

DAEMONSLAYER

A GOTREK & FELIX NOVEL BY WILLIAM KING

GOTREK & FELIX join an expedition northwards in search of the long-lost dwarf hold of Karag Dum. Setting forth for the hideous Realms of Chaos in an experimental dwarf airship, the heroic pair are sworn to recover the ancient treasures or die in the attempt.

WILLIAM KING's popular Gotrek & Felix saga now stretches to six books. He is also the author of the ongoing Space Wolf series, and is currently developing an entirely new series from his home in Prague.



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WARPSTORM

FELIX PRESSED HIS nose against the cold glass of the window and for the first time felt truly terrified. The horns calling the crew to battle stations had just sounded, and all the dwarves ran to take up their positions at the guns and engines, leaving Felix to stand idly by, a helpless spectator in this time of fear. He looked down on the eerie landscape below.

The desert had a wild and terrible beauty. Enormous rock formations towered over the glittering sand like wind eroded statues of monsters. An emerald lake glittered greenly under the crimson sky. By its shores two enormous armies marched towards each other in a tide of flesh and metal.

Felix wondered at his fear. The warriors of Chaos advancing below seemed not at all concerned with the airship overhead. They were far too intent on each other. Only occasionally would a beastman or a Chaos warrior look up at the sky and brandish a weapon. None of the missile weapons they carried appeared to have the range to hit the airship. Makaïsson had sounded the alert just to be on the safe side, however, and Felix could not blame him. The numbers and the insane ferocity of the crowd below them were terrifying.

These were both mighty forces, perhaps the largest armies he had ever seen. Thousands of beastmen surged below, like a sea of hooved and horned animals grown upright into twisted parodies of men. Felix had fought these followers of Darkness before, but now something about the sheer numbers here made them seem far more terrifying than ever before. Huge banners rose from the midst of the forces, each a twisted parody of the heraldic emblems of his distant homeland. Monstrous men garbed in incredibly ornate black armour marched at the head of each force or rode at its flanks on mutated steeds which dwarfed even the largest of human war-horses.

There were thousands upon thousands of warriors present. Felix wondered at that. How could this barren landscape support such vast regiments? Obviously there was sorcery at work here. Looking down on these immense armies he recalled the descriptions he had read of the previous incursions of Chaos, during the time of Magnus the Pious, when Praag had been besieged and it seemed like the forces of the Dark Gods were about to sweep away the entire civilised world. They had always seemed faintly unreal to him, with their lurid depictions of daemons, and their enormous hordes of twisted feral things but those armies down there made those hellish visions seem all too plausible. He could easily see those mighty forces crashing through Blackblood Pass and smashing through the lands of men. For the first time he started to truly understand the power of Chaos, and he wondered why it had not yet devoured the world.

With a roar Felix could hear even above the racket of the airship's engines, the armies closed the distance between them. Felix trained the telescope, focusing on those distant figures, turning them from tiny marionettes into living breathing warriors.

A huge figure garbed in armour of black iron, on which was inscribed redly glowing runes charged his barded war-horse towards a mob of beastmen. This foul knight brandished an enormous battleaxe in each hand. The horse's trappings were fantastically ornate. Its head was shielded by a moulded mask that gave it the features of a daemonic dragon. The armour on its body was segmented like that of a centipede and on each section were numerous discs, carved in the shape of leering daemon masks. The mounted warrior rode full pelt into a band of beastmen. His axe decapitated a foe with each swing. His horse's hooves dashed out the brains of another, and it continued onwards trampling the bodies of the slain into bloody mush. Behind the knight his fellows charged with maniacal fervour towards packs of beastmen that outnumbered them more than twenty to one. They seemed fearless and uncaring of whether they lived or died.

In another part of the battlefield, monstrous minotaurs armed with axes the size of small trees hacked their way through all that opposed them. They towered over the beastmen the way adults tower over small children, and it seemed to Felix that a

beastman had about as much chance of overcoming one as a child had of overcoming a full grown man. Even as Felix watched, one of the bull-headed giants caught a goat-headed thing on its horns and lifted it kicking and screaming from the ground. With a shake of its head, the monster sent its gored victim flying twenty paces to land atop its comrades. The impact sent half a dozen of them sprawling onto the bloody sand. But then, even as Felix watched, the rest of beastmen swarmed over the minotaur, striking with spears, clambering up its legs, harrying it the way a pack of wild dogs would savage a bear. The massive creature fell and disappeared in a cloud of dust, to be trampled under the beastmen's hooves and impaled on their spears.

