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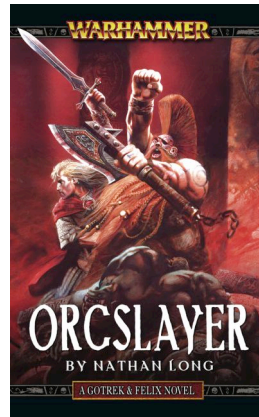
ORCSLAYER

A Gotrek & Felix novel

By Nathan Long

The adventures of dwarf Slayer Gotrek Gurnisson and his human companion, Felix Jaeger, continue in the eighth instalment in the series!

Honouring an ancient pledge, Gotrek & Felix help a dwarf prince reclaim his hold from savage greenskin invaders who have overrun it. But the intrepid heroes find more than they bargain for as they journey into the cold depths of the mountains.

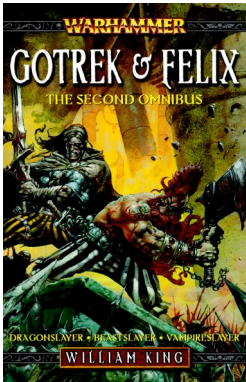


About the Author

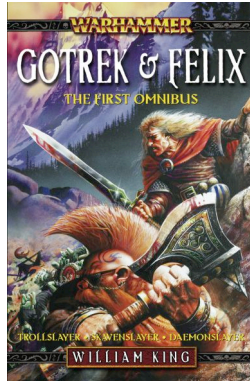
Nathan Long has worked as a screenwriter for fifteen years, during which time he has had three movies made and a handful of live-action and animated TV episodes produced. He has also written three novels, and several award-winning short stories. He lives in Hollywood.

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The following is an excerpt from *Oreslayer* by Nathan Long. Published by the Black Library. Games Workshop, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

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‘ORCS?’ GOTREK SHRUGGED. ‘I’ve fought enough orcs.’

Felix peered at the Slayer in the gloom of the merchant ship’s cramped forward cabin. The thick-muscled dwarf sat on a bench, his flame-bearded chin sunk to his chest, an immense stein of ale in one massive fist, and a broached half-keg at his side. The only illumination came from a small porthole – a rippling, sea-sick-green reflection from the waves outside.

‘But they’ve blockaded Barak Varr,’ said Felix. ‘We won’t be able to dock. You want to get to Barak Varr, don’t you? You want to walk on dry land again?’ Felix wanted to dock, that was for certain. Two months in this seagoing coffin where even the dwarf had to duck his head below decks had driven him stir-crazy.

‘I don’t know what I want,’ rumbled Gotrek, ‘except another drink.’

He took another drink.

Felix scowled. ‘Fair enough. If I live, I will write in the grand epic poem of your death that you drowned heroically below decks, drunk as a halfling on harvest day, while your comrades fought and died above you.’

Gotrek slowly raised his head and fixed Felix with his single glittering eye. After a long moment where Felix thought the Slayer might leap across the cabin and rip his throat out with his bare hands, Gotrek grunted. ‘You’ve a way with words, manling.’

He put down his stein and picked up his axe.

BARAK VARR WAS a dwarf port built inside a towering cliff at the easternmost end of the Black Gulf, a curving talon of water that cut deeply into the lawless badlands south of the Black Mountains and the Empire. Both the harbour and the city were tucked into a cave so high that the tallest warship could sail under its roof and dock at its teeming wharves. The entrance was flanked by fifty-foot statues of dwarf warriors standing in massive stone ship prows. A squat, sturdy lighthouse sat at the end of a

stone spit to their right, the flame of which, it was said, could be seen for twenty leagues.

Felix could see almost none of this architectural wonder, however, for a boat-borne horde of orcs floated between him and Barak Varr's wide, shadowed entrance, and a thicket of patched sails, masts, crude banners and strung-up corpses blocked his view. The line looked impenetrable, a floating barricade of captured and lashed-together warships, merchantmen, rafts, barges and galleys that stretched for nearly a mile in a curving arc before the port. Smoke from cooking fires rose from many of the decks, and the water around them bobbed with bloated corpses and floating garbage.

