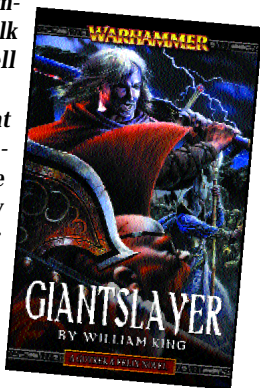


GIANTSLAYER

A Gotrek & Felix novel by William King

A DARKNESS IS gathering over the storm-wracked isle of Albion. Foul creatures stalk the lands once more and the omens foretell the coming of a great evil.

Gotrek and Felix are compelled to fight the malignant evil that terrorises the populace before it can grow to threaten the whole world. With the aid of the mighty high elf mage, Teclis, they must decipher and utilise the secrets of the Old Ones. Only then can they hope to save the innocent and vanquish the dark master.



WILLIAM KING's popular Gotrek & Felix saga now stretches to seven books. He is also the author of the ongoing Space Wolf series, and the eldar novel Farseer.

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AS FELIX RUSHED forward he noticed a strange stink, like of rotting flesh and congealed blood. It came from the Chaos warrior, he was sure, and it was as nauseating as it was appropriate. Closing the distance revealed to him how huge Grume was – a veritable mountain of armoured flesh. The shrieking of his mace made Felix's head ache and his teeth grind. He felt like his ears were starting to bleed. How the Slayer withstood this, he could not guess.

Through the stinking fog he could see Gotrek still stood frozen as the mace descended. True to his word, Grume was not aiming for the Slayer's head but for his axe arm. He obviously did intend to capture and torture the Slayer. This did not bode well for the rest of them. Behind him, Felix could barely hear the sounds of carnage as Snorri fought with the beastmen.

Grume's insane booming laughter was barely audible over the daemonic shriek of his weapon. Gotrek's face looked pale and flinty. The mace descended like the hammer of some mad war god. At the last second, Gotrek's axe lashed out. The rune-covered blade bit into the daemonic skull. Lines of fire flashed along the star-metal. The daemon's head shattered into a thousand pieces. The shrieking ceased instantly and the stinking cloud began to disperse.

'You will break my bones, will you?' said Gotrek, almost conversationally. The axe lashed out, catching the giant just behind the knee. The ornate armour buckled as if it were made from tin. Blood gouted. Grume began to topple backwards like a massive tree. Felix had to jump to one side to avoid being crushed.

'You will throw my battered form to your followers for their sport, will you?' The axe descended again on the giant's other leg, cutting through armour and tendons, paralysing it. Grume

began to push himself upwards with both hands. The axe flickered out, taking off the left hand at the wrist. Another blow lopped off the right arm at the elbow. Gotrek spat on his recumbent form and turned to face the beastmen. There was an awful casual cruelty about the Slayer's actions that chilled Felix. The virtually limbless form of the Chaos warrior thrashed in the snow, bleeding to death.

Gotrek strode purposefully towards the beastmen, axe held ready. It was too much for them. They turned and fled in a mad rush. As they did so, Felix noticed the strange eye-like object still hovered there, almost invisible in the gloom. It swivelled backwards and forwards, like an eye tracking them.

What new evil was this, he wondered?

KELMAIN TURNED TO consult his brother's floating image. 'So much for the mighty Grume,' he said. The image of the dying Chaos warrior was still imprinted on his mind.

'It was predictable. The likes of Gotrek Gurnisson are not to be overcome by the Grumes of this world. That axe carries a mighty freight of destiny.'

'Best we should remove it from the gameboard of the world then,' said Kelmain smiling.

'Proceed with your plan,' said Lhoigor. 'Spring the trap.'

'NO!' SHOUTED FELIX as Gotrek and Snorri disappeared into the gloom. 'Wait, we must have a plan!'

It was already too late, he knew. He turned and saw Max Schreiber walking closer. A glow surrounded him. The snow seemed to sizzle away at his feet, turning to steam. It was an eerie sight and made the magician seem somehow less than human.

'Too late, Felix,' he said. 'We'd best go after them.'

'Did you see that strange floating eye?' Felix asked.

Max nodded. 'A magical construct of considerable power – the focus of some sort of observation spell would be my guess.'

'You mean we are being watched by a wizard?'

'Aye – and a very powerful one too. Most likely the one who planned this attack, and led the Chaos worshippers to us.'

'A Chaos wizard as well as that monster, great,' said Felix sourly. 'Is there anything you can do about it?'

'We shall see when we find the others,' said Max Schreiber. 'Best get going, or we'll never catch up with them.'

‘Don’t worry,’ said Felix. ‘Dwarfs have short legs. There’s no way they are going to outrun us.’

EVERY FEW HUNDRED strides, they found evidence of where the beastmen had turned at bay and sought to rend the dwarfs. Their lack of success was evident by the number of mutated corpses that lay in the snow. Now bigger, thicker flakes were starting to fall and fill the tracks and cover the corpses. Soon, he knew, there would only be odd-looking humps where once living, breathing beings had been. It was all rather depressing, he supposed.

