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THE GREAT BETRAYAL
NICK KYME

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THE GREAT BETRAYAL

Nick Kyme

THOUSANDS OF YEARS before the rise of men, the dwarfs and elves are stalwart allies and enjoy an era of unrivalled peace and prosperity. But when dwarf trading caravans are attacked and their merchants slain, the elves are accused of betrayal. Quick to condemn the people of Ulthuan as traitors, the mountain lords nevertheless try to prevent conflict, but the elves' arrogance undoes any chance of reconciliation and war is inevitable. Snorri Halfhand, son of the High King and no particular friend of the elves, is at the vanguard of the war. At the city of Tor Alessi a vast army stands against the dwarfs. Here Snorri will meet his destiny against the elven King Caledor as the first blow is struck in a conflict that could bring about the fall of two great civilisations.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nick Kyme is the author the Tome of Fire trilogy featuring the Salamanders. He has also written for the Space Marine Battles and Time of Legends series with the novels *The Fall of Damnos* and *The Great Betrayal*. In addition, he has penned a host of short stories and several novellas, including 'Feat of Iron' which was a *New York Times* Bestseller in the Horus Heresy collection *The Primarchs*. He lives and works in Nottingham.

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SNORRI AND MORGRIM knew there was something in the Ungdrin Ankor, vermin maybe, but definitely an enemy the dwarfs had not faced before. Tales abounded, they always did, told by drunken treasure hunters. Few dwarfs, barring the credulous and the gullible, beardlings in the main, believed such tall stories. But myths made flesh were hard to refute. Morgrim was reminded again of the stories of his father, of the glowing rock unearthed by Karak Krum's miners. He brought to mind the faces of the savage creatures they had just escaped and decided there was something alarmingly familiar about them.

The two dwarfs spent the next few minutes in silence, listening for any sign of the rats' return.

After passing through a vast open cavern, its narrow stone bridge spanning a bottomless pit and its ceiling stretching into darkness, Morgrim asked, 'How is your hand, cousin?'

Snorri kept it close to his chest, taking the axe one-handed as he walked. Blood stained the metal links of his armour where it had bled through the makeshift bandage. Regarding the wound, he sneered, 'Think you need thicker pampering cloths.'

Morgrim ignored the gibe, reading the pain etched on his cousin's face. 'Looks in need of a redress.'

They had left behind the chasm chamber with its narrow, precipitous span and walked a long gallery with a high ceiling. Errant shafts of light cast grainy spears in the darkness from clutches of *brynduraz*. Such a rare mineral was worthy of mining and Morgrim had wondered then whether the clans of Karak Krum had left willingly – or moved at all. Long stalactites dripping with moisture that reflected the brightstone made the dwarfs duck occasionally, and a chill gave the air a bite.

'Hurts like Helda just sat on it wearing full armour,' Snorri complained, wincing as the ruddy cloth was re-tightened.

Morgrim laughed out loud.

Helda was one of many would-be consorts that Snorri's father had attempted to *arrange* for the young prince. She was of good stock, *too* good in Snorri's opinion given her impressive girth. A dwarf lord was said to be worthy to marry a *rinn* if his beard could wrap around her ample bosom at least once. Snorri doubted Helda would ever find a mate able to achieve that feat. If she did it would be a longbeard and past the age when siring an heir was amongst the dwarf's concerns. In fact, one night Helda would likely test the poor sod.

Her father, the King of Karak Kadrin, was a strong ally of Karaz-a-Karak and had offered a sizeable dowry from his personal coffers to secure the union but Snorri had objected and then declined. Comely as she was, he had no desire to bed such a walrus and continue the Lunngrin bloodline. Besides, he had eyes for another.

'She was a broad girl,' admitted Morgrim, wiping tears from his eyes as he finished binding the wound anew.

'As an alehouse, cousin.'

'And a face like a troll.'

'Trolls are prettier.'

Morgrim was holding on to his sides, which had begun to pain him, when he saw the light. It was faint, like a distant fire or a partly shuttered lantern.

And it was moving.

‘Hide!’ he hissed. Both dwarfs moved to the opposite edges of the gallery and hugged the walls.

Snorri gestured silently to his cousin, asking him what he had seen.

Morgrim nodded to the lambent glow in the distance. The reek of soot had grown stronger too.

Dawi? Snorri mouthed.