'You see?' said Captain Doucette, an extravagantly moustachioed Bretonnian trader from whom Gotrek and Felix had caught a ride in Tilea. 'Look like they build from every prize and warship that try to pass; and I must land. I have to sell a hold full of Ind spices here, and pick up dwarf steel for Bretonnia. If no, the trip will make a loss.'

'Is there someplace you can break through?' asked Felix, his long blond hair and his red Sudenland cloak whipping about in the blustery summer wind. 'Will the ship take it?'

'Oh, oui,' said Doucette. 'She is strong, the *Reine Celeste*. We fight off many pirates, smash little boats in our way. Trading is not easy life, no? But... orcs?'

'Don't worry about the orcs,' said Gotrek.

Doucette turned and looked Gotrek from bristling crimson crest, to leather eye-patch, to sturdy boots and back again. 'Forgive me, my friend. I do not doubt you are very formidable. The arms like trunks of the trees, yes? The chest like the bull, but you are only one man – er, dwarf.'

'One *Slayer*,' growled Gotrek. 'Now fill your sails and get on. I've a keg to finish.'

Doucette cast a pleading look at Felix.

Felix shrugged. 'I've followed him through worse.'

'Captain!' a lookout called from the crow's-nest. 'More ships behind us!'

Doucette, Gotrek and Felix turned and looked over the stern rail. Two small cutters and a Tilean warship were angling out of a small cove and racing towards them, sails fat with wind. All the fancy woodwork had been stripped from them, replaced with rams, catapults and trebuchets. The head of the beautiful, bare-breasted figurehead on the warship's prow had been replaced with a troll's skull, and rotting corpses dangled by their necks from its bowsprit. Orcs stood along the rail, bellowing guttural war cries. Goblins capered and screeched all around them.

Doucette hissed through his teeth. 'They make the trap, no? Pinch like the crayfish. Now we have no choice.' He turned and scanned the floating barrier, and then pointed, shouting to his pilot. 'Two points starboard, Luque. At the rafts! Feruzzi! Clap on all sail!'

Felix followed Doucette's gaze as the steersman turned the wheel and the mate sent the waisters up the shrouds to unfurl more canvas. Four ramshackle rafts, piled with looted barrels and crates, were lashed loosely together between a battered Empire man-o'-war and a half-charred Estalian galley. Both of the ships were alive with orcs and goblins, hooting and waving their weapons at Doucette's trader.

The merchantman's sails cracked like pistols as they filled with wind, and it picked up speed.

'Battle stations!' called Doucette. 'Prepare to receive boarders! 'Ware the grapnels!'

Greenskins large and small were pouring over the sides of the man-o'-war and the galley, and running across the rafts towards the point where the merchantman meant to break through. True to the captain's warning, half of them swung hooks and grapnels above their heads.

Felix looked back. The cutters and the warship were gaining. If the merchantman made it through the blockade it might outrun the pursuers, but if it were caught...

'By the Lady, no!' gasped Doucette suddenly.

Felix turned. All along the raft-bound man-o'-war, black cannon muzzles were pushing out of square-cut ports.

'We will be blown to pieces,' said Doucette.

'But... but they're orcs,' said Felix. 'Orcs can't aim to save their lives.'

Doucette shrugged. 'At such a range, do they need to aim?'

Felix looked around, desperate. 'Well, can you blow them up? Shoot them before they shoot us?'

'You joke, mon ami,' laughed Doucette. He pointed to the few catapults that were the merchantman's only artillery. 'These will do little against Empire oak.'

They were rapidly approaching the blockade. It was too late to attempt to turn aside. Felix could smell the greenskins, a filthy animal smell, mixed with the stink of garbage, offal and death. He could see the earrings glinting in their tattered ears and make out the crude insignia painted on their shields and ragged armour.

'Throw me at it,' said Gotrek.

Felix and Doucette looked at him. The dwarf had a mad gleam in his eye.

‘What?’ asked Doucette. ‘Throw you?’

‘Put me in one of your rock lobbers and cut the cord. I’ll deal with these floating filth.’

