

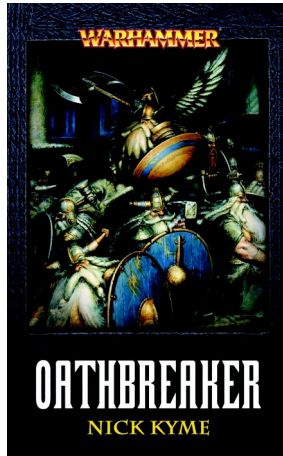
# ***OATHBREAKER***

A Warhammer novel

*By Nick Kyme*

*In the bleak mountains of the Warhammer Old World, the dwarf race fights a bitter battle for survival against its ancient enemies.*

*In a time before even Sigmar walked the earth the dwarf hold of Karak Varn is overrun by skaven ratmen and its venerable lord, Kadrin Redmane, slain. Thane Uthor vows to reconquer it, paying little thought to the enormity of such a task. Drawing together a force led by mighty heroes from across the realm he ventures into the dark, determined to wrest the flooded hold from skaven, greenskins and the foul terrors of the deeps. How can this band of dwarfs, brave and stalwart as they are, ever hope to triumph against such impossible odds?*



## **About the Author**

Nick Kyme hails from Grimsby, a small town on the east coast of England. He moved to Nottingham in 2003 to work on White Dwarf magazine as a Layout Designer. Since then, he has made the switch to the Black Library's hallowed halls. His writing credits include several published short stories and the Necromunda novel Back From The Dead.

The following is an excerpt from *Oathbreaker* by Nick Kyme.  
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THE GREAT GATE OF Karak Varn loomed large and imposing – two immense slabs of stone, bound with steel and gold set into the very mountainside.

‘Tis quite a sight,’ breathed Lokki, arching his head properly to survey the gate’s majesty.

‘Aye lad, an eye opener you might say,’ Halgar agreed.

‘Indeed,’ said Uthor.

Rorek nodded sagely, supping on his pipe.

The four dwarfs were standing on a short, but wide, road fashioned from stone tiles of ruddy terracotta and grey granite that led up to the massive gate. The walkway, a preamble to the majesty of the entrance proper, was decorated with square spiral devices and inset by a band of runes on either edge. Shallow stone steps met the short road and ended in a wide plateau of smoothed rock, similarly inscribed with gold intaglio.

The main gate itself was a full two hundred feet at its highest point and framed by a stout arch of fashioned bronze, inlaid with intricate copper filigree. A cross-hammers device encompassed both sides of the gate, the stone haft of each inset with large gemstones. Judging by the crude scratch marks around the jewels, efforts had been made to remove them but to no avail. On either side of the gate was a symbolic rendering of a dwarf face, each wearing helmets, but one with an eye patch, the other bearing horns, and forged from bronze. At the gate’s apex was a carved stone anvil.

At each end of the immense structure there stood an eighty-foot statue, set proudly upon a rounded stone dais, banded with runic script. On the left there was Grungni, clad in long mail, a forge hammer in his hand. On the right, the imposing figure of Grimnir, war-like with his noble crest standing sternly from his shaven skull, the mighty axes forged by his brother god gripped in both hands. Other, smaller statues gave way to the ancestor gods – kings and thanes of Karak Varn all – set in mighty alcoves carved into the mountain rock. Harsh weathering had worn the statues down, some were even toppled over.

‘Praise Grungni for his skill and wisdom that we humble dawi might fashion such beauty,’ Uthor breathed reverently.

‘For his hand guides all things, and is felt in the hammer blow of every forge,’ Rorek completed the litany.

Uthor clapped the engineer heartily on the shoulder then turned towards Lokki, his expression serious.

‘We had best keep word of their liege-lord’s death to ourselves until we are admitted,’ the dwarf suggested.

Lokki nodded. ‘Agreed,’ he said and cast his gaze up to an empty parapet carved out of the rock and above the gate itself. It was a watch station, yet strangely there were no quarrellers in evidence to garrison it. Still, Lokki noted the crossbow slits and murder holes warily.

‘Ho there!’ he bellowed. ‘The emissaries of Izor, Kadrin and Zhufbar seek an audience with the lord of Karak Varn.’ The last part nearly stuck in the thane’s throat, given his foreknowledge of Kadrin Redmane’s demise. It was likely, given the condition of the bones they’d found, that the dwarfs of the hold already knew of it, but then a successor would have been chosen, or at the very least a warden appointed to act in Redmane’s stead. In either case, it did not explain the fact that there were no guards at the main gate.

