



# STORMRIDER

A NOVEL OF THE RIGANTE

DAVID  
GEMMELL

International bestselling author of *White Wolf*



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DAVID GEMMELL



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STORMRIDER

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# Prologue

The night sky was lit by flames, and black smoke swirled across the valley as the town of Shelsans continued to burn. There were no screams now, no feeble cries, no begging for mercy. Two thousand heretics were dead, most slain by sword or mace, though many had been committed to the cleansing fires.

The young knight of the Sacrifice stood high on the hillside and stared down at the burning town. Reflections of the distant flames shone on his blood-drenched silver breastplate and glistening helm. The wind shifted, and Winter Kay smelled the scent of roasting flesh. Far below the wind fanned the hunger of the flames. They blazed higher, devouring the ancient timber walls of the old museum and the carved wooden gates of the Albitane church.

Winter Kay removed his helm. His lean, angular features gleamed with sweat. Plucking a linen handkerchief from his belt, he examined it for bloodstains. Finding none, he wiped the cloth over his face and short-cropped dark hair. Putting on armor had been a waste of time this day.

The townsfolk had offered no armed resistance as the thousand knights had ridden into the valley. Instead, hundreds of them had walked from the town singing hymns and crying out words of welcome and brotherhood.

When they had seen the knights of the Sacrifice draw their longswords and heel their horses forward, they had fallen to their knees and called on the Source to protect them.

What idiots they were, thought Winter Kay. The Source



blessed only those with the courage to fight or the wit to run. He could not recall how many he had slain that day, only that his sword had been blunted by dusk and that his holy white cloak had been drenched in the blood of the evil.

Some had tried to repent, begging for their lives as they were dragged to the pyres. One man—a stocky priest in a blue robe—had hurled himself to the ground before Winter Kay, promising him a great treasure if he was spared.

“What treasure do you possess, worm?” asked Winter Kay, pressing his sword point against the man’s back.

“The orb, sir. I can take you to the Orb of Kranos.”

“How quaint,” said Winter Kay. “I expect it resides alongside the sword of Connavar and the helm of Axias. Perhaps it is even wrapped in the Veiled Lady’s robe.”

“I speak the truth, sir. The orb is hidden in Shelsans. It has been kept there for centuries. I have seen it.”

Winter Kay hauled the man to his feet by his white hair. He was short and stocky, his face round, his eyes fearful. From all around them came the screams of the dying cultists. Winter Kay dragged the man toward the town. A woman ran past him, a sword jutting from her breast. She staggered several steps, then fell to her knees. A knight followed her, wrenching the sword clear and decapitating her. Winter Kay walked on, holding his prisoner by the collar of his robe.

The man led him to a small church. In the doorway lay two dead priests. Beyond them were the bodies of a group of women and children.

The prisoner pointed to the altar. “We need to move it, sir,” he said. “The entrance to the vault is below it.”

Sheathing his sword, Winter Kay released the man. Together they lifted the altar table clear of the trapdoor beneath. The priest took hold of an iron ring and dragged the trapdoor open. Below it was a narrow set of steps. Winter Kay gestured the priest to climb down and then followed him.

It was gloomy inside. The priest found a tinderbox and struck a flame, lighting a torch that was set in a bracket on the gray wall. They moved down a narrow corridor that opened

out into a circular room. There were already torches lit there, and an elderly man was sitting before an oval table. In his hands was a curiously carved black box some eighteen inches high. Winter Kay thought it was polished ebony. The old man saw the newcomers and gently laid the box upon the table.

"The orb is within it," said the captured priest.

"Oh, Pereus, how could you be so craven?" asked the elderly man.

"I don't want to die. Is that so terrible?" the prisoner replied.

"You will die anyway," the old priest said sadly. "This knight has no intention of letting you live. There is not an ounce of mercy in him."

"That is not true," wailed the prisoner, swinging toward Winter Kay.

"Ah, but it is," the knight told him, drawing his sword. The little priest tried to run, but Winter Kay sprang after him, delivering a ferocious blow to the back of the man's head. The skull cracked open, and the priest crumbled to the stone floor. "Is that truly the Orb of Kranos?" Winter Kay asked.

"Aye, it is. Do you have any inkling of what that means?"

"It is a relic of ancient times. A crystal ball, some say, through which we can see the future. Show it to me."

"It is not crystal, Winter Kay. It is bone."

"How is it you know my name?"

"I have the gift, Sir Knight, though at this moment I wish I did not. So kill me and be done with it."

"All in good time, priest. My arm is tired from constant work today. I'll let it rest awhile. Show me the orb."

The elderly priest stepped away from the table. "I have no wish to see it. The box is not locked."

Winter Kay strode forward. As he reached out for the lid, he realized the box was not made of wood at all but had been cast from some dark metal. "What are these symbols etched upon it?" he asked.

"Ward spells. The orb radiates evil. The box contains it."

