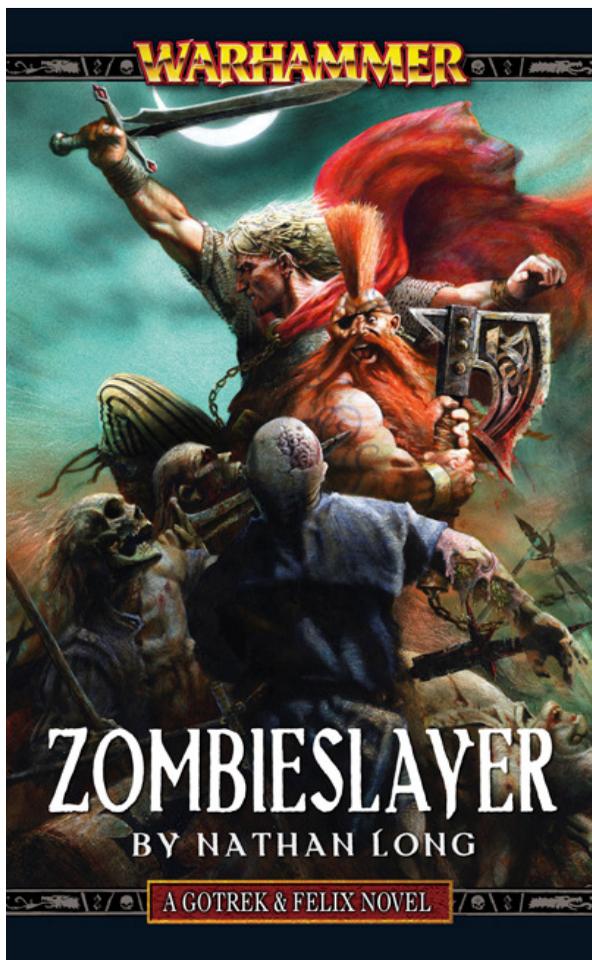




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# **ZOMBIESLAYER**

*A Gotrek and Felix novel*

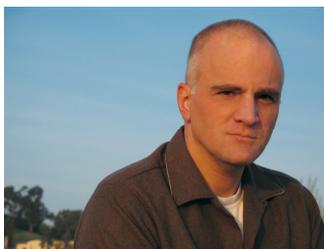
*By Nathan Long*

Pursued by the dark forces of the necromancer Heinrich Kemmler, Gotrek and Felix arrive at Castle Reikgard, where they must hold out against the zombie hordes. The brutality of the siege is unremitting as wave after wave of horrific creatures, led by the undead champion Krell, attempt to take the walls. With supplies running low and morale sinking, the defenders begin to hear terrible whispers and endure awful nightmares. Suspicion and paranoia run rampant within the castle walls, and the defence seems impossible. Somehow Gotrek and Felix must unite the forces of the Empire against Kemmler's ever-growing legion until help arrives.

## **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 enjoys it much more. For Black Library he has written three Warhammer novels featuring the Blackhearts, and has taken over the Gotrek and Felix series, starting with the eighth installment, Orcslayer. He lives in Hollywood.



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

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SPEARMEN, GREATSWORDS AND knights hurried past them as Felix and Kat climbed the stone steps to the top of the castle wall. Torches glinted off their swords and spear-tips as they ran to their positions, and gleamed on the gun barrels of the handgunners who crouched between the crenellations, but the flames couldn't blot out Morrslieb's sickly green glow, which made the lowering clouds look like fat phosphorescent maggots, and turned everyone's skin a pasty grey.

To the right as they reached the parapet, Felix saw von Volgen talking earnestly with his knights, while to the left, Gotrek, Snorri and Rodi peered down over the battlements. Snorri had acquired a peg leg from somewhere, freshly sawn off at the bottom to fit his short frame, and had his hammer back, while Rodi had a new axe of dwarfen make to replace the one he had broken at Tarnhalt's Crown. Felix wondered where it had come from. A gift of the garrison?

'Snorri wants to go down and fight them,' Snorri was saying as Felix and Kat crossed to stand beside the slayers.

