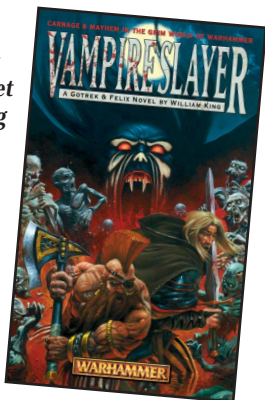


# VAMPIRESLAYER

A Gotrek & Felix novel by William King

*IN THE UNCEASING WAR against Chaos, the doom-seeking dwarf Gotrek and his human companion Felix are beset by a new, terrible foe. An evil is forming in darkest Sylvania which threatens to reach out and tear the heart from our band of intrepid heroes. The gripping saga of Gotrek and Felix continues in this epic tale of deadly battle and soul-rending tragedy.*

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‘THIS IS A bit of a wild goose chase,’ Felix said, drawing his cloak closer against the cold. The Slayer glared off into the darkness.

‘Tell me about it, manling.’

‘Well, at least we know that Krieger or someone calling himself that exists, and that Andriev wasn’t lying about his guards or his tame wizard disappearing. I don’t think we need check on any of the others. I have a pretty good idea of what we will find. I don’t think Pauli will be seeing his brother again.’

The Slayer nodded once again.

‘Back to the mansion then.’ They trudged into the night and the deepening snow.

ADOLPHUS GLANCED AROUND the room. It was warm. It was luxurious. Osrik always liked to do well by himself, and his guests. He could smell wine and fresh cooked food and blood – lots of human blood. Thick hangings of brocade covered the windows, keeping out the night chill. Portraits of noble ancestors covered the walls. The carpets were thick, the furniture old and polished and heavy. The place suited the wealth of its other occupants. They looked on him with adoring eyes.

He was used to it now. He had selected them himself, just after he reached the city. Some of them he had known in other places, and other times. He had first met Baroness Olga nearly a decade ago. He had drunk from her veins in a scented garden in the warm south of Bretonnia, and she had been his willing slave ever since, finding new chattels for him, introducing him to other nobles, ensuring that his coven grew in size and influence.

She had proven most useful, although her thinness and the sickly light in her eyes told him that soon she would be fading. Standing too close to the sun was not good for mortals. Being on intimate terms with the Arisen had a tendency to drain them of youth and strength before their time, if they were allowed to survive at all.

Not that it mattered. There were always others willing to step up and take their place. Their owners always fascinated the cattle. None knew better than Adolphus the way the aura of immortality and power and beauty affected them. He had been overwhelmed by it himself when he had first met the countess all those centuries ago, and she had chosen him.

And that was what this was all about, he knew. Being chosen. All of these rich and powerful people present this evening hoped that eventually he would grant them the embrace. All of them knew it was unlikely he would choose to, but the hope of it kept them going, motivated them to do what Adolphus wanted willingly. Not that they had much choice anyway. He had tapped all of them for blood and that created a bond that was hard for all but the strongest to break.

He looked at them again. Everyone present had surrendered their will to him gladly. They were all in his thrall, would gladly do whatever he required of them. He felt nothing but contempt for them all. They were slow, stupid, greedy, ugly, grasping, foolish. They had all turned their backs on conventional morality, on all their old gods, and they had raised him up in their place. It was written all over their faces. He wondered whether this was what it felt like to be a god. Perhaps they were the only creatures left, aside from the Arisen, with whom he had anything in common. Perhaps the world was not divided between predators and prey, as he had always thought; perhaps it was divided between worshipped and worshippers.

Where were these thoughts coming from? Why was he thinking them now? It did not matter what these people were or who they thought they were. All he really needed them for was tools. Like all the followers of the Arisen, they provided money, blades, adulation and blood. That was all they were really good for.

He looked around once more. There were nobles here, men and women who craved immortality the way a drunkard craves drink. They were all rich and powerful, that was why they had

been chosen, but right at this moment they looked like a group of desperate children keen to be the one chosen for the favour of a distant parent. Good. That was the way he liked to keep them.