"We shall see." Winter Kay flipped open the lid. Within the



box was an object wrapped in black velvet. Putting down his bloody sword, Winter Kay reached in and lifted it out. Carefully he folded back the cloth. The priest was right. It was no crystal ball. It was a skull, an iron circlet upon its brow. "What nonsense is this?" demanded Winter Kay. Reaching out, he touched the yellowed brow. The skull began to glow, as if a bright candle had been lit within its hollow dome. Winter Kay felt a powerful surge of warmth flow along his fingers and up his arm. It was exquisite. It continued to flow through his body, up through his chest and neck and into his head. He cried out with the pleasure of it. All weariness from the day of slaughter fell away. He felt invigorated.

"This is a wondrous piece," he said. "I feel reborn."

"Evil knows its own kind," said the old man.

Winter Kay laughed aloud. "I am not evil, fool. I am a knight of the Sacrifice. I live to destroy evil wherever I find it. I do the work of the Source. I cleanse the land of the ungodly. Now tell me what magic has been placed in this skull."

"Only what was always there. That . . . that creature was once a mighty king. A great hero destroyed him and freed the world of his evil. However, the darkness within him cannot die. It seeks to reach out and corrupt the souls of men. It will bring you nothing but sorrow and death."

"Interesting," said Winter Kay. "There is an old adage: 'The enemy of my enemy must therefore be my friend.' Since you are named by the church as the enemy, then this must be a vessel for good. I find no evil in it."

"That is because its evil has already found you."

"And now you begin to bore me, old man. I shall give you a few moments to make your peace with the blessed Source, and then I shall send you to him."

"I will go gladly, Winter Kay. Which is more than can be said for you when the one with the golden eye comes for you."

Winter Kay's sword swept up and then down in a murderous arc. Having been blunted by a day of murder, the blade did not completely decapitate the old man. Blood sprayed



across the room. Several drops splashed to the table, spattering the skull. Light blazed from the bone. As Winter Kay gazed upon it, an ethereal face seemed to form for a brief moment. Then it faded.

Wrapping the skull in its hood of black velvet, Winter Kay returned it to its box and carried it from the burning ruins of Shelsans.

The winter in the northern mountains was the most vicious in more than thirty years. Rivers and lakes lay under a foot of ice, and fierce blizzards raged across the land for days on end. Sheep trapped in snowdrifts died in scores, and only the hardiest of the cattle would live to see the spring. Many roads were impassable throughout Black Mountain, and the townspeople struggled to survive. Highlanders of the Black Rigante came out of the mountains, bringing food and supplies, aiding farmers, seeking out citizens trapped in lonely homes high in the hills.

Even so many died, frozen in their beds.

Few ventured out into the wilderness between Black Mountain and the craggy western peaks of the Rigante homeland.

Kaelin Ring was wishing he was not one of them as he struggled through the bitter cold toward the high cabin of Finbarr Ustal. Laboring under a heavy pack to which was strapped a new long-barreled musket, Kaelin pushed up the last steep hill. Ice shone brightly in his dark beard, and the long, white scar on his right cheek felt as if it were burning. His legs ached from the unaccustomed strides necessitated by the wide snowshoes he wore. Kaelin pushed on, growing ever more weary. At twenty-three he was a powerful young man. In summer he would run, sometimes for ten miles over the hills, reveling in the strength and stamina of his youth. At this moment he felt like an old man, his muscles exhausted, his body crying out for rest. Anger flared. Rest here and you'll die, he told himself.

His dark eyes scanned the hill ahead. The slope was steep and stretched on and up for another half mile. He paused and clumsily readjusted the straps of his pack. Kaelin was wearing two pairs of gloves, one pair of lamb's wool and the second of rabbit fur. Even so his fingers felt numb. A fierce wind blew down over the hills, lifting snow in flurries, stinging his face and eyes. The wind billowed his sheepskin hood, flicking it back from his face. With a curse Kaelin grabbed at it, hauling it back into place. The sky above was gray and heavy with snow clouds. Kaelin stared balefully at the slope ahead. He was coming to the end of his strength. To die here would be laughable, he told himself. Never to see Chara again or his little son Jaim. "It will not happen," he said aloud. "I'll not be beaten by a touch of snow."

The wind picked up, roaring into his chest and almost throwing him from his feet. "Is that the best you can do?" shouted Kaelin. Strengthened by his anger, he ducked his head into the wind and began to climb. The pain in his legs was growing, his calves tight and cramping.

As he struggled on, he focused on Finbarr and the welcome he would receive as he entered the warmth and security of the high cabin.

Finbarr had worked at Ironlatch Farm for several years, but the previous year he had come to live in the northwest cabin with his wife and two surviving children. His oldest boy had died two years earlier. Employed by Maev Ring to watch over the stock in those mountain pastures, Finbarr patrolled the high country, carrying bales of hay and digging out sheep trapped in the snow. It was tough, demanding work. His wife, Ural, a strong woman, often worked alongside him, as did the two boys.

Kaelin had not seen the family for more than two months and, caught within one of his wandering moods, had packed some supplies and set off for the cabin. In good weather it was a day's walk from Ironlatch to the high cabin, but in these conditions it had taken the powerful young highlander more



than three times that long. He had been forced to spend one whole day in a cliff cave, sheltering from a fierce blizzard.

