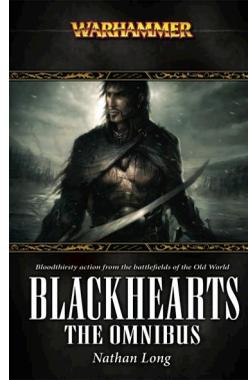


BLACKHEARTS: THE OMNIBUS

By Nathan Long

Contains the novels *Valnir's Bane*, *The Broken Lance* and *Tainted Blood*, plus two short stories and an introduction by the author.

Under threat of death for their crimes, Reiner and his companions are forced to carry out the most desperate and suicidal secret missions, all for the good of the Empire. Chaos cultists, ratmen, dark elves, rogue army commanders and more – time and again the Blackhearts are pitted against impossible odds and survive – yet what they most want is the one thing they cannot have: their freedom.



About the Author

Nathan Long was a struggling screenwriter for fifteen years, during which time he had three movies made and a handful of live-action and animated TV episodes produced. Now he is a novelist, and is enjoying it much more. For Black Library he has written three Warhammer novels featuring the Blackhearts, and has taken over the Gotrek and Felix series, starting with the eighth installment, *Orcslayer*. He lives in Hollywood.

• ALSO BY NATHAN LONG •

ORCSLAYER
(A Gotrek & Felix novel)

The following is an excerpt from *Blackhearts: The Omnibus* by Nathan Long.

Published by the Black Library. Games Workshop, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

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REINER HETZAU HAD not had a good war. When he had ridden north with von Stolmen's Pistoliers to join in the last push to drive the heathen horde back north of Kislev where they belonged, he'd hoped to return home to Altdorf with a few battle-scars to impress his various sweethearts and bedmates, a few trunks full of plunder and battlefield souvenirs to sell on the black market, and a few saddlebags full of gold crowns, won from his fellow soldiers in games of chance played behind the cavalry stables. Instead, what had happened? He had been wounded in his first battle and forced to sit out the rest of the offensive in Vulsk, a Kislev border town that fell further and further behind the front as the Grand Alliance forced the raiders deeper into the Chaos Wastes.

Then, while recuperating, he had single-handedly flushed out an evil sorceress disguised as a sister of Shallya and slayed her before she had succeeded in spreading disease and confusion throughout the army. But had they heaped praise and promotions upon him for this heroic act? No. Through the blind stupidity of his superiors, he was charged with murdering a clergywoman and perpetrating the very crimes he had stopped the false sister from committing.

Fortunately – or unfortunately – depending on how one looked at it, his arrest had coincided with the final offensive of the war, and the outcome had been so uncertain that little things like court martials and executions had been postponed while the conflict came to its blood-soaked climax. Reiner had cooled his heels in various cells for months, being moved from brig to brig as the vagaries of

war demanded. At last, with the war half a year over, he sat in the garrison brig at Smallhof Castle, an Empire outpost just west of the Kislev border, awaiting execution by hanging at dawn in a cell full of the lowest sort of gallows trash.

No, it had not been a good war. Not a good war at all.

Reiner, however, was not the sort of fellow to give up hope. He was a gambler, a follower of Ranald. He knew that luck could be twisted in one's favour by an astute player with an eye for the main chance. Already he had succeeded in bribing the thick-witted turnkey with tales of treasure he had hidden before his arrest. The man was going to sneak him out of the brig at midnight in return for a cut of that fictitious cache. Now all he needed was one further accomplice. It would be a long, dangerous road to freedom: out of the camp, out of the Empire, into the unknown, and he would need someone to keep watch while he slept, to boost him over walls, to stand lookout while he liberated horses, food or clothes from their rightful owners. Particularly, he needed someone to push in the way of the authorities so that he could make his escape if they were trapped.

As the sun set outside the barred brig window, Reiner turned and surveyed his fellow prisoners, trying to determine which of them might be the most desirable travelling companion. He was looking for the right combination of competence, steadiness and gullibility – not qualities to be found in great abundance inside a prison. The others were all trading stories of how they came to be imprisoned. Reiner curled a lip as he listened. Every one of them proclaimed his innocence. The fools. In their eyes, not one of them deserved to be there.