The only one who stood out was Roche. His hulking servant stood to one side, a cynical smile on his brutal pockmarked face, the fingers of his massive strangler's hands intertwined in a parody of prayer. Roche knew what was going on. Roche had seen the likes of the coven before, and he shared his master's contempt for them. He was secure of his place in Adolphus's favour, just as his father had been, and his grandfather before him. Roche's family had served Adolphus for generations. In them he had placed as much trust as he placed in any mortal. They looked after his interests among the mortals, guarded his crypt while he slept, drove his coach in the daylight when he travelled, spoke with his voice to the cattle when he did not need to be present. Roche was a servant, but he knew he possessed more power than many lords and that arrogance was written on his face. Adolphus did not mind, just so long as he remembered who was truly the master here. Perhaps this evening he would allow Roche to pick out one of the noble women and begin breeding his successor. After all, Roche was not getting any younger; his close-cropped hair was iron grey now, and the lines around his eyes were deep. So soon, Adolphus thought. Mortal lives passed like those of mayflies.

Adolphus studied his slaves, wondering if he really needed them. He had disposed of most of old Andriev's guards, and the corpse of the greedy magician would not be found until the spring thaw. Either the old man would give him the talisman at the price he offered, or he would take it from his cold, dead hands. At the moment the latter option seemed preferable. Subtlety was no longer going to get him anywhere. He had made himself too visible now. If the countess or any of her agents were in the city, then it would be only too obvious to them that another of the Arisen was also present.

He could see that one of his followers, the fat merchant Osrik, was desperate to speak. The man obviously felt he had something important to say. He rubbed his double chin and his oiled hair, his eyes fixed on Adolphus with blazing intensity. He wondered if he should let the man suffer a bit longer but dismissed the idea. A god should be above such petty games.

'What is it, Osrik? You seem keen to speak.'

'Yes, master, I have important news to impart to you.' He ignored the glares of the rest of the coven, all of whom were equally desperate for Adolphus's attention. The image of a sultan in his harem sprang into Adolphus's mind. It was not an idea he liked.

'Then go on, share this revelation with us all,' said Adolphus mockingly. The coven smiled at his tone. One thing they could always be relied on to do was toady well.

'As you know master, I have had my agents watching old Count Andriev's house day and night.'

'I commanded nothing less.'

'The old man has had visitors.' If Adolphus's heart had still beaten it would have skipped a beat now. Immediately, he assumed the countess or some other agent of the council had found out what he was doing.

'Who?' he asked calmly. He had centuries of practice at concealing his emotions, and it never did to show any dismay in front of the cattle.

'He has summoned aid. A magician and two dwarf Slayers, as well as a pair of human warriors.' Adolphus allowed himself a small, satisfied smile. These did not sound like any agents the countess would have used. Dwarfs were almost never part of any coven. There was something about their blood that disagreed with most of the Arisen.

'This hardly sounds like a major problem, Osrik.'

'The magician is very powerful, master. He is an advisor to the duke. I have made enquiries and found out a few more things about him. His name is Maximilian Schreiber. He is famous for casting protective enchantments. He was an advisor on such things to the Elector Count of Middenheim and has been employed by the Duke of Praag in a similar role. By all accounts, he is a very formidable magician.'

This was sounding less promising. Adolphus feared few mortals, but mages of the first rank were a cause for caution. Given time to cast their spells they could prove a threat to even one of the Arisen. It seemed that the old man was not going to give in without a fight.

The madness that lurked in the back of Adolphus's mind welcomed this; more deaths, more blood, more killing. He had to fight back the urge to show his fangs.

'I believe we can overcome any single mage.'

'The Slayers too are formidable.' Adolphus allowed a smile to crease his features. He feared no mortal warriors.

'I do not think we need trouble ourselves with them,' he said confidently. To his surprise, he saw that Osrik looked troubled, almost as if he wanted to contradict Adolphus. That was unusual for a coven member. He was about to dismiss the fat merchant's qualms but some instinct told him not to. 'I can see you are troubled, Osrik. Why don't you tell us why?'

The fat man sighed. His blubbery cheeks shook. 'One of the Slayers is Gotrek Gurnisson. I met him once on the walls of the city before the siege. He is terrifying.'