Winged humanoids with daemonic features rose like a flock of hideous bats and wheeled over the battlefield. At first Felix feared that they were going to attack the airship and his hands reached for the hilt of his sword but then the hellish flock gave out a hideous, ear-piercing shriek and descended down onto the beastmen hordes. They lashed out with taloned claws and ripped their victims limb from limb with a strength that seemed supernatural, before being lopped into pieces themselves by their frenzied foes.

In the centre of all this howling madness loomed a gigantic figure clad in the most fantastically ornate armour Felix had ever seen. Every piece of it appeared to moulded with grinning skulls and leering gargoyle faces. The warrior was mounted on a skeletal steed which seemed barely able to sustain its great weight and yet moved with a speed like the wind. In his right hand, the Chaos champion held an enormous scythe; in his left, a banner depicting a throne of skulls whose empty eye-sockets wept tears of blood. The warlord gave instructions to his followers with great sweeping gestures of the scythe and hordes of lesser, black armoured warriors leapt to obey, running to their deaths or to dispatch their foe with a strange savage joy.

Felix had to admit that they were terrifying. He watched aghast at the sheer frenzy with which the combat was fought. He had never seen such insane hatred as these two forces seemed to possess for each other, and suddenly it came to him that here was the reason why the followers of Darkness had yet to overwhelm the world. They were as divided amongst themselves as the nations of men were; more so, in truth. Perhaps

then the rumours of rivalry between the Ruinous Powers were true. For this Felix was profoundly grateful, for here was a force that inspired respect and fear.

There was something disturbing about all this as well. What if the powers were somehow to put aside their rivalry and turn their faces towards the world? What if some mighty warlord was to arise among the forces of Chaos and unite them in one invincible horde? Then the uncountable hosts would march down on Kislev and the lands beyond. Suddenly Straghov's fortress and his thousand lancers seemed pitifully few.

In a matter of minutes the airship swept over the battle and it dwindled away behind them, lost in the enormous immensity of the endless desert. No matter how vast the warring armies were, this landscape could reduce them to less than the significance of ants. A vast dark gloom, obscuring the northern horizon. The very sight of it filled him with foreboding. Felix let out his breath in a long sigh and returned to his cabin to sleep.

THE SHAKING OF the airship woke Felix unhappily from a dream of Ulrika. He pulled himself upright just as an enormous crash echoed through the steel corridors, and the whole vessel vibrated as if struck with an enormous hammer. His stomach lurched as the lantern on his wall swung, sending shadows flickering across his chamber. In that brief instant he felt certain he was going to die.

He pulled himself upright and glanced through the porthole. Outside all was roiling murk. Then there was a flash of incredible green lightning, multiple forks flickering down from above and losing themselves in the gloom. After a few seconds the voice of thunder spoke and the whole ship shook once more. The vibrations cast Felix from his bed and sent him rolling to the floor. As he leapt upright, he banged his head against the low ceiling. The pain sent lights dancing before his eyes and he reached a hand out to grasp the wall and help keep his balance. To his surprise it felt warm.

Struggling to keep his balance on the rocking floor, he shuffled out into the corridor and headed towards the control room. His ears rang with the sound of thunder, and he could barely control the terror which clawed at his guts. This was far worse than any earlier turbulence. It was as if a giant had grasped the airship in its enormous hand and was trying to wrestle it to the

ground. He could hear the roar of titanic winds hurtling past the hull. Any moment he thought the vessel would be split like a ripe melon hit by a hammer, and he and everybody else in the vessel would fall tumbling through a thousand strides of storm-tossed air to splatter on the ground below.

It was the sense of helplessness that was so frightening, the knowledge that there was nothing he could do to prevent any of this happening. There was no way off the Spirit of Grungni except clambering out through the hatches in the roof and leaping to certain death. At least in battle he could do something, wield a sword, smite a foe. Here and now he could do nothing save pray to Sigmar, and he doubted very much, given where they were currently located, that there was anything the God of the Hammer could do to save them. The twenty strides to the control room seemed to take a lifetime and Felix confidently believed that each step might be his last.

