

The Broken Lance

The second Blackhearts novel by Nathan Long

If you've got a job so dangerous, so suicidal that even the bravest men balk in terror, then it's time to call in Reiner Hetsau and the Blackhearts.

Convicted men, fated to die in the hangman's noose, the Blackhearts have one chance of salvation. The Old World has plenty of dark deeds that need doing for the good of mankind, and the Blackhearts are just the scum for the job.

Their latest assignment takes them to a remote border fort. All communications with this bastion have ceased and the Imperial authorities are starting to get nervous. The Blackhearts can only be sure of this: the odds are going to be stacked against them, and they may not come back alive!



Nathan Long has worked as a screenwriter for fifteen years. He has also written several award winning short stories. He has also been a taxi driver, limo driver, graphic designer, dishwasher and lead singer for a rockabilly band. He lives in Hollywood.

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

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from THE BROKEN LANCE

THE HAMMER BRANDS were gone. The shameful scars that had been burnt into their flesh had been removed at last by a sorcery so painful it made the original branding a pleasant memory by comparison. The skin of their hands was clean, unblemished, as if the red iron had never touched it. But the blood beneath that skin, that was another story.

Reiner Hetsau and his convict companions; the pikemen Hals Kiir and Pavel Voss, the Tilean crossbowman Giano Ostini, and Franka Shoentag, the dark-haired archer who only Reiner knew was not the boy she pretended to be, had been given the deserter's brand by Baron Albrecht Valdenheim as a way to force them to help him betray his brother, Count Manfred Valdenheim. He had promised them that when their service to him was done, he would remove the brands. But after they learned that he intended to betray them as well as his brother, they had helped Manfred instead, in hopes that he would make good on Albrecht's promise.

And he had. Manfred had been so impressed by the unorthodox ways in which Reiner and his companions had escaped their predicaments, by their ability to adapt and survive in any situation, and by their utter disregard for what respectable men might call right and wrong, that he had decided to make them agents of the Empire whether they wished it or not. The country, he said, had need of blackhearts who would not flinch at dishonourable duty. So he had ordered his personal sorcerer to remove the brands – which marked them deserters who could be shot on sight, and therefore useless as spies – and instead bound them to him with a much more subtle leash.

He had poisoned their blood.

It was a latent poison, which would lie dormant within them unless they attempted to leave Manfred's service or betray him. Then a spell could be read that would wake the poison and kill them wherever they might run, within the Empire or beyond.

There might be some, Reiner thought, as he folded his compact frame into the bay of a mullioned dormer window and looked out over the moonlit rooftops of Altdorf, who would be happy with the arrangement. Manfred had installed them in his townhouse and given them the run of the place, allowing them to read in the library and practise at swords in the garden, and had provided them with warm beds, fine food and obsequious servants – a soft life in these days of hardship and war, when many in the Empire were maimed and starving and hadn't a roof over their heads to call their own – but Reiner hated it.

The townhouse might be the epitome of comfort, but it was still a prison. Manfred wanted their existence kept a secret, so they were not allowed beyond its walls. It tortured Reiner that Altdorf was just outside and he couldn't reach it. The brothels and gambling halls, the dog-pits and theatres he called home, were within walking distance – on some nights he could hear singing and laughing and perhaps even the rattle of dice. But he couldn't get to them. They might as well have been in Lustria. It was agony.

Not that the others didn't suffer as well. When Manfred had recruited them, he had promised the Blackhearts action – secret missions, assassinations, kidnappings – but for the last two months they had done nothing but sit, waiting for orders that never came, and it was driving them stir crazy. It wasn't that Reiner relished the thought of risking life and limb for the Empire that had falsely branded him sorcerer and traitor, but endlessly waiting to be sent to one's death was a misery all its own – an edgy, endless boredom which set him and his companions at each other's throats. Casual conversations suddenly erupted into shouting matches, or broke off into sullen silences. Though he liked them all, Reiner's companions' tics and mannerisms, which he had once found amusing, now grated like brick on flesh: Hals's incessant barbs and jokes, Pavel's little clearing of the throat before he asked a question, Giano's moaning about how everything was better in Tilea, Franka's...

Well, it was Franka that was the real problem, wasn't it? Reiner had made a terrible mistake falling for the girl. He hadn't thought it would happen. After he had gotten over the shock of learning her true sex he hadn't given her a second thought. She wasn't really his sort – a wiry hoyden with hair shorter than his own – nothing like the laughing, lusty harlots he usually favoured, with painted lips and voluptuous hips. But that day

on the crag above Nordbergbusche, when together they had killed Albrecht, they had exchanged a look that had awakened a flame of desire in him he knew could only be quenched in her arms. The trouble was, though she had admitted to him that she shared his passion, had in fact kissed him once with a fervour that had nearly carried them both away, she refused to consummate their lust. She...

The latch in the door behind him clicked. Reiner turned from the window as Franka entered the room, candle in hand. He held his breath. She closed the door, set the candle on a dresser, and began unlacing her jerkin.