It was interesting, Adolphus thought, that Osrik could describe this Gotrek Gurnisson as terrifying. After all, Osrik was a coven member and had encountered one of the Arisen. After that, few mortals were impressed by anything less. This Slayer might indeed prove to be a problem. His fame had reached even Adolphus's ears. The dwarf had become quite famous during the siege. He was said to be the possessor of a magical axe and had slain the Chaos warlord Arek Demonclaw. He had rallied the defenders on the walls at the height of the siege and was even said to have destroyed the great daemonic siege engines. Adolphus had been deep in slumber at the height of the battle so he had not witnessed this for himself.

Adolphus rubbed his forehead. He had bad experiences with dwarf rune weapons in the past, at the battle of Hel Fenn. He knew that they could hurt him and from all he had heard the Slayer was very skilled with his axe. Even so, Adolphus doubted that he would prove much of a threat, but it never paid to take chances.

'You have done well, Osrik. And you appear to be thorough. Who are the other mercenaries the old man has hired?'

'With all respect, master, they are not mercenaries. One of them is a noblewoman, Ulrika Magdova, daughter of the March Boyar Ivan Petrovich Straghov, and a distant relation of Count Andriev. The other Slayer is a certain Snorri Nosebiter, a dwarf of great strength. The last one is Felix Jaeger, a swordsman and associate of Gotrek Gurnisson's. He too played a major part in the siege of the city and enjoys the favour of the duke.'

This was getting worse and worse, thought Adolphus. It was as if the old powers were intervening to thwart him. If the count

appealed to Ulrika's father then he could have a small army of troops at his disposal. Adolphus was familiar enough with Kislevite politics to know that the march boyar had the ear of the Tsarina and, if the others had the ear of the duke, a formidable coalition of foes could be raised against him. In numbers, even the cattle could prove dangerous. Worse, if this Max Schreiber was a competent wizard, and by all accounts he appeared to be, then he might unravel the true nature of the talisman and seize it for himself.

Adolphus snarled and all of the coven shivered and looked pale. He realised that unconsciously he had allowed his fangs to extrude from his gums. It was not a sight that most mortals looked upon without qualms. Events were running out of his control. All of this time, he had been worried about the countess or the council finding out his plans, and now it appeared he had been blindsided by a stupid, old madman. He knew that he would have to act quickly now. The time for waiting was past. Even if it meant revealing his presence to any Arisen in the city, he would have to act, and act quickly before the mortals could assemble their forces to stop him.

He had spent far too long tracking down the talisman to allow himself to be thwarted now. He was the Prince of Night. He would fulfil the Prophecies of Nospheratus. If anyone got in his way at this late stage then they would have to die.

He began giving instructions to the coven. He knew with their aid, he could assemble a small army of henchmen quickly. Which was good, he thought, for it looked as though he was going to need one.

ULRIKA LOOKED DOWN at Max. She was worried. A few hours ago the wizard had screamed and fallen from the chair in which he sat. The odd talisman lay near his hand. Ulrika had checked and found out that Max was still breathing and his heart still beat albeit slowly, but nothing she could do would wake him. She had sent out for a physician but there had been nothing the man could do either. Now Max lay unconscious on the floor of the vault. It did not look as if he would be awakening any time soon.

Ulrika felt helpless, and it was not a feeling she liked. She owed Max Schreiber for saving her from the plague, and she had not had a chance to repay the debt. Now there seemed to be

nothing she could do. It would take another wizard or perhaps a priest to revive Max. She wondered if she should send word to the Temple of Shallya, or to the duke. She was beginning to wish she had never become involved in any of this strange business. She could just have ignored Andriev's message. After all, he was only a distant cousin on her mother's side. She could barely remember her father ever mentioning him when she was growing up, and when he had it was with a mixture of pity and contempt. Her father was a warrior and he had no interests outside horses, battle and the managing of his estates. To him, Andriev's hobby seemed to be something childish and unmanly. Ulrika shook her head. That summed up the relationship between the border nobles of Kislev and those who dwelled in the cities. Most of the country folk thought their city-bred kin were decadent and effete. Most of the city dwellers looked down on the border nobles as little more than barbarians. There was some truth in both points of view, Ulrika thought, and then brought her attention back to the matter at hand. She knew she was just trying to distract herself from it anyway.