'Don't worry, Father Rustskull,' said Rodi. 'They'll come to us soon enough.'

‘Too soon,’ said Gotrek, shooting a grim glare at Snorri.

Kat and Felix leaned out over the walls to see what the slayers were looking at. The wan moonlight confused Felix’s eyes, and at first he saw only twisted shadows lurching through the winter grass, but after a moment the shadows resolved themselves into walking corpses, both beast and man, hundreds of them converging slowly but inexorably on the castle. Already a thick crowd of them milled restlessly at the edge of the swift-flowing moat, while more and more stumbled forwards to join them, a moving carpet of the undead that stretched into the night for as far as he could see.

Gotrek was right. The dead had come too soon. Felix and Kat had planned to leave with Snorri the next morning, and be well on their way to Karak Kadrin before the horde arrived. Now they were trapped in the castle with everyone else. Gotrek must be furious. He had denied himself and Rodi a certain doom at Tarnhalt’s Crown in order to get Snorri away from the undead, and now it was all for naught. Snorri was in worse danger than before, and Gotrek had done nothing but make an enemy of Rodi.

On the other hand, this wasn’t necessarily the end of everything. Felix had fought the undead before and survived. He knew he was more than a match for any ten of them, and Gotrek was more than a match for a hundred. Still his stomach sank and his mouth went dry just looking at their lifeless, upturned eyes. And it wasn’t just the dread of something dead returning to a travesty of life that chilled his blood, though that was horrible enough. It was the sheer, mindless inevitability of them. They were like ants, or water. A raindrop or a single ant was no threat. He could flick them away without effort.

But a million ants, or a flood of water, those would find cracks in any wall, would spill over any barrier, would pull a man down and drown him in sheer numbers.

That was the true horror of the walking dead. They couldn't be reasoned with, couldn't be panicked into running away, couldn't be bought off or convinced to change allegiances. They were an unnatural force, as relentless as time or tides, and like time and tides, they would eventually wear you down, as mountains were worn down into hills and dead cattle were slowly stripped to the bone by thousands of tiny jaws. Zombies were as inevitable as death, for they were death.

'Look at 'em all,' said a spearman, his eyes dull. 'Endless. Endless.'

'And there's beasts among them,' said a handgunner, making the sign of the hammer. 'Sigmar, if that necromancer can make zombies of them monsters, what chance have we?'

'We must all pray to Morr,' said an artilleryman, touching a pin in the shape of Morr's raven on his cap. 'He will settle them and set us free.'

'Less of this talk!' cried General Nordling. 'We are Reiklanders! We fear nothing!' He was striding along the wall at the head of six household knights, with Steward von Geldrecht, and blind Father Ulfram and his acolyte, Danniken, following behind.

The men turned as the general stepped up into a crenellation and faced them, his back to the zombies. Felix could see that he was pale behind his jutting black beard, but he kept the fear out of his voice.

'Yes, our enemy is terrifying,' he said, as more men gathered around him. 'Yes, it is legion. But you are the strongest of the strong, the bravest of the brave, forged in battle against the Empire's greatest foes. Did we not hold

the line together at Wolfenburg? Did we not drive back the fiends at Grimminhagen?’

‘Aye!’ cried the men. ‘For the Empire! For the graf!’

Von Volgen and some of his men filed in at the back of the crowd, listening as Nordling continued.

‘Neither do you stand naked and alone in the field against these horrors!’ shouted the general, slapping the stones of the wall. ‘You are protected by the defences of the finest castle of the Empire. Ogres could not ford our moat without being swept away. Dragons could not tear down our walls, so what chance have these poor corpses? Our battlements are dwarf-built and woven with powerful wards against the undead. They have endured for eight hundred years. Never has Castle Reikguard fallen, and never will it fall!’

The men cheered again, until Nordling raised his hands again. ‘Quiet now for Father Ulfram, who will lead us in a prayer to Sigmar to give us strength for the coming—’

Something black and swift swooped out of the sky and slammed into him before he could finish, smashing him into Father Ulfram and knocking him off his feet.

‘General! Father!’ cried von Geldrecht, ducking and running to them as the black thing swept into the air again on leather wings.

