accidentally?’ said one, crossing his arms sceptically. ‘Aye,’ said Dagskar, lashing out with his whip and taking the goblin’s nose off at the root with a deft twist. ‘Accidentally. Just like dat.’

The goblin fell back, howling and clutching his gouging nose stump as the others edged away, frightened.

Dagskar raised his whip and shook it at them. ‘I is yer boss now, d’y’hear?’ And you is all my boys! Got that? Yer Dagskar Earscrapper’s boys, now!’

‘All hail da new boss!’ shouted a cowering goblin.

The rest took up the cry. ‘All hail da new boss!’

Dagskar nodded, pleased, then smiled to himself. ‘Now,’ he said under his breath. ‘Now Skarsnik has gotta make me a big boss.’

Another year, thought dwarf thane Godri Thunderbrand as he walked through the unfinished great hall and looked up at the arching ceiling. No more than two. Emotions welled up in his broad, beard-buried chest as he thought of it. Soon the masons would smooth and polish the pillars. Soon the sculptors and goldsmiths would carve and gild the ancestor faces that ringed the roof. Soon the painters and weavers would cover the walls with the proud colours of Clan Byrnik and hang the heavy tapestries that told their long proud history. Soon this dusty, echoing hole in the side of Skull Pass would be a true dwarf hold.

‘By Grungni’s hammer, Naragrim has done a magnificent job,’ said Godri’s son Aurik, a golden-bearded young dwarf warrior who walked beside him through the clutter of scaffolds and piles of cut stone.

‘Truly, this is a hall fit for a king, a hall like those of the holds of old.’

Rodrin, Godri’s bald, black-bearded younger brother and chief miner, chuckled and shook his head. ‘It isn’t that, beardless. Not that it’s bad,’ he said, with a quick look at Godri. ‘It’s a triumph, all things considered, but Karak Eight Peaks in its day – well, there was nothing like it in the world.’

‘Say what you will, brother,’ said Godri as he reached the centre of the hall and turned in a slow circle to take it all in. ‘To me it is the grandest hall ever built, for it is mine. There were times when I thought it would never come.’ He sighed with a mixture of sadness and pride as he thought back to the fall of Karak Eight Peaks, when Clan Byrnik and all the other dwarf clans who had dwelled with King Lunn in the greatest of the dwarf holds had been forced to abandon it to the verminous invaders and seek shelter elsewhere.

King Lunn’s words to him then came back to him now as if he had heard them only yesterday.

‘And you, Godri Thunderbrand,’ said King Lunn, looking down from atop his shield as Godri knelt before him in the middle of the long train of refugee dwarfs who were marching away from the fallen karak. ‘Where will you go? Have you kin in other holds that will welcome you?’

‘Lord king,’ said Godri, looking up. ‘We have kin, but we will not burden them. We will accept no charity and incur no debt.’ He could barely see the king as he spoke. He was still half blind from the corrosive vapours that the skaven had pumped into the hold’s airshafts. His brother Rodrin lay on a cart along with many of the others of Clan Byrnik, laid low by the poison the ratmen had dumped into the wells. ‘We will make our own way, first above ground, later in a hold of our own. The earthquakes that shook our homes, and the vermin that took advantage of that ruin, may have shattered the chain of holds that linked these mountains together, but we of

Clan Byrnik vow to forge a new link that will one day join with others, old and new, to make us strong again.’ The old king stroked his long white beard and nodded. ‘Well said, Godri Thunderbrand. You show the true strength of the dwarfs, which is not might of arm, nor keenness of axe – though those be great – but determination and tenacity. I hail you for it, and shall give you a token of my esteem.’

‘Lord king,’ said Godri, bowing over his knee. ‘We are honoured, but we will accept no gift, not even from you.’ King Lunn laughed. ‘It is not a gift, proud thane. Indeed it is a burden – heavy, and laden with terrible honour.’ He waved behind him at his baggage train. ‘Amongst my treasure I carry the King’s Wall, the iron chain that once surrounded my throne, and beyond which none could pass without my invitation. Each of my warriors vowed to die before letting one enemy step within it.’ He sighed. ‘Sadly I will have no need of it where I go, for I will be guest in another king’s hold, so I shall give it to you.’