Morgrim shook his head.

Not this deep.

Karak Krum was a tomb in all but name. It only harboured creatures and revenants now. It fell to the dwarfs to find out which this one was.

The blade of Snorri’s axe caught in the light from the brightstone, signalling his intention.

Nodding slowly, Morgrim drew his hammer and followed his cousin as he crept along the opposite side of the gallery. All the while the patch of light bobbed and swayed, but never got any closer. Tales were often told to scare beardlings of cavern lamps or *uzkuzharr*, the ‘dead fires’ of dwarfs long passed who were slain in anger or because of misfortune. Such unquiet spirits did not dwell with the ancestors, nor did they eat at Grungni’s table, but were destined to walk the dwarf underworld. Jealous of the living, they would lure young or foolish dwarfs to their deaths, drawing them on with their light and their promises of gold. Often these dwarfs were found at the bottom of chasms or crushed to death under a rock fall.

Snorri and Morgrim knew the stories, they had been told them too during infancy, but now they were faced with such an apparition made real. The dwarfs kept it in their eye line at all times, using the eroded columns at the sides of the tunnel that held up the ceiling to hide behind. The tunnel led them to another room. It was small and had once possessed a door, which stood no longer. Only rusted hinges and wooden scraps clung to the frame.

It was a temple, obvious from the icon of Grungni carved into the wall, and had no other visible exits. A figure clad in a simple tunic, hose and chainmail was kneeling down inside. Old, if the bald pate and greying locks were anything to go by, he was muttering whilst casting rune stones onto the ground in front of him. A lantern was strapped to his back via some leather and metal contrivance and shone brightly without need of a flame. Its light gave him an unearthly lustre. Seen side on, he appeared to be conversing quietly with someone out of view.

Snorri mouthed, *Not alone*, and the two dwarfs crept closer until they could hear what the old dwarf was saying.

‘Dreng tromak, uzkul un dum?’ the old dwarf asked. ‘Are you sure? Nah, cannot be that.’ His low, sonorous tones made Snorri think of slowly tumbling rock.

‘What?’ Morgrim hissed, but Snorri pressed his finger to his mouth to silence him.

Casting the stones again, the old dwarf muttered, *‘Dawi barazen ek dreng drakk, un riknu...’* It was Khazalid, the language of the dwarfs, but archaic to the point where it was almost incomprehensible. ‘Not what I was expecting,’ he said, looking up at his companion, who was still obscured from sight. ‘Any ideas?’

Morgrim had reached the very edge of the temple and gestured to the old dwarf’s ‘companion’.

It was a stone statue of Grungni.

‘He’s mad,’ hissed Morgrim, frowning.

Snorri nodded. He recognised some of the old dwarf’s words, which now seemed prompted by their arrival. *Death* and *doom*, he knew. Also there was *destiny* and *king*.

Uzkuzharr lure their victims with promises, and their malice is as old as the earth, the words of his mentors returned to him.

‘Uzkul un dum.’ The old dwarf nudged a rune stone with his knuckle, arranging it above

another. '*Dreng drakk... riknu...*'

The markings were ancient, wrought from chisel-tongue and hard to define.

Suddenly, the old dwarf turned, fixing them with a narrowed eye.

'I see a dragon slayer in my presence,' said the old dwarf, reverting to more common Khazalid. 'One destined to become king.' His eyes were slightly glazed, as if perhaps he was still unaware of their presence.

'Ears like a bat!' hissed Morgrim, hammer held ready.

Hackles rose on the back of Snorri's neck. His tongue felt leaden, and he tasted sulphur. He hefted his axe in two hands, glad when his voice didn't quaver. 'Stand, creature. Make yourself known.'

In the glow of the lantern, the strange dwarf looked almost hewn from stone, no different to the statues of Karak Krum's fallen king and queen. Snorri had heard Morek the runesmith speak in whispers of dwarfs that dabbled in magic, the wild unpredictable kind not bound to metal, of the slow petrification of their bodies and the cruelty it bred into their souls.

Not all dwarfs honoured the ancestors any more. Not since the Coming of Chaos in the elder days. Snorri knew his history, of legends about clans that fled the Worlds Edge Mountains to a land of everlasting fire and who swore fealty to a different god entirely, a father of darkness.