‘Kill it!’ shouted a handgunner, pointing.

‘Shoot it!’ shouted a spearman.

Then the rest came.

Felix could not count the number of black shadows that streaked down out of the dim green sky and slammed into the defenders. It seemed as if the night had shattered and fallen in upon them. All along the walls, people were knocked to the courtyard, armour crushed and flesh torn, while others twisted and flailed as the

things rode their backs, looking for all the world like lunatics dancing in flapping black cloaks. More were attacking the refugee farmers who had set up their meagre tents around the harbour. The peasants ran screaming as the ragged shades shredded their shelters and snatched up men, women and children to drop them to the flagstones or into the dark water of the harbour.

Felix ducked a swooping silhouette and drew his sword as Kat fired an arrow after it.

‘Sigmar! What are they?’

Gotrek sheared the wing off one and it crashed at their feet in a spray of maggots and clotted bile. Felix recoiled at its rotting, snoutless face.

‘Bats,’ said the Slayer.

‘Giant bats!’ said Snorri, delighted.

‘Giant dead bats,’ said Rodi, wrinkling his bulbous nose. ‘Grungni, what a reek.’

‘So much for wards against the undead,’ grunted Gotrek.

He and Rodi clambered onto the battlements and slashed around like whirlwinds as more black bodies dived at them. Snorri tried to follow, but couldn’t manage with his new peg, and so stood guard with Felix over Kat as she continued loosing arrows.

A bat flew straight at Felix’s face. He slashed with Karaghul and opened its chest to the bone, but momentum drove it into him, and it scabbled at his chainmail shirt with diseased claws as teeth like black coffin nails snapped an inch from his cheek.

He retched, nauseated, and shoved it away, then cleaved its decaying head with his sword. It spun down over the wall, and Kat sent another after it, the fletching of her arrow sprouting from its eye. Felix made to turn

back, but Kat laughed and pointed down towards the moat.

‘Look at them!’ she cried. ‘Come on, you bone bags! More! More!’

Felix followed her gaze and saw that the undead, apparently stirred by the fighting over their heads, were pushing towards the walls – and toppling straight into the moat, where they were swept away by the roiling current. Dozens were floating downstream, and dozens more were falling.

Kat smiled grimly. ‘At this rate the whole horde will be washed away!’

Gotrek chopped a bat out of the air directly above her head. ‘Forget them, little one,’ he rasped. ‘Fight what you can hit.’

Kat scowled and she and Felix turned back to the bats on the walls, dropping them with sword and bow as they wheeled and swooped.

All along the parapet, the handgunners, knights and spearmen had rallied around their officers and were now fighting off the black shadows in good order, but they had already suffered terrible losses, and more fell every moment – punched from the parapet by the heavy bodies of the bats and torn apart by their claws. On Felix’s right, the greatswords were sweeping their huge blades in wide circles over their heads, protecting Captain Bosendorfer as he pulled one of their number back onto the battlements. On his left, General Nordling had recovered, and was forming a square with his retinue around Father Ulfram and his acolyte while Steward von Geldrecht, bleeding badly from a wound on his leg, limped after them. Further on, Lord von Volgen and his men were fighting their way down the far stairs while the bats slammed down into them like black meteors.

In the courtyard Captain Zeismann and his spearmen were trying to herd the peasants towards the wide double doors of the underkeep as their tents burned down around them, but the farmers were being picked off as they ran, and many spearmen fell as well.

Then, with a sound like windmill blades turning in a gale, something huge swept over the wall, blotting out the sky. Felix ducked, and the thing skidded to a landing on the parapet beyond him, ploughing through Nordling's knights and knocking them flat with its enormous wings, as the armoured warrior on its back swept around it with an ugly black axe.

The beast was a wyvern – or perhaps a crude patchwork of several wyverns. It had a wyvern's vast leathery wings and whipping tail, and a cruel, horned head that snapped at the end of a long neck, but its scaly skin was ten different colours, the wings black, the head green, the body grey and red and brown, and in ten different stages of decay, with thick scars and stitches holding it all together; but as gruesome as it was, the rider mounted athwart its hulking shoulders was more terrifying still.