Snorri Nosebiter looked up at her. His brutish eyes held a look of dismay. 'Snorri thinks Max is not getting any better,' said Snorri. 'Of course, Snorri isn't a doctor.'

Ulrika tried to smile at the Slayer. Snorri was stupid but he had a good heart and had been a good companion in many desperate adventures. He did not deserve to feel the cutting edge of her tongue now, no matter how much she felt like giving him it. She wondered when Felix would get back. Perhaps he would have some ideas about what to do. He was a clever man. Too clever, she often thought. Too clever, and too superior by far, when really he was only the son of a merchant. She wondered what she had ever seen in him now. Still, he had the power to make her angry even when she just thought about him. Just at that moment she heard the sound of the doorbell ringing.

Within moments, Felix and Gotrek were in the room.

'What happened to him?' asked Gotrek jerking his thumb in Max's direction. Ulrika told him. Felix looked at him closely then at her. 'Where is the talisman?' he asked.

'Is that all you're concerned about?'

'No – but if we summon another magician to look at him, he might want to study it too.'

'It was studying the thing that did this to Max,' she said.



‘Are you sure?’

‘It’s possible that he might have had a fit at the exact moment he was examining the thing but I prefer to believe the two things were connected,’ she said.

‘There’s no need to be sarcastic.’

She glared at him. He was such an infuriating man when he wanted to be. ‘Do you think summoning another magician is a good idea right now?’

‘I can’t think of anything better to do, unless it’s to summon a healer, or send him to the Temple.’

‘Best send for the healer then.’

‘The healer will want a donation to the Temple. They nearly always do.’

Andriev looked at them. ‘I will pay. After all this happened when the man was in my service.’

At that moment there came a crashing sound from above.

‘What was that?’ Ulrika asked.

‘Sounded like somebody breaking the door to me,’ said Gotrek. Felix did not doubt the Slayer was right. He usually was about such things.

‘Snorri thinks we should go and break some heads,’ said Snorri Nosebiter. Gotrek growled his agreement and the two Slayers rushed for the stairs. Felix glanced after them, and then looked around the open vault, and at the recumbent figure of Max.

‘Snorri is not exactly a master strategist,’ said Felix. ‘We’re supposed to be guarding this place.’

‘Sometimes the best form of defence is offence,’ said Ulrika. ‘Go and help them! I will stay here with Max and make sure no one gets into the vault.’

Felix could see she was determined and what she said made a certain amount of sense. If any intruders could be stopped before they got in here, it would go much better. Felix looked at Andriev. Somehow he did not doubt that Snorri Nosebiter and Gotrek would be capable of handling anything short of a small army.

‘Can the vault be opened from the inside?’

‘Ahem – yes. It can. There is a hidden lever in here.’ Good, Felix thought. ‘I will close the door behind me. If we have not returned within an hour, make your own decisions as to what to do.’

As he raced up the stairs, Felix wondered how long the air would last in the sealed vault. Long enough, he hoped.

From up ahead came the sound of fighting. Felix recognised the bellowed war cries of the two Slayers and the butcher-block sounds of weapons impacting on flesh swiftly followed by screams of agony. It sounded as if the dwarfs were doing the work they were paid for. It was time for him to do the same.

His sword felt light in his hand. His heart raced. He was not exactly scared. He just felt a little weak. Everything seemed to be happening a little slower than normal. Felix recognised the signs. He was always like this before going into action.

He emerged into the atrium and took in the whole scene at a glance. Snow and cold night air blew in through the door that swung wide on its hinges. A mass of cloaked men, armed with swords and daggers, engaged the two Slayers. Servants and men-at-arms lay sprawled in their own blood everywhere. It looked as if the intruders had not been too choosy about who they slaughtered.