The engineer in the corner, a brooding, black-browed giant with hands the size of Wissenberg cheeses, was shaking his head like a baffled bull. 'I didn't mean to kill anyone. But they wouldn't stop. They just kept pushing and pushing. Jokes and names and...' His hands flexed. 'I didn't swing to kill. But we were framing a siege tower and I held a maul and...'

‘And yer a bloody great orc what don’t know his own strength, that’s what,’ said a burly pikeman with a bald head and a jutting chin beard.

The engineer’s head jerked up. ‘I am not an orc!’

‘Easy now, man,’ said a second pikeman, as thin and wiry as his companion was sturdy. ‘We none of us need another helping of trouble. Hals meant no harm. He just lets his mouth run away with him now and again.’

‘Is that why you’re here?’ asked Reiner, for he liked the look of the pair – sturdy sons of toil with an alert air – and wanted to know more about them. ‘Did your mouths dig a hole your fists couldn’t fill?’

‘No, my lord,’ said the thin pikeman. ‘Entirely innocent we are. Victims of circumstance. Our captain...’

‘Blundering half-wit who couldn’t fall out of bed without a map,’ interjected Hals.

‘Our captain,’ repeated his friend, ‘was found with a pair of pikes stuck in his back, and somehow the brass came to blame us for it. But as the coward was running from a charge at the time, we reckon it was Kurgan done for him.’

Hals laughed darkly. ‘Aye. The Kurgan.’

There was a giggle from the shadows near the door. A fellow with white teeth and a curling black moustache grinned at them. ‘Is no need to make stories, boys,’ he said in a Tilean accent. ‘We all in boats the same, hey?’

‘What do you know about it, garlic-eater?’ growled Hals. ‘I suppose you’re as pure as snow. What are you in for?’

‘A mis-standing-under,’ said the Tilean. ‘I sell some guns I find to some Kossar boys. How I know the Empire so stingy? How I know they don’t share with allies?’

‘The Empire has no allies, you thieving mercenary,’ said a knight who sat near the door. ‘Only grateful neighbours who flock to it in times of need like sheep to the shepherd.’

Reiner eyed the man warily. He was the only other man of noble blood in the brig, but Reiner felt no kinship for him. He was tall and powerfully built, with a fierce blond beard and piercing blue eyes, a

hero of the Empire from head to toe. Reiner was certain the fellow saluted in his sleep.

‘You seem awfully keen for a man whose Empire has locked him up,’ he said dryly.

‘A mistake, certain to be rectified,’ said the knight. ‘I killed a man in an affair of honour. There’s no crime in that.’

‘Somebody must have thought so.’

The knight waved a dismissive hand. ‘They said he was a boy.’

‘And how did he run afoul of you?’

‘We were tent-pegging. The fool blundered across my line and cost me a win.’

‘A killing offence indeed,’ said Reiner.

‘Do you mock me, sir?’

‘Not at all, my lord. I wouldn’t dare.’

Reiner looked beyond the knight to a beardless archer, a dark-haired boy more pretty than handsome. ‘And you, lad. How comes one so young to such dire straits?’

‘Aye,’ said Hals. ‘Did y’bite yer nursie’s tit?’

The boy looked up, eyes flashing. ‘I killed a man! My tent mate. He...’ The boy swallowed. ‘He tried to put his hands on me. And I’ll do for any of you as I did for him, if you try the like.’

Hals barked a laugh. ‘Lovers’ tiff was it?’

The boy leapt to his feet. ‘You’ll take that back.’

Reiner sighed. Another hothead. Too bad. He liked the boy’s spirit. A sparrow undaunted in an eyrie of hawks.

‘Peace, lad,’ said the thin pikeman. ‘’Twas only a jest. You leave him be, Hals.’

A tall, thin figure stood up from the wall, a nervous looking artilleryman with a trim beard and wild eyes. ‘I ran from my gun. Fire fell from the sky. Fire that moved like a man. It reached for me. I...’ He shivered and hung his head, then sat back down abruptly.