He looked more than a yard taller than Felix, and was encased in scarred black armour of ancient design. A heavy-browed skull, etched with age, glowered out from under a horned helm, green flames kindling in his empty eye sockets. He swung from the wyvern's saddle and waded into Nordling's retinue, his black axe trailing a glittering cloud of dark specks like the tail of a comet. Three knights died instantly as the fell weapon shredded their armour like parchment, and the rider trod their corpses underfoot to stride towards Nordling and Father Ulfram as von Geldrecht crabbed out of the way, gibbering with fear.

Gotrek, Rodi and Snorri stared. The ancient rune of power on the head of Gotrek's axe was glowing red.

'Mine,' he said.

'No, mine,' said Rodi.

'Snorri's!' shouted Snorri.

The three slayers charged as Nordling raised his sword and stepped in front of the skeletal warrior to protect Father Ulfram. The rider's flaking axe snapped the general's sword in half and smashed him off the parapet to bounce down the roof of the temple of Sigmar and into the courtyard.

'Face me, wight!' roared Gotrek, chopping into the wing of the undead wyvern as he dodged past it. The wyvern shrieked at the wound and leapt into the air as Rodi and Snorri ran under it.

'Face me!' called Rodi.

'Face Snorri!' bellowed Snorri.

'Come on,' said Felix, hacking at the swooping bats and starting forwards. 'We're safer near them than away.'

Kat dropped another bat point-blank, then followed, shouldering her bow and drawing her hatchets.

Gotrek reached the armoured wight first, and slashed for his knees just as he was turning from von Geldrecht to see what the commotion was. The dread warrior roared and blocked, and a choking cloud of obsidian dust shivered from his black axe as it clanged haft to haft with Gotrek's, covering the Slayer in black grit. Rodi struck next, but his blow glanced off the ancient black armour without leaving a mark. Snorri's hammer did no better. The wight seemed hardly to feel their attacks, and hacked back at them.

‘Stand aside, Gurnisson!’ shouted Rodi. ‘You owe me this doom for that which you denied me at Tarnhalt’s Crown!’

‘I owe you nothing!’ barked Gotrek. ‘Take it if you can.’

Kat and Felix fell in behind the slayers, then turned as the wyvern whumped down again behind them, snapping and shrieking. Felix cursed and dodged right as Kat dived left, almost falling off the narrow parapet. Trapped with the slayers between the beast and its master. Oh yes, much safer. What had he been thinking?

Kat buried her hand-axe in the beast’s scaly neck, and it whipped around, crushing her against the wall.

Felix slashed, and Karaghul sheared off one of the wyvern’s heavy horns. It roared and snapped, and he fell back into Snorri as the slayer was dodging back from the wight. They went down in a heap and the wyvern raised up, its fanged jaws distending as it snapped down at them.

Snorri swung his hammer up and knocked the scaly head aside. Its snout slammed into the parapet inches from Felix’s shoulder, shattering the stone, and he and the old slayer scrambled up – only to have the wyvern’s wing sweep them off the wall.

Felix froze, certain he was about to be smashed to a bloody pulp on the cobbles of the courtyard, but the impact came sooner than he expected, and he found himself rolling down the slanted roof of the temple of Sigmar in a scree of broken slates. He slid to a stop inches from the edge, then grunted as Snorri crashed on top of him.

Kat leapt down to the roof as the wyvern’s jaws clacked shut inches behind her. She skidded to a stop beside him.

‘Are you all right?’

‘Aye,’ wheezed Felix as he and Snorri untangled themselves. ‘You?’

‘Snorri is fine,’ said Snorri. ‘He landed on something soft.’

They scrambled up the slant again, dodging and swiping at bats as Snorri’s peg leg slipped on the broken slates. Above them, the tide of the battle had turned. Rodi was driving back the undead wyvern, his axe making gruesome cuts in its head, neck and breast, while Gotrek was backing up the armoured wight and matching him strike for strike as his axe traced rune-red swipes in the air.

But as Gotrek blocked a blow to his head, the champion turned his swing and cut at the Slayer’s legs instead. Gotrek dodged back instinctively, but not quite quick enough, and the blade of the black axe grazed his thigh, cutting through his striped trows and slicing into his flesh.