The shoe was on the other foot now though. Gotrek thundered through them like a raging bull. His axe left bloody corpses every time it struck, and it struck often, moving almost too fast for the human eye to follow. As Felix watched, the Slayer cut down two more assailants and dived headlong into the pack of men trying to force their way in through the door.

Snorri was no less dangerous. In one hand he held his broad-bladed axe, in the other a heavy warhammer. He wielded the two weapons as dextrously as most warriors would use one, lashing out almost simultaneously with both, whirling like a dervish maddened on locoweed to face his foes. As soon as one cowed man went down beneath a thunderous hail of blows, Snorri sprang over his corpse to get to grips with another. All the while an idiot grin of enjoyment played across his lips, and occasionally mad bellows of mirth erupted from deep within his enormous chest.

Even as Felix watched, more men emerged from other entrances to the halls. Either they had been there earlier slaughtering the servants or they were coming through the windows. Felix did not want to think about the implications of that. Whoever wanted the talisman had brought a small army with him. It was not a reassuring thought. Felix shouted a challenge and raced to join the melee.

He wondered if the mysterious Adolphus was somewhere in the milling throng. To be honest, Felix was not all that keen to meet him.

ADOLPHUS KRIEGER MOVED silently through the house. It was a place he could have learned to like given time. Every corner was stuffed with curios and artefacts of an earlier time. Adolphus recognised vases that must have emerged from the potter's kiln before he arose. Some of the tapestries on the wall had been woven when he was still a child. It almost made him nostalgic. Almost.

Behind him he could hear the sounds of battle. It appeared that the coven's retainers were providing the distraction he required. Perhaps they might actually overwhelm the guardians of the manor. Somehow though Adolphus doubted it. Maybe with his aid they might have stood a chance, but they were on their own. The beast that lurked at the back of his mind wanted to go back there, to tear and rend and drink blood, but he was not going to give in to it. Why should he risk his centuries-long life if he did not have to? The chances were that he could defeat the dwarfs, but why chance it if there was even a one in a thousand possibility they might win?

If you took enough thousand-to-one risks, then eventually one of them would kill you. Consequently, he avoided them when he could, which was doubtless why he had lived so long when others of his kind had been snuffed out like flickering candles. No, if he absolutely had to, he would face the dwarf and kill him, but there was no sense in tempting fate when it was not utterly necessary. Despite this though, it took a great effort of will not to run towards the fray, not to rush to where he knew all that warm hot blood was flowing.

Moving so silently he doubted that even a cat could have heard him, Adolphus stalked deeper into the mansion. The magician Benedict had provided him with detailed descriptions and a rough map of the layout before his unfortunate demise. Adolphus had the near perfect memory of the Arisen, which, combined with his darkness-piercing vision, enabled him to navigate the shadowy corridors without difficulty.

A sense of relief filled him as he put more distance between himself and the battle, and the urge to kill decreased slightly. He had entered the part of the mansion where magical protections

were in force. He opened his mage senses to the flow of energy moving around him. There were no magical traps that he could see, simply spells of warding and protection, weaves designed to keep prying eyes from gazing into the place with scrying spells, and wards designed to negate a head-on magical assault. Whoever had cast these spells had known his business, but had drawn the line at using harmful magical energies, just as the builders of the vault had not used any physical traps such as deadfalls.

Adolphus could understand it. Certainly, there were those who were paranoid enough to use such things but they were a minority. After all, who wanted to dwell in a building where a slight misstep could put you in a pit, or blast you with a fire-bolt? Despite what mages might tell you about how careful they were, such things did occur. And when they did you were usually not around afterward to complain about the consequences.

Adolphus fought to keep a smile from his lips. He was making assumptions that might prove fatal. He did not absolutely know this was the case here. It might simply be that the magician who had cast these wards was a better sorcerer than he, and he just could not perceive the traps. It would be best to proceed with the utmost caution until he had established whether this was the case or not.

He was at the top of the flight of stairs now. He knew they led down through the cellars and into the vaults. He paused for a moment, and allowed himself to savour the anticipation. He was close now, so close he could almost taste it.