‘It is a great honour, lord king,’ said Godri, wondering if it was.

‘Perhaps you think I am only lightening my load,’ said the king, chuckling. ‘But I vow to you that if you make a success of this new hold of yours, and build a throne room from which to rule, then I will visit you, and wait outside the chain at your bidding. Further, I will bow to you, and pay you the respect due a brave and defiant king.’

Now Godri truly did feel honoured. He stood tall and struck his chest in a dwarfen salute. ‘My king, I accept this burden, and by Grungni, Grimmir and Valaya, I vow that Clan Byrnik will never let an enemy past the King’s Wall!’

And though it had been a long, hard century since then, and there had been many setbacks and troubles, Godri and his clan had kept that vow, and wherever they had set the heavy chain, with its squat stone posts in the shape of doughty dwarf warriors, not one enemy had crossed it.

The clan had wandered for many years, searching for a rich, defensible mine, and found it at last in a valley in the south of the World's Edge Mountains known as Skull Pass, which had a good vein of gold, a clean spring, and a strong position.

But finding the valley had only been the beginning. They had been forced to live above ground these past eight decades while they slowly dug into the mountain, both to mine for gold and iron, and to dig out living quarters. More than once along the way the surface settlement they had established was almost wiped out. The winters had been hard, the orcs and goblins legion, and their clan very small and poor. But despite these many setbacks – what his grim-browed brother Rodrin referred to as ‘the curse’ – they had held on tenaciously, and now they were almost ready to move completely underground.

The living quarters were built, the wells dug, the air shafts bored, the grain vaults complete, the treasure vaults and workshops ready. All that remained was to put the finishing touches on the public areas, move the

grain, forge works, mill and brewery to the spaces waiting for them inside, widen the entry passage and set the great gates into the front door. In less than a year all would be complete and Godri would invite King Lunn to call upon him. Then the High King would stand outside the King's Wall and bow to him on his throne. It would be the proudest moment of his life.

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Godri shook himself from his reminiscences and returned his attention to the half-finished great hall. He turned to Aurik, who, in preparation for the day when he would rule the hold, was learning to oversee much of the trading and communication with other holds. 'How soon will the gate lock and hinges be delivered from Karak Azul?'

'Hokkir the gem merchant brought word from there when he arrived with his wares yesterday,' Aurik replied. 'It should only be a matter of weeks. The hold will be secure before winter.'

‘We should have made the lock ourselves,’ Rodrin muttered. ‘It would be done by now.’

Godri sighed. It had been a bone of contention between him and his brother for a long time. ‘I will have only the best,’ he said, as he had said many times before. ‘Our foundries are not yet large enough or sophisticated enough to build the locks we must have.’

‘And Karak Azul has agreed to take our gold, cowhides and beer in return,’ added Aurik. ‘The establishment of regular trade with them will ensure our prosperity for years to come.’

‘But what of our security now?’ said Rodrin. ‘We haven’t even placed the doors. What if the curse rears its ugly head again?’

Godri turned on him, lowering his shaggy white eyebrows. ‘If trouble comes,’ he said, ‘we will deal with it as we have always dealt with it, with axe, hammer and cannon.’

‘Aye,’ said Aurik, jutting out his golden beard. ‘Our vow to defend the King’s Wall is stronger than any gate. We

have no need to fear. Has my father not named the hold Karak Grom?’

‘Aye, aye,’ grumbled Rodrin. ‘Enduring Defiance – I know. I would just feel a little better if we did our enduring and defying behind nice, thick stone doors.’

‘We will, brother,’ said Godri, softening. ‘I promise you.’

The three dwarfs turned as steps approached them.

Hurrying across the great hall came a balding dwarf in a leather apron and gloves, his grey beard neatly braided into a single club. He wiped his worried face with a red kerchief as he stepped before Godri and bowed.

‘My thane,’ he said. ‘I must speak to you.’