For a moment no one spoke, or met anyone else’s eye. He’s honest, at least, thought Reiner, poor fellow.

There was one last man in the room, who had not spoken or seemed to take any interest in the conversation: a plump, tidy fellow

dressed in the white canvas jerkin of a field surgeon. He sat with his face to the wall.

‘And you, bone-cutter,’ Reiner called to him. ‘What’s your folly?’

The others looked at the man, relieved to turn to a new subject after the artilleryman’s embarrassing admission.

The surgeon didn’t raise his head or look around. ‘Never you mind what ain’t your business.’

‘Oh, come sir,’ said Reiner. ‘We’re all dead men here. No one will betray your secrets.’

But the man said nothing, only hunched his shoulders further and continued to stare at the wall.

Reiner shrugged and leaned back, looking over his cellmates again, contemplating his choices. Not the knight: too hot-headed. Nor the engineer: too moody. The pikemen perhaps, though they were a right pair of villains.

The sound of footsteps outside the cell door interrupted his thoughts. Everyone looked up. A key turned in the lock, the door squealed open, and two guards entered followed by a sergeant. ‘On your feet, scum,’ he said.

‘Taking us to our last meal?’ asked Hals.

‘Yer last meal’ll be my boot if y’don’t move. Now file out.’

The prisoners shuffled out of the cell. Two more guards waited outside. They led the way with the sergeant into the chilly evening, and across the muddy grounds of the castle in which the garrison was housed.

Thick flakes of wet snow were falling. The hackles rose on Reiner’s neck as he passed the gallows in the centre of the courtyard.

They entered the castle keep through a small door, and after descending many a twisting stair, were ordered into a low-ceilinged chamber that smelled of wood smoke and hot iron. Reiner swallowed nervously as he looked around. Manacles and cages lined the walls, as well as instruments of torture – racks, gridirons, metal boots. In a corner, a man in a leather apron tended brands that glowed in beds of hot coals.

‘Eyes front!’ bawled the sergeant. ‘Dress ranks! Attention!’

The prisoners came to attention in the centre of the room with varying degrees of alacrity, and then stood rigid for what seemed like an hour while the sergeant glared at them. At last, just as Reiner felt his knees couldn’t take it any longer, a door opened behind them.

‘Eyes front, curse you!’ shouted the sergeant. He snapped to attention himself as two men stepped into Reiner’s line of vision.

The first man Reiner didn’t know: a scarred old soldier with iron grey hair and a hitch in his walk. His face was grim and heavily lined, with eyes like slits hidden under shaggy brows. He wore the black-slashed-with-red doublet and breeks of an Ostland captain of pike.

The second man Reiner had once or twice seen at a distance – Baron Albrecht Valdenheim, younger brother to Count Manfred Valdenheim of Nordbergbruche and second-in-command of his army. He was tall and barrel-chested, with a powerful frame running a little to fat, and he had a lantern jaw. His reputation for ruthlessness showed in his face, which was as cold and closed as an iron door. He wore dark blue velvet under a fur coat that swept the floor.

The sergeant saluted. ‘The prisoners, my lord.’

Albrecht nodded absently, his ice-blue eyes surveying them from under a fringe of short, dark hair.

‘Ulf Urquart, my lord,’ said the sergeant as Albrecht and the scarred captain stopped in front of the brooding giant. ‘Engineer. Charged with the murder of a fellow sapper. Killed him with a maul.’

They moved to Hals and his skinny friend. ‘Hals Kiir and Pavel Voss. Pikemen. Murdered their captain while in battle.’

‘We didn’t, though,’ said Hals.

‘Silence, scum!’ shouted the sergeant and backhanded him with a gloved hand.

‘That’s all right, sergeant,’ said Albrecht. ‘Who’s this?’ He indicated the pretty youth.

‘Franz Shoentag, archer. Killed his tentmate, claims self-defence.’

Albrecht and the captain grunted and moved on to the angular artilleryman.