The thing he had sought so long and so hard for was almost within his grasp, and with it the power to do what none of the Arisen had dreamed of since the time of the Vampire Counts. He would be the one to fulfil the prophesies in the *Book of Shadows* and the *Grimoire Necronium*. Surely the time had now come to pass? The armies of Chaos were on the march, the old order was ending, and a new world would be born in fire and blood. Most of all, in blood. He would be the King of the Night, and his reign would be eternal, dark and filled with poisonous beauty.

He shook his head. Such musing brought him no closer to his goal. It was time to take the last few steps that would lead him to ultimate glory.

FELIX GLANCED AROUND at the scene of carnage. Dead bodies were piled up all around them. Blood splattered Gotrek and Snorri making them look as if they had been working in an abattoir. Felix guessed that he did not look much better. Not all of the blood belonged to his opponents. He was nicked and cut in half a dozen places though he guessed that none of the wounds were major.

'Hardly a fight at all,' grumbled Gotrek. 'Even for humans these were poor warriors.'

'Snorri has killed tougher cockroaches,' agreed Snorri Nosebiter sourly. 'Snorri squashed an ant once that put up a better fight. Nasty acid sting it had.'

Felix could not entirely agree with the Slayers about the toughness of their foes. By virtue of sheer numbers, he had been almost overwhelmed on several occasions, and his body's aches reminded him that this fight had been dangerous enough. Still, they had a point.

These men had not fought as well as many he had faced. It was not just that they were indifferent warriors; it was something more. They had fought like sleepwalkers. Their timing was off, and they had been indifferent as to whether they had lived or died. Their parries and thrusts had possessed a purely mechanical quality. A thought struck him.

'They fought like men who were under a spell,' he said.

'A spell of being very bad fighters, maybe,' said Snorri Nosebiter.

'I think you are right, manling,' said Gotrek. 'Not even humans are usually so bad. They fought as if they did not have all their wits about them.'

'That's never stopped Snorri from putting up a good fight,' said Snorri. From the peevish tone, anyone would have thought the men had tried to cheat him out of a copper pfennig. He was obviously still disappointed by the quality of the opposition they had faced.

Felix ignored him. His mind was already racing ahead, searching out reasons for why this might have happened. This Adolphus Krieger was a magician of some sort, and obviously these men had been in his thrall. The question was why he had sent them to attack now. The answer was obvious.

'This was a diversion,' Felix said. 'The magician is already in the building.'

He and Gotrek exchanged glances. 'The vault,' they said simultaneously.

ADOLPHUS STOOD BEFORE the entrance to the vault. The door was large and very strong and could probably resist a team of men with a battering ram. Not that there would have been room to swing it in these corridors. There were several potent wards on the doors designed to neutralise spells of opening and unlocking.

Adolphus doubted that he could overcome them with magic. He was a very knowledgeable mage but not a particularly potent one. The countess, for one, had been much stronger. That would change when he had the talisman.

He did not need to be a great mage, under the circumstances. The concealment of the dwarf-built pressure pads would have fooled most eyes, but not his. They were far, far keener in the darkness than any human eye could ever be. Even the hairline edges cunningly concealed in the stonework were as clear to him as the edges of a paving stone would be to a mortal.

He took out his dagger and slid its edge through the narrow gap of the nearest one. He heard a click and the stone slid out, revealing the pressure pad within. He pushed it, and was rewarded with another click that told him the way was partially open. He repeated the process on the other side of the door. There remained only the main lock on the door itself. Fortunately he had an easy solution for that too. He had made his preparations with care.

Reaching inside his jerkin he carefully pulled out the two containers he had made earlier. He smiled. He might not be the greatest of sorcerers but his knowledge of alchemy was considerable and had been perfected over long centuries. When the contents of the two containers were mixed they would create a powerful corrosive capable of eating through solid metal in a short time.

Carefully he dribbled some fluid onto the area around the lock. When the green fluid encountered the red fluid, an acrid chemical smoke rose. There was a hissing, spluttering sound and the metal of the lock began to melt away like snow under a soldier's piss.

Very soon now, the talisman would be in his grasp.