Exhausted now, Kaelin began to sweat from the effort of climbing the hill. Fear touched him. In these conditions a man had to move slowly and carefully. At this temperature perspiration would freeze against the skin beneath a man's clothes, draining all warmth from his flesh.

I am almost there, he thought. The sweat does not matter.

The sun was dropping low over the mountains as he approached the last quarter mile, and he was now regretting that he had chosen to bring his new long-barreled musket and his two Emburley pistols. Kaelin had planned to do a little hunting with Finbarr and the boys, but now all he wanted was a chair by a warm hearth and to be relieved of the weight of his guns and his pack. He shivered with pleasure at the thought of the heat from Finbarr's fire.

The boys, Feargol and Basson, would be delighted to see him. The youngsters loved his stories—stories he had first heard from the giant Jaim Grymauch when he was their age: tales of Connavar the King and Bane, who had fought in the great arenas of Stone. Basson, the oldest at ten, would sit at Kaelin's feet, his eyes wide, his attention rapt. Feargol, a six-year-old with an unruly mop of red hair, would interrupt the tales constantly, asking the oddest questions. "Did Bane wear a hat?" he asked one day just as Kaelin was telling the boys the story of a gladiatorial contest between Bane and a Stone warrior.

"Not while he was fighting before the crowd," Kaelin said, patiently. "So Bane drew his sword and stepped out before the emperor, a powerful man named—"

"What kind of a hat did he wear when he wasn't fighting?" asked Feargol.

"Will you be quiet?" snapped Basson, a slim young boy who had inherited his mother's fair skin and blond hair. "Who cares if he had a hat?"

"I like hats," said Feargol.

"He had a woolen hat," said Kaelin, "just like yours, with

ear protectors. When it was cold, he would let them down and tie them below his chin. In the summer he would lift the earflaps up and tie them at the top of the hat."

"What color was it?" asked Feargol. "Was it white like mine?"

"Yes, it was white."

Feargol was delighted. Scrambling up from the floor, he ran back into the bedroom and returned wearing his white hat. Then he sat quietly as Kaelin finished the story.

The memory lifted Kaelin's mood as he saw the cabin. He pictured the fire and the friendly reception, the boys running out to greet him. Kaelin paused in his climb. There was no smoke coming from the stone chimney. That was odd, for there was enough firewood to last the winter. He and Finbarr had spent weeks hauling and sawing logs, chopping rounds, and stacking the fuel by the north wall.

As he came closer to the cabin, he saw that the timbers of the west wall had been caved in and part of the roof had fallen. Then, out of the corner of his eye, he saw something red flicker in a nearby tree. Squinting against the fierce cold wind and the flurrying snow, Kaelin focused on the tree. Finbarr's oldest son, Basson, dressed in a thin red nightshirt, was clinging to the upper branches. Kicking off his snowshoes, Kaelin scrambled up the last part of the slope, his weariness forgotten. Even as he came to the tree, he knew that the boy was dead.

The ten-year-old had frozen to death. There was ice in his blond hair, and his skin was blue. Great gouges had been torn from the trunk of the tree below him. Kaelin recognized the marks as the talons of a grizzly. They reached up almost nine feet.

Moving to the shattered wall of the cabin, he saw that the timbers had been smashed open. There were talon grooves in the shattered wood and blood upon the snow around the ruined door. Shrugging off his pack, he pulled off his gloves. There would be no point trying to load the musket. The firing



mechanism would be frozen solid. Opening his heavy sheepskin coat, he pulled one of his long-barreled Emburley pistols from its leather sheath and cocked it. He did not go into the cabin but examined the bloodstained ground. There were bear tracks and a deep channel where something had been dragged toward the trees—something leaking gore.

With a sinking heart Kaelin Ring followed the channel. What he found just inside the tree line sickened him. The remains of the family were scattered there. Finbarr's head—half the face bitten away—was resting by a tree root. Of Ural there was part of a leg and a ripped and bloody section of skirt. Kaelin had neither the heart nor the stomach to search for signs of the child Feargol.

He returned to the cabin. There were deep claw marks on the outer, smashed walls. Inside, the table was broken in half and two of the chairs were shattered. Several shelves had been torn from the walls, and the floor was littered with broken crockery. A discharged musket and a pistol lay close to the door of the back bedroom. A broken saber was resting against the far wall, and a bloody kitchen knife had been hurled into the hearth. From what Kaelin could see—and the fact that Basson had scrambled up the tree in his nightshirt—the bear had come upon the cabin at night. It had smashed at the door and the frame, tearing out the timbers. This had not been done quickly. Finbarr and Ural had had time to load and fire the musket and the pistol. As the bear had come through, they had fought it with sword and knife. Spray patterns of blood on the walls showed that they had died there. Basson must have ducked past the bear and run for the trees.

Kaelin moved to the hearth. Dropping to one knee, he retrieved the bloodstained kitchen knife. Then he pressed his hand to the hearthstones. They were still barely warm.

The attack had occurred the previous night.

Rising, Kaelin walked through to the small back bedroom. There was no sign there of disruption. The boys' bunk beds stood against the far wall, opposite the large double bed shared by Finbarr and Ural. Kaelin sat down on the bed. This was a