‘You... you want me to catapult you?’ asked Doucette, incredulous. ‘Like the bomb?’

‘The grobi do it. Anything a goblin can do, a dwarf can do, better.’

‘But, Gotrek, you might...’ said Felix.

Gotrek raised an eyebrow. ‘What?’

‘Er, nothing, never mind.’ Felix had been about to say that Gotrek might get himself killed, but that was, after all, the point, wasn’t it?

Gotrek crossed to one of the catapults and climbed onto the bucket. He looked like a particularly ugly bulldog sitting on a serving ladle. ‘Just make sure you put me over the rail, not into the side.’

‘We will try, master dwarf,’ said the chief of the catapult’s crew. ‘Er, you will not kill us if you die?’

‘I’ll kill you if you don’t start shooting!’ growled Gotrek. ‘Fire!’

‘Oui, oui.’

The crew angled the gun around, huffing at Gotrek’s extra weight, until it faced the man-o’-war, and then cranked the firing arm a little tighter.

‘Hold onto your axe, master dwarf,’ said the crew chief.

‘Perhaps a helmet,’ said Felix. ‘Or a...’

The crew chief dropped his hand. ‘Fire!’

A crewman pulled a lever and the catapult’s arm shot up and out. Gotrek flew through the air in a long high arc, straight for the man-o’-war, bellowing a bull-throated battle cry.

Felix stared blankly as Gotrek flattened against the patched canvas of the man-o’-war’s mainsail and slid down to the deck into a seething swarm of orcs. ‘The real question,’ he said to no one in particular, ‘is how I’m going to make it all rhyme.’

He and the catapult’s crew craned their necks, trying to find Gotrek in the chaos, but all they could see was a swirl of hulking green bodies and the rise and fall of enormous black-iron cleavers. At least they’re not stopping, Felix thought. If they were still fighting, then Gotrek was still alive.

Then the orcs stopped fighting, and instead began running to and fro.

‘Is he...?’ asked Doucette.

‘I don’t know,’ said Felix, biting his lip. After all the dragons, daemons and trolls Gotrek had fought, would he really die facing mere orcs?

The lookout’s voice boomed down from above. ‘Impact coming!’

With a jarring crunch, the merchantman crashed into the line of rafts, smashing timber, snapping cord, and sending barrels and crates and over-

enthusiastic orcs flying into the cold, choppy water. The side of the man-o'-war rose like a castle wall directly to their right, her cannon ports level with Doucette's deck.

Grappnels whistled through the air to the left and right, and Felix ducked just in time to miss getting hooked through the shoulder. They bit into the rail and the deck and the sails, their ropes thrumming tight as the ship continued forwards. The *Reine Celeste's* crew chopped at them with hatchets and cutlasses, but two more caught for each one they cut.

A thunderous boom went off in Felix's right ear, and one of the man-o'-war's cannon, not fifteen feet away, was obscured in white smoke. A cannonball whooshed by at head level and parted a ratline.

Felix swallowed. It looked like Gotrek had failed.

'Boarders!' came Doucette's voice.

The merchant ship had broken through the orc line and was inside the blockade, but was slowing sharply, towing the grapnel-hooked rafts and the rest of the ships with it. The man-o'-war was turning as it was pulled, and its guns remained trained on Doucette's ship as waves of roaring green monsters climbed up the lines and the sides and clambered over the rail. Felix drew his dragon-hilted sword and joined the others as they raced to hold them off – men of every colour and land stabbing, hacking and shooting at the age-old enemy of humanity – Tileans in stocking caps and baggy trousers, Bretonnians in striped pantaloons, men of Araby, Ind and further places, all fighting with the crazed desperation of fear.

There was no retreat, and surrender meant an orc stew-pot. Felix sidestepped a cleaver-blow that would have halved him had it connected, and ran his towering opponent through the neck. Two goblins attacked his flanks. He killed one and kicked the other back. Another orc surged up in front of him.

Felix was no longer the willowy young poet he had been when, during a night of drunken camaraderie, he had pledged to record Gotrek's doom in an epic poem. Decades of fighting at the Slayer's side had hardened him and filled him out, and made a seasoned swordsman of him. Even so, he was no match – physically at least – for the seven-foot monster he faced. The beast was more than twice his weight, with arms thicker than Felix's legs, and an underslung jaw from which jutted up cracked tusks. It stank like the back end of a pig.