‘Fellow dawi beseech admittance and the hospitality of Karak Varn,’ Lokki cried again. He was met by silence.

Though it was only late afternoon the sun was dipping in the sky, thick black clouds, pregnant with rain, smothering it. From the

north, a fierce wind was blowing, its howling chorus tearing through the peaks.

‘The weather bodes ill,’ grumbled Halgar, casting a look behind him at the deepening shadows.

Uthor stepped forward and hammered on the door with his fist. It only made a dull thud. ‘Teeth of Grimnir,’ he swore, ‘this is hopeless! How are we to attend a council of war if we are unable to enter the very hold at which the council is to take place?’

‘I fear we may already be too late, Uthor, son of Algrim,’ said Lokki. ‘But still we must try to get inside. Perhaps if we were to take the Ungdrin road, there is an entryway a few leagues east, and approach through the southern gate?’ he wondered.

‘A journey of two weeks at the very least and we have no way of knowing that the entryway is still open to us,’ said Halgar, wincing as he sat down upon a rock. The spear wound was still a little raw but the tenacious dwarf had refused any treatment. ‘It’ll take more than an urk blade to finish me off, lad!’ he’d bellowed to Lokki, when the thane had expressed his concern. The longbeard mastered the pain quickly and took out a small clay pipe from within his beard. He stuffed it with weed from a pouch on his belt and lit it with a small flint and steel device. Taking a long draw, he blew out a large smoke ring and added, ‘The hour grows late and soon grobi will swarm this mountainside. They are curs, and would likely shoot us in the back from behind a rock,’ he spat, taking another pull on his pipe.

‘Two weeks is too long,’ said Uthor with uncharacteristic urgency. ‘I would gladly fight an army of grobi should circumstances require it, but we need to get inside now and find out what fate has befallen our kinsdwarfs.’

‘There might be another way,’ said Rorek from the back of the group, chewing the end of his pipe as he eyed the lofty watch station a further twenty feet above the two hundred foot gate. He paced forward then stopped a short distance from the entranceway. Raising his left hand in front of him – his right still holding the pipe as he sipped on it – he stuck up his thumb and pointed his forefinger. Looking down the extended finger, squinting slightly with his good

eye, he mumbled something and took three paces backwards. Then he unslung his crossbow from around his side and detached the metal box attachment filled with quarrels. With the others rapt in silent incredulity, he hung the metal box back onto his tool belt and replaced it with another, except this one harboured a coiled up rope with a hook at one end.

Rorek then crouched down on one knee and aimed the crossbow, complete with new attachment, towards the watch station parapet. Squinting slightly, he flipped up a metal catch on the crossbow's stock – it was a small steel ring with a cross in it. Trapping the crossbow in his right armpit and against his shoulder, he tucked the pipe back in his belt, stuck the thumb of his left hand in his mouth and raised it up to catch the wind. Satisfied, he aimed down the steel cross and fired.

There was the sudden crack and twang of a heavy spring as the hook exploded from the end of the crossbow, followed by the whirring of rope unwinding from a metal pulley as it was carried with the hook, flying upwards and then arcing in the direction of the parapet. Each of the four dwarfs followed it, mesmerised. The hook sailed over the parapet and into the open watch station, followed by the clang of steel against stone. Rorek wound the crank at the end of the stock furiously, steel scraping stone above them until the hook caught and the rope pulled taut.

‘Grungni’s steel tongs,’ said the engineer.

‘May they ever bend the elements of the earth to his will,’ Uthor finished for him. ‘What now?’ he asked; slightly dumbfounded.

If any guards were present above the gate, they would have come to investigate by now. It seemed the dwarfs had no choice.

‘Now I climb,’ Rorek returned, setting the crossbow against a rock as he strapped a set of shallow spikes to his boots. ‘Look after these for me,’ he added, shrugging off his weapon’s belt and pack. He then proceeded to walk forward slowly, all the time steadily winding up the slack from the rope. Once he reached the gate wall, he attached a small clasp on the crossbow’s stock to his tool belt, and placed a spiked boot against the mountain rock. He wound a little farther, and when he was certain the rope supported his weight,

placed a second boot against the rock. Now suspended above the ground, he wound the crank slowly and carefully, one steady step after another as he climbed up the sheer wall.