'WHAT WAS THAT?' asked Andriev nervously. Ulrika looked up. She too had heard the odd bubbling sound. A few moments before they had both heard faint clicks as if someone had been working with the locks. She could only hope it was Felix and the others coming back. Somehow she did not think it was.

'I don't know,' she said. A faint reek as of noxious chemicals reached her nostrils. She was reminded of the scent of alchemical fire but it was not that. She sniffed again. The scent was coming from the direction of the doorway. She thought she heard a faint hissing sound now as well.

'There's someone outside. I think they are trying to get in,' she said, raising her sword to the guard position. Andriev clutched his own weapon tighter. Even as they watched, the door began to bend inwards, as if being subjected to a force as slow and irresistible as the action of a glacier.

'Whatever is out there, it isn't human,' Andriev said. Ulrika shuddered. She could remember Felix's tales of his encounters with daemons all too clearly. What was it Adolphus Krieger had sent to collect the talisman?

CAREFULLY AVOIDING THE spot where the corrosive still bubbled, Adolphus exerted his strength. He was much stronger than any human, and knew in a few heartbeats the weakened door would give way. He could simply have waited for the acid to do its work, but he felt he was running out of time. The sounds of fighting had ceased behind him. That might mean his cats' paws had succeeded in killing the defenders but somehow he doubted it. It was more likely that the Slayers were coming for him. He was not going to risk a fight now if he could help it, not when he was so close to his goal.

Inside he could hear the sounds of voices. One of them belonged to Andriev, the other to a young woman. They would not stand against him for long.

FELIX RACED THROUGH the house, wondering if what he was doing was wise. His legs were longer than the dwarfs' and he was a much faster runner, so he was outdistancing them by quite a way. What if more of the enthralled warriors were in the house? What if he came upon the mage all by himself? Unless he could take the man by surprise, it would most likely prove to be a fatal encounter.

He had no illusions about the outcome of any struggle between himself and a competent sorcerer.

On the other hand, Ulrika was in danger and, despite their feelings for each other, he did not want to see any harm come to her. She might be an arrogant, overbearing, inconstant, misguided snob but he did not want to see her dead. To tell the truth, he wondered at the intensity of his own feelings now that he knew she was in danger. Not quite over her yet, he thought, sourly.

He reached the top of the stairs and halted. From below, he could hear the shriek of tortured metal. It sounded as if the entrance to the vault was being shattered by the application of enormous force. Impossible, he told himself – it would take a siege engine. But the man down there was a magician. Who knew what he was capable of? Perhaps the wards woven on the vault were not quite as strong as Max had claimed, or maybe the magician was a lot more powerful than they had expected. It was not a reassuring thought.

He listened to see if he could distinguish anything else. He hoped to hear Gotrek and Snorri Nosebiter approaching but there was nothing. He could not hear their booted feet ringing on the stonework. He could hear Ulrika's indistinct voice shouting some sort of challenge, and the murmur of a response too low for him to hear. Then from down below too came an ominous silence.

Better go and learn the worst, he thought. Reluctantly he padded down the stairs, thinking, perhaps Gotrek will be the one to write the tale of my heroic doom.

ULRIKA WATCHED AS the door exploded inwards. Stone screeched against stone. She expected to see a gang of warriors armed with a portable ram or a mage surrounded by the incandescent glow of power. Instead, she saw a tall, stately-looking man, garbed in fashionable clothing. A longsword hung scabbarded at his side. There was an eerie grace about him that she would have associated more with acrobats than a mage. He glanced at her but made no threatening move.

'If you can use that blade, magician, I suggest you draw it. I hate to cut down an unarmed man.'

To her surprise he smiled, showing gleaming white teeth. His eyes when they met hers were dark and piercing.



He was a very handsome man, Ulrika thought, almost beautiful. He bore himself with an air of command that a Tsar might have envied.

‘And I would hate to kill a young woman so lovely,’ he said pleasantly. He sounded as if he came from the Empire but there was just the faintest trace of a foreign accent in his voice. If she had been forced to guess, she would have said Bretonnian.

‘I am not afraid of your magic, wizard,’ she said, and was proud of how steady her voice was. Something about the man’s manner told her she could easily die here. He laughed – an eerie, velvety sound.