‘Oskar Lichtmar, cannon. Cowardice in front of the enemy. He left his gun.’

The grizzled captain pursed his lips. Albrecht shrugged and stepped to the blond knight, who stared straight ahead, perfectly at attention.

‘Erich von Eisenberg, Novitiate Knight in the Order of the Sceptre,’ said the sergeant. ‘Killed Viscount Olin Marburg in a duel.’

Albrecht raised an eyebrow. ‘A capital offence?’

‘The viscount had only fifteen summers.’

‘Ah.’

They next came to the Tilean.

‘Giano Ostini,’ said the brig captain. ‘Mercenary crossbowman. Stole Empire handguns and sold ‘em to foreigners.’

Albrecht nodded and stepped to the plump man who had refused to name his crime. The sergeant eyed him with distaste. ‘Gustaf Schlecht, surgeon. Charged with doing violence to a person bringing provisions to the forces.’

Albrecht looked up. ‘Not familiar with that one.’

The sergeant looked uneasy. ‘He, er, molested and killed the daughter of the farmer his unit was billeted with.’

‘Charming.’

The men stepped in front of Reiner. Albrecht and the captain of pike looked him up and down coolly. The sergeant glared at him. ‘Reiner Hetzau, pistolier. The worst of the lot. A sorcerer who murdered a holy woman and summoned foul creatures to attack his camp. Don’t know as I recommend him, my lord. The others are wicked men, but this one, he’s the enemy.’

‘Nonsense,’ said the captain of pike, speaking for the first time. He had a voice like gravel under iron wheels. ‘He ain’t Chaos. I’d smell it.’

‘Of course he isn’t,’ agreed Albrecht.

Reiner's jaw dropped. He was stunned. 'But... but then, my lord, surely the charges against me must be false. If you know I am no sorcerer, then it is impossible that I summoned those creatures, and...'

The sergeant kicked him in the stomach. 'Silence! You horrible man!'

Reiner bent double, retching and clutching his belly.

'I read your account, sir,' said Albrecht, as if nothing had happened. 'And I believe it.'

'Then... you'll let me go?'

'I think not. For it proves that you are something infinitely more dangerous than a sorcerer. You are a greedy fool who would allow the land of his birth to burn if he thought he could make a gold crown from it.'

'My lord, I beseech you. I may have made a few lapses in judgement, but if you know I am innocent...'

Albrecht sniffed and turned away from him. 'Well, captain?' he asked.

The old captain curled his lip. 'I wouldn't pay a penny for the lot of them.'

'I'm afraid they're all we have at the moment.'

'Then I'll have to make do, won't I?'

'Indeed.' Albrecht turned to the sergeant. 'Sergeant, prepare them.'

'Aye sir.' The man signalled the guards. 'Into the cell with them. All but Orc-heart here.'

'I am not an orc!' said Ulf as two guards stuffed Reiner and the rest into a tiny steel cage on the left wall. The other two led Ulf to the far side of the room where the man in the leather apron stirred his coals. The guards kicked Ulf's legs until he kneeled, then flattened his hand on a wooden tabletop.

'What are you doing?' asked the big man uneasily.

One of the guards put a spear to his neck. 'Just hold still.'

The man in the apron picked a brand out of the fire. The glowing tip was in the shape of a hammer.

Ulf's eyes went wide. 'No! You can't! This isn't right!' He struggled. The other guards hurried over and held him down.

The guard with the spear pricked his skin. 'Easy now.'

The torturer pressed the brand into the flesh of Ulf's hand. It sizzled. Ulf screamed and slumped in a dead faint.

Reiner swallowed queasily as he smelled the unpleasantly pleasant odour of cooking meat.

'Right,' said the sergeant. 'Next.'

Reiner suppressed a shudder. Next to him, Oskar, the artilleryman, was weeping like a child.

REINER WOKE WITH a sensation of cold on his cheek and searing agony on the back of his hand. He opened his eyes and found that he was lying on the flagstones of the torture chamber. Apparently he too had passed out when they had branded him.