‘Impetuous youth,’ Halgar mumbled from his seat on the rock, puffing smoke rings agitatedly. ‘Beardlings,’ he muttered, despite Rorek’s gnarled leather skin and broad beard making him at least a hundred, ‘no respect for tradition.’

It took Rorek almost an hour to climb the two hundred and twenty feet to reach the edge of the parapet. By the time he did, the sun had all but faded in the sky as the engineer scrambled over it. Rorek gave a short wave to indicate his success and then disappeared from view. All the dwarfs could do now was wait for Rorek to try and open the gate.

‘I HAVE TRAVELLED FAR to reach the hold of my kinsdwarf,’ Uthor remarked, ‘but to venture from the Vaults, across Black Fire Pass no less, that is indeed a perilous journey and Redmane, to my understanding, was not your clan brother.’

The dwarfs had set up camp outside the gate upon the roadway, far enough from the edge of the mountains to ensure they were not surprised by a grobi ambush or unknowingly preyed upon by some other beast. Like the rest of their kin, they had little need for shelter, hardy enough to weather even the harshest conditions, though the lack of a roof, together with several tons of rock, above their heads was a little unsettling.

Uthor sat facing Lokki. Both dwarfs had their weapons laid in front of them, their hands locked around stout tankards, and were seated on their shields. They had made a small fire, surrounded by a thick belt of stones. If they were to attract the attention of grobi, they would do so with or without the flames in their midst. Besides, greenskins hated fire, as did many other denizens of the night – it would be a useful weapon, if it came to it.

The dwarfs were arranged so each could look over the shoulder of the other at the high crags into which the main gate of Karak Varn was wedged, should any threat present itself.

‘Halgar and I...’ Lokki began, looking towards his venerable mentor. Halgar was nearby, and sat unmoving on the rock, his eyes fixed forward, unblinking. His hands were sat upon his lap, restfully. Uthor followed Lokki’s gaze and saw the statuesque longbeard for himself.

‘He bears many scars,’ he said, noting the lack of fingers on Halgar’s right hand.

‘He lost them long ago, but won’t speak of how. At least he never has to me,’ Lokki told him.

‘Is he... all right?’ said Uthor, a hint of concern in his voice as he continued to regard the still form of Halgar.

‘He’s sleeping,’ Lokki explained with a thin smile.

‘With his eyes open?’

‘Grobi will as sure as kill you in your bed as on the battlefield, he always taught me,’ said Lokki.

‘Truly, the wise have much to teach us.’ Uthor nodded his deepest respect in the direction of the slumbering longbeard.

‘Halgar and I,’ Lokki tried again, once he had Uthor’s attention, ‘are here on a debt of honour,’ he explained. ‘Almost nine hundred years ago, during the War of Vengeance, Kromkaz Vargasson, my ancestor and grandsire of Halgar, was ambushed on the way to Oeragor by a band of elf rangers.’

At the mention of elves, Uthor hawked a great gobbet of phlegm into the fire where it sizzled briefly.

‘The elves were swift and cunning,’ Lokki continued, the glow of the fire casting his face in increasing shadows with the gradual onset of night. ‘Four of Kromkaz’s kin lay dead before a shield was raised, an axe drawn, and yet still more fell,’ Lokki went on, repeating by rote the tale that Halgar had taught him. ‘Hiding behind their bows, they herded Kromkaz and his warriors into a narrow defile and my ancestor would surely have died – he and his warriors – were it not for miners from Karak Varn. They emerged from a hidden tunnel, part of the Ungdrin road, at the ridge from where the elves had Kromkaz pinned. The miners, dwarfs of the Copperhand clan, fell upon the elves, chasing them from their hiding places. His foes revealed, Kromkaz ordered his warriors to attack and the elves

were crushed. Kromkaz reached Oeragor that day. They fought alongside the Copperhand clan and witnessed Morgrim, cousin of Snorri, son of the High King, slay the elf lord Imladrik,' Lokki said, and the reflected glare of the fire made his eyes seem as if they were ablaze. 'We come to honour that debt, to repay the dwarfs of the Copperhand clan and the hold of Karak Varn.'

Uthor nodded solemnly, wiping a tear from his eye as he did so. 'Great deeds,' he said, his voice slightly choked, 'great and noble deeds.'

'Ho there!' the distant voice of Rorek broke the reverie.

The engineer was nowhere to be seen. Lokki and Uthor got to their feet, and took up their weapons and armour.

Halgar blinked once and was awake, the old dwarf standing up as if he'd never been asleep.

Uthor kicked out the fire and went over to stand expectantly beside Lokki and Halgar, outside the great gates.