Its mad red eyes blazed with fury as it roared and swung a black iron cleaver. Felix ducked and slashed back, but the orc was quick, and knocked his sword aside. There was another boom and a cannonball punched through the rail ten feet to Felix's left, cutting a swath through the melee that killed

both merchants and orcs alike. Red blood and black mixed on the slippery deck. Felix deflected a swipe from the orc that shivered his arm to the shoulder. The catapult's crew chief fell back in two pieces beside him.

Another series of booms rocked the ship, and Felix thought the orcs had somehow got off a disciplined salvo. He glanced past his orc to the man-o'-war. Smoke poured from the cannon ports but, strangely, no cannonballs. The orc slashed at him. Felix hopped back and tripped over the crew chief's torso. He landed flat on his back in a puddle of blood.

The orc guffawed and raised his cleaver over his head.

With a massive *ka-rump* the man-o'-war exploded into a billowing ball of flame, bits of timber and rope and orc parts spinning past. The fighters on the deck of the merchantman were blown off their feet by a hammer of air. Felix felt as if his eardrums had been stabbed with spikes. The orc above him staggered and looked down at his chest, surprised. A cannon's cleaning rod was sticking out from between his ribs, the bristly head dripping with gore. It toppled forwards.

Felix rolled out of the way and sprang to his feet, looking towards the flame-enveloped man-o'-war. So Gotrek had done it after all. But at what cost? Surely there was no way the dwarf could have survived?

Out of the boiling fireball toppled the man-o'-war's mainmast, crashing towards the merchantman's deck like a felled tree – and racing out across it, half climbing, half running, was a broad, compact figure, face and skin as black as iron, red crest and beard smouldering and singed. The top of the mast smashed down through the merchantman's rail and pulverised a knot of goblins that was just climbing over. With a wild roar, Gotrek leapt from this makeshift bridge into the merchantman's waist, right in the middle of the crowd of orcs that was pushing Doucette's crew back towards the sterncastle with heavy losses.

The Slayer spun as he landed, axe outstretched, and a dozen orcs and goblins went down at once, spines and legs and necks severed. Their companions turned to face him, and seven more went down. Heartened, the merchant crew pressed forwards, attacking the confused orcs. Unfortunately, more were running across the rafts, and the merchantman was still caught in a net of grapnels, and pinned in place by the fallen mast.

Felix leapt the forecastle rail, yelling to Doucette as he plunged into the circle of orcs and goblins towards Gotrek. 'Cut the lines and clear the mast! Forget the orcs!'

Doucette hesitated, then nodded. He screamed at his crew in four languages and they fell back, chopping at the remaining ropes and heaving

together to push the man-o'-war's mast off their starboard rail, while the greenskins pressed in to take down the crazed Slayer.

Felix took up his accustomed position, behind, and slightly to the left of Gotrek, just far enough away to be clear of the sweep of his axe, but close enough to protect his back and flanks.

The orcs were frightened, and showed it by trying desperately to kill the object of their fear. But the harder they tried, the faster they died, getting in each other's way in their eagerness, forgetting Felix until he had run them through the kidneys, fighting each other for the chance to kill Gotrek. The deck under the dwarf's feet was slick with black blood, and orc and goblin bodies were piled higher than his chest.

Gotrek caught Felix's eye as he bifurcated an orc, topknot to groin. 'Not a bad little scrap, eh, manling?'

'Thought you'd died at last,' said Felix, ducking a cutlass.

Gotrek snorted as he gutted another orc. 'Not likely. Stupid orcs had all the powder up on the gun deck. I cut some ugly greenskin's head off and stuck it in a cook fire until it caught.' He barked a sharp laugh as he decapitated two goblins. 'Then bowled it down the gun-line like I was playing ninepins. That did it!'

With a screeching and snapping of rending timbers, the merchantman's crew finally pushed the man-o'-war's mainmast clear of the rail. Grapnel lines parted with twangs like a loosed bow's as the *Reine Celeste* surged forwards, straightening out before the wind.