Beside him, Max strode along, seemingly impervious to the cold. Felix was glad the mage was near. The aura surrounding him gave off enough heat to ward the worst of the chill. Perhaps Max was directing it that way, to help him. Felix did not feel like asking. It also provided enough light to see by.

‘They went that way,’ said Felix, pointing in the direction of Gotrek’s tracks. The Slayer had a very recognisable print. His feet were larger and broader than a man’s, and his stride was shorter.

‘That does not surprise me,’ said Max.

‘I have the feeling you’re about to tell me something I won’t like,’ said Felix, studying the gloom beyond the circle of light, looking for the reflected glint of beastmen’s eyes. Without the Slayers, he and Max might be overcome. All it would take would be one lucky spear cast to incapacitate the wizard, and then he would be alone against the monsters.

A frown of concentration passed across Max’s face. ‘There is a massive source of magical energy in that direction. It blazes like a beacon. I can sense it even from here. It’s powerful beyond belief and tainted by the power of Chaos.’

‘Why did you not tell us this earlier? Didn’t want to worry us, I suppose.’

‘No, Felix, I did not tell you earlier because it was not there earlier.’

What new horror waits now, Felix wondered?

FROM UP AHEAD came the sound of fighting. Felix thought he recognised Gotrek’s bellowing and Snorri’s warcry. He raced up the slope through the snow and emerged into a clearing in the woods. Ahead of them lay what a great barrow or a small hill,

incredibly weathered and ancient-looking. In its side was an arch, comprised of two massive uprights and a stone crossbar. All of the barrow except the arch was encrusted with newly fallen snow. It glowed oddly, and when the snow touched it, the flakes melted immediately. He guessed the stench of burning vegetation in the air came from incinerated moss.

'What the hell is going on here?' he asked.

'Magic,' said Max. 'Of a very powerful kind.'

Felix could see a battle was taking place at the entrance to the barrow. Snorri and Gotrek hacked and slew their way through a mass of beastmen. The retreating monsters fought a desperate rearguard action as they fled within. Felix and Max followed to the entrance. The way down was peculiar, unlike anything Felix had ever seen before. The walls were massive blocks of undressed stone covered in strange angular runes. Several more arches supported the ceiling, as the corridor descended down at an angle into the gloom. Somewhere off in the darkness was another intensely glowing arch.

The mass of the beastmen raced through the glowing arch and simply disappeared. It was uncanny. One moment they were there, the next they were gone, leaving only a pattern of ripples in the glowing air. Looking closely, Felix could see that the glowing eye hovered over the scene, shifting its location with blurring speed as it moved to position itself for a better view of the combat.

Felix decided that he had better go do his part. He raced forward, feeling a strange shiver run down his spine as he passed underneath one of the stone arches. He did not need to be a powerful magician like Max to know there was something supernatural going on here.

Snorri slashed and whirled his way through the beastmen corpses, hacking limbs and crushing heads with merry abandon. As he got within range of the glowing arch something odd occurred. A massive tentacle, thick as the hawser cable on a moored ship, emerged from the glow and wrapped itself around him. Before Felix could shout a warning, the tentacle contracted, and Snorri was dragged through into the glow. In a heartbeat he had vanished.

Gotrek roared a curse, and redoubled his efforts, chopping down the last few beastmen. Felix strode up to his side. 'What was that thing that took Snorri?' he asked.

'A daemon, most likely, and soon to be a dead one, or my doom will be upon me,' replied the Slayer. Without a backward glance, he leapt forward into the glow. In a second he too was gone.

'Wait!' shouted Max. 'You have no idea where that portal leads.'

Felix stood before the glowing arch and wondered what to do. There was no trace of the Slayers, the beastmen or the tentacled monster. He could hear no sounds. Even as he watched, the shimmering began to vanish. Suddenly something blurred overhead. There was a sickening crunch. Looking back, he could see that Snorri had been cast out through the portal with the speed of a stone shot from a sling. Either by accident or design he had been thrown directly into Max. The two of them lay sprawled unconscious on the ground.

Instinct told Felix that he had mere moments to come to a decision. He knew that if he stood here until the light vanished, whatever portal the Slayer had passed through would be closed, and with it any chance of following him. Even as he stood there undecided, something small and round and hard smashed into his back, and propelled him forward into the light. Of course, he thought. I forgot all about the floating eye.

A wave of cold passed through him, and for a moment a dizzying sense of vertigo threatened to overwhelm his senses. He felt like he was falling down a huge mineshaft, accelerating at enormous velocity. He braced himself for an impact and was surprised to find himself stumbling along on solid ground. A moment later he wished he wasn't as a terrifying sight greeted his gaze.