Someone kicked his legs. The sergeant. 'On your feet, sorcerer.'

It was hard to understand the order. His mind was far away – detached from his body like a kite at the end of a string. The world seemed to revolve around him behind a wall of thick glass. He tried to stand – thought he had, in fact – but when he focused again, he found he was still on the floor, the pain in his hand rolling up his arm in waves like heavy surf.

'Stand at attention, curse you!' roared the sergeant, and kicked him again.

This time he managed it, though not without mishap, and joined the others who formed a ragged line before Albrecht and the captain. Each prisoner had an ugly, blistering, hammer-shaped burn on his hand. Reiner resisted the urge to look at his. He didn't want to see it.

'Sergeant,' Albrecht barked. 'Give the surgeon fellow some bandages and have him dress those wounds.'

The torturer in the leather apron produced some unguents and dressings which he gave to Schlecht. The plump surgeon salved and bound first his own burn, then started on the others.

'Now then,' said Albrecht, as Schlecht worked. 'Now that we have you leashed, we can proceed.'

Reiner snarled under his breath. They had leashed him indeed. They had scarred him for life. The hammer brand told all who saw it that the man who wore it was a deserter and could be killed on sight.

‘I am here to offer you something you did not have an hour ago,’ said Albrecht. ‘A choice. You can serve your Emperor on a mission of great importance, or you can be hanged from the gallows this very evening and go to the fate that awaits you.’

Reiner cursed. Hanged this evening? He was to escape at midnight. Now the fiends had stolen even that from him.

‘The chances of surviving the mission are slim, I warrant you,’ continued Albrecht. ‘But the rewards will be great. You will receive a full pardon for your crimes and be given your weight in gold crowns.’

‘What good is all that when you also gave us this?’ growled Hals, holding up the back of his ruined hand.

‘The Emperor values your service in this matter so highly that he will command a sage of the Order of Light to remove the brands when you return successful.’

This sounded too good to be true, thought Reiner. The sort of thing he himself would say if he was trying to con a mark into some foolish course of action.

‘What’s the job?’ asked Pavel, sullen.

Albrecht smirked. ‘You mean to haggle? You will learn the nature of the mission once you have volunteered for it. Now, sirs, give me your answers.’

There was much hesitation, but one by one the others voiced or nodded their assent. Reiner damned Albrecht under his breath. A choice, he called it. What choice was there? Wearing the hammer brand, Reiner could never again travel easily within the Empire. It was early spring now. He might still wear gloves for a while, but come summer he would stick out like a sheep in a wolf pack. Never would he be able to go back to his beloved Altdorf, to the card rooms and cafes, the theatres and dog pits and brothels that he thought of as home. Even if he could somehow escape the brig, he would have to leave the Empire for foreign lands and never come back. And now that Albrecht had moved his execution to this

evening instead of tomorrow at dawn, and thus foiling his only plan, even that unappetising option was closed to him.

Only by accepting the mission did he gain any chance of escape. Somewhere along the road he could perhaps slip away: west to Marienburg, or south to Tilea or the Border Princes or some other foul hole. Or perhaps the mission wouldn't be as dangerous as Albrecht made out. Perhaps he would see it through to the finish and take his reward – if Albrecht truly meant to give him one.

All that was certain was that if he declined the mission, he would die tonight, and there would be no more perhapses.

‘Aye,’ he said at last. ‘Aye, my lord. I’m your man.’

Blackhearts: The Omnibus can be purchased in all better bookstores, Games Workshop and other hobby stores, or direct from this website and GW mail order.

Price £9.99 (UK) / \$11.99 (US) / \$15 (CAN)

ISBN 13: 978 1 84416 510 0

- Bookshops: Distributed in the UK and the US by Simon & Schuster Books.
- Games & hobby stores: Distributed in UK and US by Games Workshop.
- UK mail order: 0115-91 40 000 US mail order: 1-800-394-GAME
- Online: Buy direct care of Games Workshop's web store by going to www.blacklibrary.com/store or www.games-workshop.com.