The crew cheered and turned to fight the last few orcs. It was over in seconds. Felix and the others wiped their blades and looked back just in time to see the three orc pursuit ships smash together as they all tried to shoot the gap through the blockade at once. Roars of fury rose from them, and the three crews began to hack at each other while their boats became inextricably fouled in the mess of rafts, ropes and floating debris.

Next to the three-ship squabble, the remains of the burning man-o'-war sank slowly into the gulf under a towering plume of black smoke. Orcs from further along the line were hastily cutting it free so it didn't pull anything else down with it.

Captain Doucette stepped up to Gotrek and bowed low before him. He had a deep gash on his forearm. 'Master dwarf, we owe you our lives. You have saved us and our cargo from certain destruction.'

Gotrek shrugged. 'Only orcs.'

'None-the-less, we are extremely grateful. If there is anything we may do to repay you, you have only to name it.'

‘Hrmm,’ said Gotrek, stroking his still smouldering beard. ‘You can get me another keg of beer. I’ve nearly finished the one I left below.’

IT WAS A TENSE twenty minutes, sailing into the harbour from the blockade, the crew warily watching the rafts and rowboats of orcs that chased after them from the floating barricade until they at last gave up and fell behind. As the *Reine Celeste* got closer to Barak Varr’s cavernous opening, they had to pick their way through a litter of wrecked orc ships half-sunk around the sea wall. Signals flew from the lighthouse, which Captain Doucette answered speedily. Grim-faced dwarf cannon crews watched them from fortified emplacements below it. Dwarf masons were at work on the lighthouse itself, repairing a great hole blasted in its side.

Felix gazed in wonder as the *Reine Celeste* sailed between the two statues and into the shadow of the harbour cavern, staggered by the beauty and immense proportions of the place. The cave was so wide and so deep that he could not see the walls.

Hundreds of thick chains hung down from the darkness of the roof. At the end of each was an octagonal lantern the size of a nobleman’s carriage, which provided an even yellow light that allowed ships to find their way to the docks.

The harbour filled the front half of the cave, a wide, curving frontage from which the branching stone fingers of quays and wharves extended. They were laid out with typical dwarfish precision, evenly spaced and perfectly positioned, to make manoeuvring in and out of the slips as easy as possible for the ships that docked there. There were thirty ships berthed there now, and room for at least fifty more.

A city of stone rose beyond the harbour. It was strange for Felix, who had visited more dwarf holds than most humans, to see such human structures as houses and mercantile buildings arranged along broad avenues under the shadow-hidden roof of the cave, but the dwarfs had made these surface-world forms their own. Never had Felix seen squatter, more massively built houses, all steel grey granite and decorated to the roof peaks with intricate geometric dwarf ornamentation. Even the smallest looked as if it could withstand a cannon-blast.

As they approached the embankment, a tiny dwarf steam ship, little more than a dinghy with a furnace, puffed out to them, and then guided them to an empty slip. A cheer erupted from the dock as the crew threw out their lines and extended the gangplank. There was a crowd of nearly a hundred on hand to welcome Captain Doucette and his crew as they stepped off the ship. Most were dwarfs, but there were a fair number of men as well.

The harbourmaster, a fat dwarf in slashed doublet and breeches, stumped forwards amid the general hubbub of congratulation and greeting. 'Welcome, captain, and twice welcome. You are the first ship to dock here in three weeks, since the accursed orcs set their barricade. A great deed, sir.'

Doucette turned to Gotrek. 'This one do the deed, sir. He blow up the man-o'-war with the single hand, hien?'

'Then we are indebted to you, Slayer,' said the harbourmaster, bowing low. Then, without further ado, he took out his ledger and got to business. 'Now, sir, what do you carry?' He licked his lips eagerly.

'I bring cinnamon and other spices from Ind,' said Doucette grandly, 'and oil of palm, patterned rugs of Araby, and little lace caps for the ladies. Very pretty, yes?'

The harbourmaster's smile crumpled, and many in the crowd fell silent. 'Spices? All you have is spices?'