'About time,' Uthor muttered. Halgar's low grumblings were indiscernible, though Uthor thought he caught the word 'wazzock'.

'What are you doing stood over there?' came the engineer's voice again, echoing throughout the canyon.

This time all three turned in the direction of the sound. Still there was nothing. With Lokki leading them, the three dwarfs moved away from the great gate, cautiously, and towards where Rorek's voice was coming from. Negotiating their way around the right-hand side of the gate, to where one of the long galleries of statues was arrayed, they saw Rorek's head about fifty feet up and poking over a shallow lip of stone. Such was the ingenious geology – part natural, part dwarfmade – of the stone overhang that were it not for the fact that his voice had guided them and that his head was sticking out, the engineer would have been invisible.

'Take this,' he hollered from above and shortly afterwards a trail of rope came down to them.

One by one, the trio of dwarfs climbed up a stark, flat face of rock that got them to a short ledge from where Rorek's seemingly disembodied head was watching them keenly.

When they found the engineer, he was sat inside a narrow, dank-looking tunnel. Only a dwarf, and one that was being particularly observant, would have been able to detect the opening. Stretched over the narrow ledge, Rorek was holding up an ironbound grate, thickly latticed and stained in brown and yellowish hues that were visible even in the fading light. A trail of darkly stained water, long since dried up, fed away from the opening into a shallow rut in the ledge and was carried in long streaks down a section of the rock face, away from the statues.

‘I have found our entrance,’ the engineer said proudly.

‘Wazzock!’ bawled Halgar, cresting the ledge. ‘You have found the tunnel to the latrine.’

Uthor wrinkled his nose when he noticed the concealed pit far beneath the grate.

Unperturbed, Rorek crept back from the ledge, retreating back into the tunnel to allow the others to pass. ‘I could not operate the mechanism to open the great gate, try as I might,’ he explained, ‘and this was the only other way in. I’ve disarmed any traps but you’ll have to duck, though.’

Lokki went in first, pausing for a moment at the mention of traps, but traversing the short ledge quickly. Halgar followed, grunting and muttering all the while. Uthor brought up the rear, gathering the engineer’s rope up after him and giving it back to Rorek, along with the rest of the engineer’s possessions.

The latrine grate slammed shut in their wake. Rorek bolted it shut from the inside, before ramming down a heavy looking second gate. Three clockwise turns of a stylised, bronze ancestor face wrought into the wall completed the ritual and was accompanied by the dull retort of more, hidden, locks. ‘Just a short crawl to the outer gateway hall,’ the engineer said and started off down the narrow tunnel. It was disgusting, a long dark yellow stain ran down the middle of it and the walls of the tight space were encrusted with dried filth. The stink of it was palpable.

‘I have smelled urk less foul,’ Halgar grumbled again as the dwarfs set off after Rorek.

TRUE TO ROREK'S WORD, the dwarfs emerged from another iron grate into the outer gateway hall. It was a fairly spartan room, but vast, designed to accommodate huge throngs of dwarfs as they entered from the main gate. Any nobles, craft guild masters or other notable dignitaries could then be received by the lord of the hold in the audience chamber that resided at the bottom of a lengthy stairway connecting it to the outer gateway hall.

'This is how I found it,' said the engineer. The chamber was deserted and barren save for a dwarf helmet resting forlornly on its side in the centre of the room. 'Not mine,' Rorek added.

'Draw your weapons,' Halgar growled, glancing first to the gate on the left and then to the gate on the right – beyond them were the barracks, where a throng's warriors could be housed temporarily. Lastly, his gaze fell to the gate at the far wall, that which led to the stairway.

Axe in hand, shield raised, Lokki said, 'We head for the audience chamber and make oaths to Grungni that we are not too late.'

Beyond the next gate the long stairway wended down into the darkness, great columns of stone carved with clan symbols and runes punctuating it. Though lit by hulking iron braziers set at regular intervals, the shadows cast upon the stairway were long and could hide any number of lurking dangers.

The dwarfs moved swiftly and in single file, two watching the left, and two the right, until they reached the entrance to the audience chamber.

'Someone has been here before us,' Lokki hissed, standing on one side of the double gate that was slightly ajar. Uthor quickly took up a position on the opposite side, axe in hand. Halgar and Rorek waited pensively behind them, ready to charge in.

'Make ready,' said Lokki.

Uthor nodded.