Up ahead was a vast tentacled thing, a cross between a squid and a serpent, some hideous mutant daemon of Chaos. Its tentacles lashed out attempting to grasp Gotrek but the Slayer stood his ground and slashed away at them with his axe, severing the tips of some, drawing great gouts of gore from others. All around lay the shattered bodies of dozens of beastmen. A few more still fought, grasped in its giant tentacles. Obviously whatever this enormous brute was, it did not discriminate between its fellow Chaos worshippers and anybody else when it came to seeking its prey.

Something whizzed over Felix's head, and he saw the glittering eye hurtle past. For a second he could have sworn he heard

chilling infernal laughter and then the thing flashed out of view. In the distance behind the daemonic thing, Felix thought he saw a black robed figure reach up and catch the gem, then race off into the gloom.

Felix felt a blaze of heat behind him, and the shimmering glow of light dimmed. He turned to look back the way he came, and was surprised to see nothing but a huge archway that seemed to look out onto infinite space. Blazing lights passed to and fro in the gloom. Not stars, he thought, but will-o'-the-wisps of sorcerous light.

Briefly he felt his sanity totter. Somehow, he had been transported to an entirely different location beyond his normal ken. There was no sign of the snow-covered forest, or the great barrow, or Max Schreiber or Snorri either. There was only an arch reminiscent in shape of the one he had passed through, but somehow newer-looking and carved with the gargoyle faces of some strange toad-like beings. This was indeed strong magic, he thought, wishing that he had paid more heed to what Max had said.

A howling war-cry behind him reminded him that battle still raged and he was part of it. Even as he watched, the last of the beastmen were raised high in the tentacles of the daemon and dropped into its huge gaping beak-like maw. There was a hideous crunching sound as bones were broken, and blood splattered the daemon's mouth. At the same time, more of the monstrous tentacles snaked past Gotrek and came looping towards him. He threw himself to one side, avoiding its suckered grasp, and lashed out with his sword. The blade bit deep into rubbery flesh. Black blood oozed slowly forth. He dodged and weaved forward, hacking at tentacles that came near him as he battled his way towards Gotrek's side. At times like this, it seemed like the safest place to be.

A rush of displaced air warned him, and he threw himself forward as a massive tentacle swept through where his head had been. He hit the ground rolling and noticed that the floor looked odd. It was made of old stone that looked as if it has been eaten away by something like acid. Set in each of the blocks were odd runes, straight lines and serpent-like squiggles. They were unlike anything he had ever seen before.

He let his momentum carry him to his feet, and found himself within a hairsbreadth of being decapitated. Gotrek's axe

stopped mere fingerbreadths from his face. Felix felt a surge of relief that the Slayer had such control, otherwise he would surely be dead.

'I've seen better-looking creatures,' Felix said, gazing up at the thing. It was huge, the tentacled maw arched nearly four times his height overhead. He could see that it dripped slime. The eyes that looked down on him, though, were filled with a baleful and awfully human intelligence.

'It's probably thinking the same thing about you, manling,' said Gotrek, ducking the sweep of a massive tentacle, retreating step by step before the oncoming bulk of the thing. Felix realised that this was a hopeless battle. Even the Slayer's mighty axe was all but useless against a monster of such size and power. Gotrek's mighty hacks were like a small boy hitting a bull with a table-knife. They were causing the beast discomfort, but it was doubtful they would kill it.

Felix felt a surge of despair. How had it come to this? A few minutes ago they had been seated around a cheery fire in a comfortable cave, and now they were, well, the gods alone knew where, fighting some hideous daemonic thing.

Unless he did something desperate he could see no chance of surviving. Snarling, he drew back his sword and cast it like a spear directly into the one huge eye of the beast. It flew straight and true and embedded itself in the foul jelly of the great unwinking orb. The sword buried itself deep and Felix hoped it had lodged in the creature's brain.

A second later he regretted his actions. The monster let out an evil high-pitched shriek and began to lash the air blindly with its tentacles. Felix saw Gotrek sent tumbling head over heels to land on the floor by a convulsion of the thing's tentacles. Felix threw himself flat to keep himself from being swatted like a bug.

The huge monster began to retreat away from them, still lashing the air. A few seconds later a foul cloud of black inky gas billowed from orifices near its beak. Felix had just enough time to hold his breath before the cloud overwhelmed them, cutting off sight.

Felix noticed that his skin was stinging and tears billowed from his eyes. A foul stench filled his nostrils worse even than that of the giant Chaos warrior. That the gas was as poisonous as that from some vile Skaven weapon, he did not doubt.

Desperately he launched himself backwards, hoping to get out of it before his lungs gave out and the fumes overcame him.

Even as he did so, he saw the blurred outline of something huge and snake-like emerge from the mist. He had only a second to recognise it as one of the daemon's tentacles before it made contact with his skull. The force of the impact of the great rope of muscle smashed him flat. Involuntarily he opened his mouth, and took a lungful of the foul polluted air.

Damn, he thought, as his chest felt like it was catching fire, and a wave of blackness sent him tumbling down into the darkness.

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