'And rugs and caps.'

'Spices,' grunted the harbourmaster. 'What good are spices when we have no meat? You can't make a meal of pepper and salt.'

'Monsieur, I...'

'The orcs have been blocking the harbour for three weeks?' interrupted Gotrek. 'What ails you? Why haven't you blasted them out of the water?'

A dwarf sailor with his beard and hair in tarred braids spoke up before the harbourmaster could reply. 'Grungni-cursed greenskins got lucky and sank one of our ironclads, and the other is transporting dwarfs to the war in the north.'

'It's true,' said the harbourmaster. 'With so many gone to aid the Empire, we've barely enough dwarfs and ships to keep the orcs from entering the harbour, let alone chase them away. They infest the landside entrance as well. We're besieged land and sea.'

Gotrek and Felix glanced at each other.

'War?' asked Gotrek. 'What war?'

'You don't know of the war?' asked the harbourmaster. 'Where have you been?'

'Ind and Araby,' spat Gotrek, 'chasing our tails.'

'You say this war is in the Empire?' asked Felix.

'Aye,' said the sailor. 'The Chaos hordes coming south again: usual madness. Some "chosen one" and his lads making a try for the world. A lot of holds sent dwarfs north to help turn them back. Our ships carried many of them.'

'Chaos,' said Gotrek, his one eye shining. 'Now there's a challenge.'

‘It were better if we left men’s troubles to men,’ said the harbourmaster bitterly. ‘The orcs have taken advantage of the clans being away and are rising all over the Badlands. Many small holds and human towns have been put to fire and sword. Even Karak Hirn is lost. The other holds have buttoned themselves up tight until they’re at full strength again.’

‘But how goes the war?’ asked Felix. ‘Does the Empire still stand? Have they reached... Nuln?’

‘The harbourmaster shrugged. ‘Who can say? The overland caravans stopped coming more than a month ago, and every ship that docked before the orcs strung their rafts across our mouth had a different story. One said Middenheim had fallen, another that Altdorf was in flames. The next said the hordes had been pushed back to the Wastes and never got further than Praag. It might already be over for all we know. Grimnir make it so. These orcs must be put down or we shall starve.’

Gotrek and Felix turned back to Captain Doucette.

‘Take us out of here,’ said Gotrek. ‘We must get north.’

‘Yes,’ said Felix. ‘I must get to Nuln. I must see if it still exists.’

Doucette blinked. ‘But... but, my friends, it is impossible. We must make the repairs, no? And I must take on water and supplies, and cargo. It will take a week at least.’ He gestured to the entrance of the harbour, glowing orange in the late afternoon sun. ‘And what of the green ones? Will we make the escape the way we make the entrance? It may not be so easy, eh?’

‘Damn your excuses,’ said Gotrek. ‘I’ve a doom waiting for me. Let’s go.’

Doucette shrugged. ‘My friend, I cannot. Not for a week. It is impossible.’

Gotrek glared at him, and Felix was afraid he was going to grab the captain by the scruff of the neck and drag him back on board, but at last the Slayer cursed and turned away.

‘Where’s Makaiisson when you need him?’ he growled.

‘Forgive me, harbourmaster,’ said Felix, bowing, ‘but can you tell me where we can find lodgings for a week?’

The harbourmaster barked a laugh. ‘Good luck. The city is filled to bursting with refugees from every hold and human town in the Badlands. There isn’t a bed to let at any price, and not much food either, but you’ve cinnamon to dine on, so you’ll make out all right.’

Gotrek balled his fists as the crowd laughed. For once Felix was in a like mood. He wanted to punch everyone within reach in the nose. This was maddening. He had to get north. He had to learn what had become of his

family – his father, his brother Otto. He didn't want to stay in some out of the way port while his home, his country, was ravaged by bloodthirsty barbarians. He had seen what the hordes had done to the lands of Kislev. That the same thing might be happening in the Empire – in the Reikland and Averland – while he was far away and powerless to stop it, was almost more than he could bear.

'Come, manling,' said Gotrek at last, turning towards the city and hefting his axe. 'Let's go make some empty beds.'

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