‘What is it this time, Naragrim Torinsson?’ Godri asked, crossing his arms over his beard. Naragrim was his chief mason, and brought him news of doom and gloom on a regular basis.

‘Something truly serious this time, my thane,’ said Naragrim.

Aurik chuckled. ‘You say that every time.’

‘This time I mean it,’ said Naragrim.

‘You say that too,’ grinned Rodrin.

Godri motioned his brother and son to be quiet, then nodded to Naragrim. ‘Tell us, engineer.’

Faced with their combined attention, Naragrim hesitated, mopping the back of his neck with his kerchief. ‘Well, ah, you see, my thane, some of the stone cutters were roughing out the ceiling for the main entry passage while the sappers were placing the charges to widen it, and they found...’ He paused and coughed. ‘They found a crack.’

‘A crack?’ said Godri. His heart thudded. This might indeed be serious. ‘Grimnir! How big is it? Show me.’

Naragrim nodded and led Godri, Rodrin and Aurik back across the hall. ‘It’s big,’ he said. ‘Deep. It runs at a rough diagonal the whole length of the ceiling of the entry passage. And there are secondary cracks.’

He stopped at the mouth of the passage, still narrow, but with holes drilled in the side walls and charges set to blow it wider.

He pointed up through the drifting dust. ‘You see?’ Godri’s chest clenched as he looked up at the rough, arched ceiling of the passage where Naragrim was pointing. Even from the floor he could see the hairline fissure that snaked through the rock. This truly was bad news. The question was, how bad? ‘Can the passage be saved?’ he asked.

‘It can, my thane,’ said Naragrim. ‘But without support pillars and a network of rafters, we cannot make it any wider. The roof will collapse.’

‘But it must be wider!’ said Aurik, stepping forward. ‘How will we receive the embassies of other holds in so puny an entryway? It must be wide enough for ten dwarfs to walk abreast. It must be as great as the great hall it leads to.’

‘Not without pillars, it won’t be,’ said Naragrim.

Rodrin groaned. ‘The curse,’ he muttered.

Godri ground his teeth. ‘You told me you tested the stone in this mountain from tip to root and found no fault.’

‘There was no fault, my thane,’ said Naragrim, his hands clasped together. ‘I swear it by Grungni. The stone was as sound as a king’s vault.’

‘Then what happened?’ asked Godri.

‘The earth tremor last winter,’ said the builder. ‘It is the only thing I can think of. It must have caused the crack, and our blasting this summer worsened it.’ He looked up at Godri. ‘I’m sorry, my thane. Erecting the pillars and reinforcing the ceiling will add years to the construction.’

‘As long as it isn’t years before we can set the doors and the lock,’ said Rodrin.

Naragrim shook his head. ‘That won’t be affected.’

‘Thank Grungni for that,’ said Godri. He put a hand on the chief mason’s sturdy shoulder. ‘Very well, Naragrim. Build your pillars. Strengthen the ceiling. Do what you must. We have waited this long. We can wait a few years more.’

Naragrim bowed low. ‘I will draw up new plans at once, my thane.’ He turned and hurried away, calling new orders to his crew.

‘It’s been like this from the beginning,’ said Rodrin, tugging his black beard and turning away. ‘Famine, flood, goblins, skaven, cave-ins in the mine, and now this. I tell you, the place is cursed.’

‘Nonsense, uncle,’ said Aurik sharply as he followed Rodrin back into the great hall. ‘There have been setbacks, true, but we have our health. We have our families. We have our lives. We will persevere. We are Karak Grom.’

Godri’s chest swelled with pride at his son’s admirable dwarf staunchness. He wished his brother had more of it. Had it been up to Rodrin, Clan Byrnik would have packed up and gone begging at some other clan’s door long ago.

A young dwarf trotted down the entry passage as Godri fell in step with his brother and his son. ‘Your pardon, thane,’ he said, stopping and bowing before him. ‘The

dragonslayer, Borri Graniteskin, has just broken Argi Argisson's nose in the Wyvern's Demise.'

Godri stopped and sighed. On the other hand, maybe his brother was right after all.

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