‘Is that what you think I am?’

‘What else could you be?’

‘Something beyond your ability to imagine,’ he said.

ADOLPHUS RECOGNISED THE woman from that night at the White Boar, just as he recognised the unconscious man lying nearby. What a small world, he thought. Then again, Praag was a small city and not many taverns remained open after the destruction of the siege. Once again he felt the surge of attraction.

She was certainly beautiful, and she held herself well. There was something about her courage in the face of her obvious fear that he found quite touching. He wished he had had time to talk to her, but he had already wasted enough time. He could see what he had come for. It lay on the table beside the recumbent form of the man in wizard’s robes.

Adolphus could see the man still lived, but life pulsed so faintly in him that he would not recover any time soon, if at all. No threat there then. The only ones who stood between him and the talisman were the young woman and the old man. He would not even need his sword to take them.

Behind him on the stairs came the footsteps of a man trying to move quietly. A mortal might not have detected him at all, but Adolphus could tell where he was from the sound of his breathing, let alone the soft scuff of boot leather on stone. He smiled. One lone man was no threat to him either.

‘Step away from the talisman and I will let you live,’ he told the girl quietly. ‘Interfere with me and you will most assuredly die, and that would give me no pleasure.’

The woman lunged at him with surprising speed. She was obviously not unskilled with that long blade of hers. Adolphus

stepped easily aside. She was quick for a mortal, but compared to him she moved like an arthritic cripple. While she went for him the old man reached for the talisman. Adolphus was not going to allow that.

He extended his stride and reached the amulet at the same time as the old man. A quick buffet from his open hand sent Andriev flying across the room to smash into the wall. There was a sickening crack and he slid down to the floor. Blood pooled from his broken head. Triumph filled Adolphus as he picked up the amulet.

He was disappointed to feel no surge of power, no enormous burst of magical energy. Thunder did not roar. Lightning did not flash. The world did not change in an instant. He had been foolish to expect any such thing. The talisman would need to be studied and attuned before he could use it. There was no doubt he had found what he had come for in his mind though. It was exactly as described in the grimoire and the *Lost Book of Nagash*. There could not be more than one artefact fitting this description in the world now. He had what he came for. It was time to leave.

He turned just in time to see the woman racing towards him, and a tall blond man filling the doorway. Surely these fools did not intend to try and stop him?

FELIX DID NOT think he had ever seen a man move so fast. His swiftness was eye-blurring. Some sort of spell must be enhancing his speed. At least there was only the sorcerer. It was a small mercy. Watching the man, he knew that there was no way he could stand against him if he drew his sword. Best not to give him the chance to then, he thought, and advanced into the room.

Ulrika raced forward too, aiming a slash at the man's neck that would have severed his head from his shoulders if it had connected. It didn't. Krieger ducked and the blade passed above his head. With a motion like a tiger pouncing on a deer, he sprang forward. In an instant he had Ulrika immobilised, his arm around her neck; her struggles were as weak as those of a mouse in the grip of a cat.

'Ulrika,' Felix shouted.

The man looked up at him, and Felix was in no way surprised to see the red glow in his eyes. Mage, he thought, and then

realised that there was something naggingly familiar about the man. Felix suddenly put his finger on it. He was the wizard in the tavern, the one who vanished just as Max and Ulrika came in.

Felix could hear Gotrek and Snorri Nosebiter on the stairs. Help was on its way.

‘If you care about this girl, stand back,’ said Krieger. ‘Or I will snap her neck like a twig.’

‘If you harm her in any way I will kill you,’ said Felix, and was surprised to find that he meant it. Whatever it took, however long, he would hound this man to his grave.

‘Somehow I doubt that,’ said Krieger in his suave tone.

‘If the manling doesn’t then I will,’ said Gotrek, from beside Felix. There could be no doubt at all that he meant it.

The tall man laughed but hell was in his eyes. ‘It’s been tried before, by your kin, and they did not succeed either. Now stand aside or the girl dies.’

The Slayer glared at the dark magician. Felix wondered if Gotrek was going to attack and let Ulrika die anyway. He knew he could not allow it.

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