Arriving at the control room at last, he saw the dwarfs clutching at their control stations like it was their last hope of life. Gotrek stood in the centre, his axe held negligently in one hand, looking almost relaxed, riding the rolling deck with slight adjustments of his stance. No fear showed on his face, just a fixed grin of the sort he normally only revealed in combat. Felix noticed that the runes on his axe-blade were glowing redly. Makaisson wrestled with the control wheel, his enormous muscles straining, huge sinews standing out like cables beneath his tattooed flesh. Old Borek was strapped into one the armchairs, while Varek huddled behind him, a look somewhere between fear and wonderment inscribed on his face. Snorri was nowhere to be seen.

'What's going on?' Felix shouted, struggling to make himself heard over the echoes of thunder, the roar of the wind and the scream of the engines. The whole ship shook once more and there was sickening sensation of being dropped, as if the airship had suddenly lost buoyancy and was falling like a stone towards the earth.

'Warpstorm, manling!' Gotrek bellowed. 'The worst I've seen!'

Eerie green lightning flickered once more, the flash illuminated the whole cabin intensely, elongated Makaisson's shadow until it filled the floor, then vanished. The bolt appeared to have flickered only a few hundred yards away. Felix noticed that in its aftermath particles of shimmering dust, like a

cloud of strangely coloured fireflies, filled their field of vision as far as the eye could see. Then the blast of thunder almost deafened him and the ship began to drop once more. After a moment the sensation of falling stopped and the airship righted itself like a ship cresting a wave.

Felix scrambled over to the window and looked downwards. Through a gap in the clouds, in the flickering of the lightning, he thought he caught sight of the ground below. It was only a few hundred paces beneath them, dunes of glittering sand rising and tumbling, being driven before the titanic winds like foaming breakers on a storm-tossed sea. The wind shook the huge airship like a terrier shaking a rat. Felix knew that in a few dozen more heartbeats they were going to be driven into the ground, and the vessel was going to buckle and break like a toy boat thrown against a wall by a vicious child.

'Malakai! We're going to crash!' he shouted. 'We're almost at the ground!'

'Then come ivver here and gae us a hand, laddie. Pull on that altitude stick for all ye're worth. An' keep yer eyes peeled. The instruments hae stopped workin' in this storm.'

Felix rushed over to stand beside the engineer and pulled on the lever. Normally it would have moved easily but now it appeared to be stuck. Felix braced both his legs and heaved with all his might but still it would not move. The cold metal refused to be shifted. A vision of the airship impacting on the rocky desert below filled Felix's mind and he pulled once more, putting all the strength of fear into his efforts. Sweat ran down his brow. His muscles felt like they were going to erupt through his skin, and he knew that if he kept this up much longer he would burst a blood vessel. It was no use; still the cursed lever would not move.

'I can't shift it!' he called.

"'Tis the wind on the ailerons, laddie. It's fightin' ye. Keep tryin'. Dinna gae up!'

Felix kept tugging and still nothing happened. He knew they must be mere seconds from disaster and still there was nothing he could do. He offered up a prayer to Sigmar for his soul, knowing that his life was about to end here in the Chaos Wastes. Then suddenly Gotrek was beside him, lending his massive strength to the struggle with the lever. And still it did not move.

Gotrek's beard bristled. The veins stood out on his forehead, and then something gave way. At first Felix feared that they had simply bent the stick out of shape but no, it was moving slowly, surely, inexorably backwards. As it did so, the nose of airship tilted skywards. Then it seemed like the airship was being thrown backwards like a galleon caught by a huge breaker. The deck rocked and he and Gotrek lost their footing, sent tumbling backwards towards the rear cabin wall. There was a sickening sensation in Felix's churning innards as the airship began to leap uncontrollably skyward and then was dashed downwards again.

'Hold on tight!' bellowed Makaisson. 'This is gannae be rough!'