'Slowly, beloved,' said Reiner, twirling his moustaches like a stage villain. 'Tis too nice a job to rush.'

Franka gasped, covering herself, then let out an annoyed breath when she realized who was sitting in the window seat. 'Reiner. How did you get in here?'

'Klaus was asleep again, as usual.'

'And so should you be.'

Reiner grinned. 'An excellent idea. Turn down the covers and let's to bed.'

Franka sighed and sat on a divan. 'Must you continue to persist?'

'Must you continue to resist?'

'The year of my vow is not yet up. I still mourn for Yarl.'

Reiner groaned. 'Is it still two months?'

'Three.'

'Three!'

'Only two days have passed since you last asked.'

'It feels like two years.' He stood and began to pace. 'Beloved, we could be dead in three months! Sigmar knows what madness Manfred has in store for us. He could send us to Ulthuan for all we know.'

'A man of honour would not press me on this,' said Franka, tight-lipped.

'Have I ever said I was a man of honour?' He sat on the divan beside her. 'Franka. There is a reason for a soldier's loose morals. He knows every day that he might die tomorrow, and therefore lives each night as if it were his last. You are a soldier now. You know this. You must seize what stands before you before Morr snatches it from your grasp forever.'

Franka rolled her eyes as he opened his arms in invitation. 'You make a compelling argument, captain, but unfortunately I

have honour – or at least stubborn pride – enough for the both of us, and so...’

Reiner dropped his arms. ‘Very well, very well. I will retire. But could you not at least grant me a kiss to dream on?’

Franka chuckled. ‘And have you take advantage as always?’

‘On my honour, beloved...’

‘Did you not just say you had no honour?’

‘I... er, yes, I suppose I did.’ Reiner sighed and stood. ‘Once again you defeat me, lady. But one day...’ He shrugged and stepped to the door.

‘Reiner.’

Reiner turned. Franka was beside him. She stretched up on her tiptoes and kissed him lightly on the lips. ‘Now go to bed.’

‘Torturer,’ he said, then turned the latch and left.

UNSURPRISINGLY, REINER FOUND it difficult to sleep, which was unfortunate, for he was woken much too early the next morning. He had been dreaming of Franka unlacing her jerkin and pulling off her shirt, and it was a rude shock to open his eyes to the ugly face of dear old Klaus, the guard in charge of watching over him and his companions, glaring down at him.

‘Get yer boots on, y’lazy slug,’ Klaus barked.

‘Piss off.’ Reiner pulled the covers over his head. ‘I was with a lady.’

‘None of your sauce!’ Klaus kicked the bed again. ‘His lordship requests yer presence in the yard, on the double.’

Reiner poked an eye above the blanket. ‘Manfred’s back?’ He yawned and sat up, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. ‘Thought he’d forgotten about us.’

‘Manfred never forgets nothing,’ said Klaus. ‘You’d do well to remember it.’

‘WHAT HAPPENINGS?’ ASKED Giano as the Blackhearts shuffled sleepily down the curving mahogany staircase behind Reiner and Klaus to the townhouse’s marble-floored entryway. The curly haired Tilean was still doing up his breeches.

‘No idea,’ said Reiner. Klaus motioned them through a service door and they entered the kitchen.

‘It’s something different, though,’ said Pavel. He stole a pastry from a tray and stuffed it in his mouth. ‘Makes a change,’ he said, spitting crumbs.

Reiner chuckled at the sight. The pikeman was as ugly as a wet rat, and utterly unconcerned about it: long necked and scrawny, with a patch over his lost left eye and a scarred mouth that was missing three front teeth.

‘Probably just sword drills again,’ said Hals, Pavel’s bald, burly, red bearded brother-in-arms. ‘Or worse, horsemanship.’

Klaus opened the kitchen door and they stepped into the gravelled stable yard. ‘Maybe not,’ said Franka. ‘Look at that.’

Reiner and the others looked ahead. A coach with louvred windows sat just inside the back gate. Two guards stood before it. The Blackhearts groaned.

‘Not the coach again,’ said Hals.

‘We’d all kill each other before we got where we were going,’ agreed Pavel.

Klaus stopped in the centre of the yard and called them to attention. They straightened, but only half-heartedly. Months of enforced familiarity with him had bred contempt for his authority. They waited. The morning fog hid the world beyond the stone walls in a pearly embrace, and though it was summer, the sun was not yet high enough in the sky to chase the night’s chill away. Reiner shivered and wished he had thought to don his cloak. His stomach growled. He had become used to a regular breakfast.

After a quarter of an hour, the gate to the garden opened and Count Manfred stepped into the yard. Tall and broad, with silver in his hair and beard, the count looked the part of a kind, wise king out of legend, but Reiner knew better. Manfred might be wise, but he was hard as flint. A bright-eyed young corporal in the uniform of a lancer followed in his wake.

Manfred nodded curtly to the Blackhearts. ‘Klaus, open the coach, then retire to the gate with Moegen and Valch.’