No dwarf in their right mind would venture this deep alone. Snorri and Morgrim were only there by misadventure, but the old dwarf had clearly come here deliberately. Perhaps he sought to profane the temple. Perhaps it was not a dwarf at all but some unquiet spirit of the lost dwarfs of Karak Krum.

Snorri's skin felt suddenly cold and he suppressed a shiver. He edged forwards, caught a reassuring glance from Morgrim who was just behind him.

Axe at the ready, Snorri called out, 'I said, rise and make yourself known. You are in the presence of the prince of Karaz-a-Karak.'

'I see a great destiny,' said the old dwarf, both cousins in his sight but looking right through them. 'A king one day.'

Snorri partly lowered his axe without thinking. Another step brought him within a few short feet of the old dwarf.

His uttered a choked rasp.

'My destiny? King?' The desire in his eyes and his tone betrayed him.

'One who will lift the great doom of our race, he who will slay the drakk...' said the old dwarf, half lost in his prophetic reverie and, muttering the last part. '*Elgidum...*'

'Drakk?' Snorri's axe went up again. 'What drakk, old one? Is there a beast in these tunnels?' He glanced around, nervously. Morgrim did the same.

'I see nothing, cousin,' he hissed, but was deathly pale and clutched his hammer tightly.

Anger burned away Snorri's fear like fire banishes ice, and he returned to the old dwarf.

'Who are you? Speak now or I will--'

'You will what, brave prince?' asked the old dwarf, regarding him properly for the first time, groaning in protest as he struggled to his feet in the light. 'Kneeling is a young dwarf's game,' he mumbled under his breath. 'Would you stab an unarmed dawí, then?'

Like a veil had lifted from his eyes, Snorri balked as he recognised Ranuld Silverthumb, Runelord of Karaz-a-Karak and part of the High King's Council.

'Lord Silverthumb, I...' He kneeled, bowed his head.

So did Morgrim, who caught a flash of azure fire in the runelord's eyes before he looked down.

Ranuld sighed wearily, 'Arise, I have no desire to strain my neck and back further by looking down on you pair of *wazzocks*.' He scowled at the two dwarfs who got up apologetically. 'And sheathe your weapons,' snapped the runelord. 'Did you think me one of the *dawí zharr*, mayhap? Or an *uzkular*? Ha, ha, ha!' Ranuld laughed loudly and derisively, muttering, 'Wazzocks.'

Snorri flushed bright crimson and fought the urge to hide his face.

'What was that prophecy you spoke of?' he asked.

Lord Silverthumb grew angry, annoyed. 'Not for ears the likes of yours!' he snapped, and a shadow seemed to pass across his face. Snorri thought it looked like concern, but the runesmith was quick to recover and wagged a finger at them both.

'Choose your own fate. Make your own. Destiny is just about picking a path then walking it.'

Shaking his head, Morgrim asked, 'What are you doing down here in these ruins, lord? It's perilous to venture here alone.'

Ranuld gaped in sudden surprise, glancing around in mock panic.

'Danger is there?' he asked. 'From what, I dread to know? Might I be stabbed in the back by my own kith and kin?' He scowled again, his face wrinkling like old leather, and sneered scornfully. 'I came here in search of magic, if you must know.'

The look of incredulity on Morgrim's face only deepened.

Snorri was also perplexed, his silence inviting further explanation.

Ranuld raised a feathery eyebrow, like a snowfall upon the crag of his brow. 'And you two are supposedly from the blood of kings. Bah!' He stooped to retrieve his rune stones, chuntering about the thinning of dwarf stock and the dubious practice of *krutting*, when one consorts with a goat.

Snorri got over his awe quickly. 'What do you mean? How can you simply *look* for magic? It isn't like a lost axe or helmet. It can't be touched.'

Ranuld looked up wryly as he put the last of his rune stones into a leather pouch and drew its string taut. 'Can't it? Can't you?' Straightening up, grimacing as his back cracked, he jabbed a gnarled finger at the prince like it was a knife.

'I am... um--'

'No lad, you are Snorri, son of Gotrek, so named for the Whitebeard whose boots your bearding feet are unworthy of, let alone his name. I do not know who *um* is.'

Snorri bit back his anger. He had stowed his axe, but clenched his fists.