The wound only seemed to anger the Slayer, and his next strike was so strong that it nearly knocked the undead champion over the parapet, and left him fighting for balance. Gotrek chopped at his flailing left arm and sheared through it at the elbow. The wight’s armoured forearm bounced away along the parapet and became nothing but a lifeless bone rattling inside a battered vambrace.

He staggered back, as Gotrek pressed his advantage, denting his armoured legs and torso. The undead warrior had had enough. He jumped back from Gotrek, then barged past Rodi and leapt into the saddle of the reeling wyvern, spurring it savagely. The two slayers raced after him, but were too late. The wyvern flared its massive

wings and knocked them back, then dived over the battlements and away.

‘Come back, you coward!’ bellowed Gotrek.

‘How can the dead be scared to die?’ shouted Rodi.

‘Snorri missed the fight,’ said Snorri.

‘There are still plenty to fight, Snorri,’ said Felix, helping Kat back onto the parapet.

But all at once, there weren’t.

As if an order had been given, the bats flapped clear of their combats and flew after the dead wyvern and its malefic rider. Within a matter of heartbeats, the battle was over but for the groaning of the wounded and the weeping of the peasants in the courtyard.

While officers called orders and soldiers called for the surgeon, Gotrek and Rodi turned from the battlements, their faces hard and angry. The wound in Gotrek’s thigh had drenched his trews red to the knee, but he paid it no mind. Instead he crossed to the severed forearm of the undead champion and picked it up. It began to disintegrate as soon as he touched it, the armour rusting away in brown flakes and the radius, ulna and finger bones within it crumbling to dust.

Gotrek crushed it in his meaty hand and looked out over the walls. ‘A worthy doom,’ he said.

‘Aye,’ said Rodi, glaring at him. ‘For me, Gurnisson.’

Gotrek turned on the young slayer. ‘I did not rob you of your doom at Tarnhalt, Balkisson. You put down your hammer for the same reason I put down my axe.’

Rodi snarled and stepped closer to him. ‘You forced me to it.’

‘You were free to defy me,’ said Gotrek. ‘As you were free to walk into the wood today.’

Rodi’s hands balled into fists, and his face, already red, turned a deep vermillion. Gotrek put his axe on his

back and waited, hands at his sides, meeting Rodi's furious glare with his single contemptuous eye.

'Snorri thinks he would have found his doom tonight,' said Snorri, trying to climb back onto the parapet as Kat helped Felix up, 'if some coward hadn't pushed him.'

Gotrek and Rodi held their staredown for another second, then broke off to take the old slayer's hands.

'Lucky for you, you didn't,' said Rodi.

He and Gotrek pulled Snorri onto the wall and Felix breathed a sigh of relief. Snorri couldn't have done it on purpose, but he had intervened at just the right time. The last thing Castle Reikguard needed just now was a pair of slayers brawling across the ramparts.

'Dwarfs!' gasped von Geldrecht, limping forwards on the arm of a knight, and followed by Father Ulfram and Danniken. 'Dwarfs, I owe you my life, and I thank you. You, more than anyone, drove that hellish wight away and saved me from its axe. But – but did you not tell us the leader of the undead horde was a mad old man?'

'That wasn't Hans the Hermit, my lord,' said Felix, shivering. 'I don't know who it was, or what. I have never seen it before.'

'It was Krell,' rasped Gotrek.

Von Geldrecht blinked. 'Who? Who is Krell?'

'Krell the Holdbreaker,' said Gotrek. 'The Lord of the Undead.'

'The Butcher of Karak Ungor,' said Rodi. 'The Doom of Karak Varn.'

'Whose name is written a hundred times in the Book of Grudges,' said Gotrek.

'Who so hated dwarf-kind that he returned from the dead to seek vengeance upon us,' said Rodi.

'My doom,' said Gotrek.

'My doom, said Rodi.

Gotrek glanced at the young slayer and gave him a vicious smile. 'He may well be, beardling,' he said, then wiped blood from his wounded leg and looked at his hand. 'But he has already killed me.'

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