The two dwarfs thrust the door open and charged into the audience chamber, weapons drawn and bellowing war cries. When they saw the dwarf wearing the massive warhelm sitting at a long oval table, the merchant thane bedecked in fine velvet and the

dishevelled looking creature huddled in the corner, counting silver spoons into a burgeoning pack, they stopped abruptly and were lost for words.

‘HOW LONG HAVE YOU been waiting here?’ Lokki asked.

The dwarfs were seated around the wood table, carved of mountain oak and inlaid with intricate runic designs rendered in gold. Introductions had been made and it had been quickly established that they were all there for the same purpose: to attend a council of war at the behest of Kadrin Redmane, to discuss the best way to rid the nearby mountains of the gathering greenskin tribes.

‘Three weeks, is as near as I can reckon,’ said Gromrund, his eyes fierce behind the faceplate of his warhelm. He was the only dwarf not to have divested himself of his helmet – a fact Lokki was wise enough not to press.

‘And you have seen no one in that time?’ Uthor chipped in, leaning back in his stool as he lit up his pipe.

‘I ventured a look up the great stair and even explored two of the clan halls, but there was no one. I returned to the audience chamber and waited as I was bidden,’ Gromrund explained. ‘I had hoped to be received by Lord Redmane,’ he added.

Uthor flashed a glance at Lokki, who then turned to the hammerer.

‘Kadrin Redmane is dead, slain by urk, may he sit at the table of his ancestors,’ he said grimly. ‘Halgar and I found his remains on the Old Dwarf Road at the edge of Black Water. The four of us buried him and his companions in the earth, under the shadow of the karak.’

‘Remains?’ said the hammerer. ‘How can you be sure it was Kadrin Redmane?’

‘He wore this talisman,’ Uthor told him, holding it aloft in the light cast by the torches in the room.

‘Dreng tromm,’ Gromrund muttered, bowing his head, momentarily lost in his thoughts. ‘Then we are too late,’ he said, grimly meeting Lokki’s gaze.

‘Many years too—’

‘Quiet!’ Halgar cut Lokki off before he could speak.

The sudden outburst spooked Drimbold, who dropped a gilded comb that he was using to preen the gibil from out of his beard.

Hakem’s expression showed that he recognised it, but before he could take it up with the Grey dwarf, Halgar was on his feet and stalking to the back of the room. He edged towards a stone statue of Grungni set upon a large octagonal base, axe in hand. Lokki followed him, knowing by now to always trust the longbeard’s instincts. Rorek waited just behind him and readied his crossbow. Uthor went the other way around the table, Gromrund right at his back.

‘What is that stench,’ the hammerer whispered, sniffing at the air.

‘It matters not,’ Uthor snapped, drawing his axe, ‘make ready.’

Hakem followed them, the Barak Varr dwarf stealing a reproachful glance at Drimbold who waited pensively at the table, clutching his pack.

Halgar stopped at the statue and listened intently. He motioned to Lokki. The thane came forward and examined the statue. Looking down, he saw something.

‘Rorek,’ he hissed, beckoning the engineer, who quickly joined him, shouldering his crossbow, as Halgar stepped to the side.

Rorek followed Lokki’s gaze to the octagonal base and noticed a strange configuration of carvings, slightly outset from the rest. Crouching down, the engineer carefully ran his fingers over the stone, seeking out any imperfections. He pulled a piece of the design out, a perfectly round dwarf head effigy and rotated it. When he pushed the head back into place, there was a grinding sound and the dull scrap of a sliding bolt of stone, then a small crack appeared at the lip of the octagonal base.

‘Help me lift it,’ Rorek said, getting his fingers beneath the lip. Lokki did likewise, catching on quickly to what the engineer wanted him to do. Halgar stood poised with Uthor, whilst Gromrund and Hakem had gathered torches and held them at the ready to be thrust at whatever lurked beneath them.

‘Heave!’ Lokki cried and the two of them lifted off part of the octagonal slab, revealing a small, darkened chamber within, below the statue itself, with several tunnels leading off from it. Inside, blinking back the glare of the torches was a dwarf, a thick, leather-bound book clasped to his chest.

‘Ralkan,’ he mumbled, half-crazed, trying to ward off the bright light with his hand, ‘Ralkan Geltberg,’ he repeated, louder and with greater lucidity. The dwarf’s eyes were pleading as he added, ‘last survivor of Karak Varn.’

***Oathbreaker*** can be purchased in all better bookstores, Games Workshop and other hobby stores, or direct from this website and GW mail order.

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