LURK SQUIRTED THE musk of fear. He felt his glands void until they were empty and still they tried to keep on spurting. The wind tugged at his pelt, riffling it with a thousand demon fingers. Glittering warpstone dust filled his mouth and threatened to choke him. He had already swallowed a fair amount of the stuff and a warm glow filled his stomach. His fur stood on end. The roar of thunder almost deafened him. Tears filled his eyes from fear and constant irritation of the onrushing wind. He clutched the rails of the crow's nest with all four paws; his tail was looped round the rails to anchor him in place. He fought to keep himself low within the observation post, yet still the wind threatened to tear him from his place and send him tumbling to his doom. It was almost too much to be borne.

He cursed the day he had ever left his nice warm burrow in Skavenblight. He cursed Grey Seer Thanquol for his stupid orders. He cursed the stupid dwarfs and their stupid airship and their stupid journey. He cursed everyone and everything he could think of - except the Horned Rat, towards whom he remembered to send the occasional prayer for his deliverance.

Only a few minutes ago it had all seemed so quiet. He had climbed from his hiding place in the hold up to the crow's nest to make his daily report to Grey Seer Thanquol. The ship had been vibrating a little but Lurk had become used to its little motions and had paid no attention. But by the time he had reached the observation deck, the movements had become larger, the whole ship was bucking in the air like a crazed horse. But it was only when he had poked his snout through the upper

hatch into the crow's nest proper that he notice that the ship was surrounded by the strangely glowing cloud and its bizarre, multi-coloured lightning flashes.

Sound skaven prudence had told him that he should retreat below but he had been held in place by one thing: the tingling taste of warpstone dust on his tongue. It held him in place, fascinated. It was the source of much of the grey seer's much-feared power, and quite possibly the source of all magic. He had thought that maybe if he tasted some he, too, might acquire magical powers, but so far there had been no sign of them. By the time he had tried to return below, the accursed dwarfs had sealed the hatches and there was no way he could open them from above. They were locked.

In frantic fear he had scrambled around inside the gasbag but the strangely shifting balloons had spooked him and he had grown tired of hanging from the ladder. So he had clambered back up to the crow's nest and there the wind had grabbed him. He had only just been able to save himself by seizing the railings and now there was nothing he could do except wait and pray while the airship rocked below him like a raft in a typhoon.

Another series of thunderclaps made Lurk look up. He saw a series of lightning flashes marching across the sky, coming ever closer. Their unholy brilliance dazzled him. He shut his eyes firmly but he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that they were about to hit the airship.

He remembered to send a final curse in the general direction of Grey Seer Thanquol.

FELIX, TOO, SAW the line of lightning bolts exploding directly in front of the airship. Makaisson twisted the wheel instinctively trying to avoid being hit, but it was too late. The greenish bolts pummelled the airship. In the instant before the tremendous glare blinded him, Felix had time to notice that the gems on the ship's figurehead blazed bright as the sun. Then the ship shook as if it was about to fly apart and for a long moment Felix saw no more. For a heartbeat the terrible fear that he had been blinded filled him but it passed as his vision slowly returned, and he noticed that everything in the command deck was surrounded by a swiftly fading halo of green.

The amulet on his chest felt almost hot enough to burn and he felt like ripping it off until the thought struck him that this

might not be wise, and that perhaps it was protecting him from the magic of Chaos which had so obviously been contained within the lightning. He saw that the amulet on Gotrek's bare chest was glowing a furious green as it absorbed the halo about him. Then suddenly the ship stopped shaking and the sky around them was clear.

Felix picked himself up and limped over to window of the command deck. He could still see the green-black clouds of the warpstorm boiling below them. Occasionally the clouds would flash brightly with a glow of witch-light as the lightning sparked again and again. It was like looking down on a peculiar chaotic sea and Felix half-expected to see some enormous monster rise up out of it depths and try and swallow the airship in its jaws.

It took him a few moments to realise that the drone of the engines had changed. The sound slowly died away, until they made no noise at all. The clouds slowly passed beyond the airship. It began to gently rotate this way and that in the breeze.

'We've lost power,' Makaisson muttered. 'This isnae guid.'

Snorri chose that moment to appear in the cabin. He was yawning widely. 'What was all the noise?' he asked. 'It woke Snorri up.'

**The adventure continues in
DAEMONSLAYER!**



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