‘M’lord?’ said Klaus. ‘I wouldn’t trust these villains near yer lordship...’

‘Obey my orders, Klaus. I am perfectly safe.’

Klaus saluted reluctantly and crossed to the coach. He took a key from one of the guards and unlocked it. Reiner expected Manfred to order them into it, but when Klaus opened the door, four men ducked out and stepped down to the gravel. The Blackhearts exchanged uneasy glances. The men were filthy, unshaved, and half starved, and wore the remains of military uniforms.

‘Fall in,’ said Manfred.

The four men shambled over and lined up next to the Blackhearts, squaring their shoulders reflexively.

Manfred faced the Blackhearts. 'We have work for you at last,' he said, then sighed. 'There have actually been many jobs on which we would have liked to have used you. There is much turmoil in Altdorf at the moment. Much finger pointing over our losses in the recent conflict, and much clamouring for changes at the top – particularly among the younger barons. It would have been nice to have used you to "calm" some of the more strident voices, but we were hesitant to try an untested tool so close to home where it might fly back into our faces.' He clasped his hands behind his back. 'Now a perfect test has presented itself. Of utmost importance to the well-being of the Empire, but far enough away that you will not embarrass us if you fail.'

'Your confidence in us is inspiring, m'lord,' said Reiner wryly.

'Be thankful I have any at all after your insubordination at Groffholt.'

'Did you not recruit us particularly for our penchant for insubordination, m'lord?' asked Reiner.

'Enough,' said Manfred, and though he didn't raise his voice, Reiner did not feel inclined to push his insolence any further.

'Listen well,' said Manfred. 'For I will not repeat these orders and they will not be written down.' He cleared his throat and looked them all in the eye, then began. 'Deep in the Black Mountains is an Empire fort which guards an isolated pass and protects a nearby gold mine. The mine helps the Empire pay for reconstruction and defence in these troubled times, but in the last few months the mine's output has slowed to a trickle, and we have not received from the fort satisfactory answers to our queries. I sent a courier two months ago. He has not returned. I do not know what has befallen him.' Manfred frowned. 'All that is certain is that the fort is still in Imperial hands, for an agent of mine saw recruitment notices for the fort's regiment going up in Averheim not a week ago.' He looked at Reiner. 'This recruitment is your opportunity. You are to sign on, install yourselves in the fort, discover what is occurring, and if it is treasonous, stop it.'

'You have reason to suspect treason?'

'It is possible,' said Manfred. 'The fort's commander, General Broder Gutzmann, is rumoured to be angry that he was kept in the south when the fate of the Empire was being decided in the north. He may have become angry enough to do something rash.'

'And if he has?'

Manfred hesitated, then spoke. 'If there is a traitor in the fort, he must be "removed", no matter who he is. But know that Gutzmann is an excellent general and loved by his men. They are fiercely loyal. If it is he you must remove, it should look like an accident. If his men discovered that he was the victim of foul play, they would revolt, and the Empire is stretched too thin now to lose an entire garrison.'

'Pardon, m'lord,' said Reiner, 'but I don't understand. If Gutzmann is such an excellent general, why not bring him north and let him hunt Kurgan like he wants? Would that not stop his grumbling?'

Manfred sighed. 'I cannot. There are some in Altdorf who feel that Gutzmann is too good a general, that if he won great victories in the north, he might begin to have ambitions – that, er, he might seek to be more than a leader of soldiers.'

'Ah,' said Reiner. 'So he was kept in the south on purpose. He has reason to be angry.'

Manfred scowled. 'No "reason" can excuse stealing from the Emperor. If he is guilty, he must be stopped. Do you all understand your orders?'

The Blackhearts nodded, as did the newcomers.

Manfred glanced at the new men, then back to the Blackhearts. 'This will be a difficult mission, and it was felt you should be returned to full strength. Therefore we have found you some new recruits. These four men will be under your command, Hetsau. Corporal Karelina Eberhart,' he indicated the young junior officer who stood to his left, 'will also obey your orders, but is answerable only to me. He is my eyes and ears, and will report to me at the end of this venture on...' He paused, then smirked. 'On how true and useful a tool you and your Blackhearts are. His report will determine whether we will be able to employ you in the future, and consequently, whether we will suffer you to live henceforth. Do you understand me?'

Reiner nodded. 'Yes my lord. Perfectly.' He shot a look at Corporal Eberhart, who was gaping at Manfred with wide blue eyes. Reiner chuckled. The poor lad didn't expect Manfred to be so open about his role in the enterprise. He was unused to the count's bluntness. Reiner was not. Manfred was not accustomed to hiding his cannon behind roses.

'Are these men subject to the same constraints as we, m'lord?' asked Reiner, indicating the four new recruits. 'Have they been...'

'Yes, captain,' said Manfred. 'They have agreed to the same conditions. Their blood bears the same taint as your own.' He laughed. 'They are now your brothers. Blackhearts one and all!'

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