'Venerable one,' Morgrim stepped in calmly, 'we are not as wise as you--'

'But have a gift for stating what is obvious,' Ranuld interrupted, turning his back on them and taking a knee before the shrine. 'Never any peace,' he grumbled beneath his breath, 'even in lost years. Overhearing words not meant for ears so young and foolish...' Again, he frowned.

Morgrim persisted, showing all proper deference. 'Why are you looking for magic?'

Finishing his whispered oath to Grungni, Ranuld rose and grinned ferally at the young dwarf.

'That is a much better question,' he said, glancing daggers at Snorri. 'This,' he said, rubbing the dirt and air between his fingers, 'and *this*...' he smacked the stone of the temple wall, 'and *this*...' then hacked a gob of spittle onto the ground, just missing Morgrim's boot, 'is magic. Some of us can feel it, bearding. It lives in stone, in air, in earth and fire, even water. You breathe it, you taste it--' Ranuld's face darkened, suddenly far away as if he was no longer talking to the dwarfs at all, '-but it's changing, we're changing with it. Secrets lost, never to return,' he rasped. 'Who will keep it safe once we're gone? The gate bled something out we couldn't put back. Not even Grinnir could do that.' He stared at the dwarfs, his rheumy eyes heavy-lidded with the burden of knowledge and all the many years of his long life. 'Can you feel it, seeping into your hearts and souls?'

Morgrim had no answer, though his mouth moved as if it wanted to give one. 'I... I do not...'

As if snapping out of a trance, Ranuld's expression changed. As fiery and curmudgeonly as he ever was, he barged past the two dwarfs and into the long gallery. The runelord was halfway down when Morgrim shouted after him, 'Where are you going now?'

'Didn't find what I was looking for,' Ranuld called back without turning. 'Need to try somewhere else.'

Morgrim began to go after him. 'It's fortunate we found you, old one. Let us escort you back

to the underway.'

'Ha!' Ranuld laughed. 'You're lost, aren't you? Best help yourselves before you help me, *wer-its*. And find me, did you? Perhaps I found you? Ever consider that, beardling? And this is the underway, wazzock.'

'No part of it I know.'

'You know very little, like when it's a good time to run, for instance,' Ranuld replied, so distant his voice echoed.

'Wha--'

A low rumble, heard deep under their feet, felt through their bones, stalled Morgrim and he looked up. Small chunks of grit were already falling from the ceiling in vast clouds of spewing dust. Cracks threaded the left side of the gallery wall, columns split in half.

Morgrim had spent enough time in his father's mines to know what was about to happen.

'Get back!' He slammed into Snorri's side, hurling the dwarf off his feet and barrelling them both back inside the temple.

The roof of the long gallery caved in a moment later, releasing a deluge of earth and rock. Thick slabs of stone, weighed down with centuries of smaller rock falls, speared through the roof from above and brought a rain of boulders with them. A huge pall of dirt billowed up from the sudden excavation.

Though he tried to see him, Ranuld was lost to Morgrim. It wasn't that he was obscured by falling debris, rather that the runelord simply wasn't there any more. He had vanished. It was as if the earth had swallowed him. As the storm of dust and grit rolled over them, Morgrim buried his head under his hands and prayed to Grungni they would survive.

Blackness became abject, sound smothered by an endless tide of debris. Stone chips, bladed flakes sheared from a much greater whole, cut Morgrim's face despite his war helm. He snarled but kept his teeth clenched.

Tremors faded, dust clung to the air in a muggy veil. Light prevailed, from above where the ceiling had caved in. It limned the summit of a pile of rocks no dwarf could ever hope to squeeze through.

Snorri coughed, brought up a fat wad of dirty phlegm and shook age-old filth from his hair and beard. Clods of earth were jammed in his ears, and he dug them out with a finger.

'Think most of Karak Krum just fell on top of us.'

'At least we are both alive, cousin.'

Snorri grunted something before spitting up more dirt.

Morgrim wafted away some of the dust veiling the air. 'What about Lord Silverthumb?'

'That old coot won't die to a cave-in, you can bet Grungni's arse he won't.'

Morgrim agreed. For some reason he didn't fear for the runesmith. The old dwarf had known what was going to happen and left them to be buried. If anything, he was more annoyed than concerned.

Barring the mucky overspill from the cave-in, the temple was untouched. Its archway still stood, so too its ceiling and walls. Grungni sat still and silently at the back of the room, watching, appraising perhaps.

Morgrim touched the rune on his war helm and gave thanks to the ancestor.

Snorri was already up, pulling at the wall of rock that had gathered at the only entrance to the temple. It was almost sealed.

'Did you also bring a pick and shovel when you picked up the lantern, cousin?' he asked, heaving away a large chunk of rock only for an even larger one to slam down violently in its place. A low rumble returned, the faint suggestion of another tremor. Motes of dust spilling from the ceiling thickened into gritty swathes.

'Leave it!' Morgrim snapped, reaching out in a gesture for Snorri to stop what he was doing. 'You'll bring whole upper deep down on us. It'll flood the chamber with earth.'

Snorri held up his palms.

‘Buried alive or left to rot in some forgotten tomb,’ he said, ‘neither choice is appealing, cousin. How do you suggest we get out?’

‘Use a secret door.’

‘Would that we had one, cou–’

Snorri stopped talking when he saw Morgrim hauling aside the statue of Grungni. Behind it was a shallow recess in the wall that delineated a door. It was open a crack and a rune stone had been left next to it that caught Morgrim’s attention. He pocketed it and gave the door another tug.

‘Get your back into it,’ Snorri chided.

‘How about yours?’ he replied, red-faced and flustered.

‘I’m wounded,’ said Snorri, showing off his half-hand.

Morgrim spoke through gritted teeth and flung spittle. ‘Get your chuffing arse over here and help me move this thing.’

Together, they dragged the door wide enough to slip through. Musky air rushed up to greet them, the scent of age and mildew strong enough to almost make them gag. A long, narrow darkness stretched before them. The gloom felt endless.

‘We can stand here,’ said Snorri, pulling out his axe, ‘or we can go forwards. I vote for the dark.’

‘Aye,’ nodded Morgrim, and drew his hammer.

They had gone only a few feet when Snorri asked, ‘What did he mean?’

‘About magic? Chuffed if I know.’

‘No, about my destiny. It being great and “lifting the doom of our race” and “he who will slay the drakk”? Those words were meant for me, I am sure.’

‘Agreed,’ said Morgrim, ‘but you’re the son of the High King of Karaz-a-Karak, of course your destiny will be great.’ Morgrim led the way, following veins of gemstones and ore in the tunnel walls.

Snorri snorted, his disdain obvious.

Morgrim barely noticed. ‘Feels like we’re going up... Does it feel like we’re going up?’ He stopped, trying to get his bearings even though there was supposedly only one way for them to go.

‘A great doom...’ said Snorri. ‘Are we headed for war, do you think?’

‘Why do you sound as if you want a war? And against whom will you fight, eh, cousin? The urk and grobi tribes are diminished, dying out, thanks to your father. Ruin left the land long ago. Will you fight the rats, the vermin beneath our halls? Our enemies are dead. Don’t be so quick to find others to take their place. Peace is what I want, and a mine hold of my own.’

‘Fighting is what I am good at, cousin.’ Snorri peered down the haft of his axe, all the way to the spike at the top. ‘I can kill a grobi at a thousand yards with a crossbow, or at a hundred with a thrown axe. None are better than I with a hammer when used to crush skulls. In that, in the art of killing our enemies, my father and I are very alike.’ He lowered the weapon and his eyes were heavy with grief when he met Morgrim’s gaze. ‘But he has already defeated them all and left no glory for me. I stand at his shoulder, nothing more than a caretaker who will sit upon a throne and rule a kingdom of dust.’

‘So when you ask why I want war, it is because of that. As a warrior I am great but as a prince of Karaz-a-Karak, I am nothing. At least before my father.’

Morgrim was stern, and a deep frown had settled upon his face. A small measure of respect for his cousin was lost.

‘You are wrong about that. Very wrong, and I hope you learn the error of it, cousin.’

Grunting, unwilling to see Morgrim’s pity or think about his father’s shame, Snorri walked on.

‘Ranuld Silverthumb is the most vaunted runelord of the Worlds Edge. If he says a doom is

coming then we must prepare for it.' He thumped his chest, stuck out his pugnacious chin. 'Dragon slayer, I was so named. King because of it. *That* is a legacy I wish to inherit, not one of cowing to the elgi and the whims of other vassal lords.'

Morgrim fell silent, but followed. The old *zaki* had said many things during his casting.

One word stood out above the others.

Elgidum.

It meant *elfdoom*.