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BLOODBORN

An Ulrika the Vampire novel

By Nathan Long

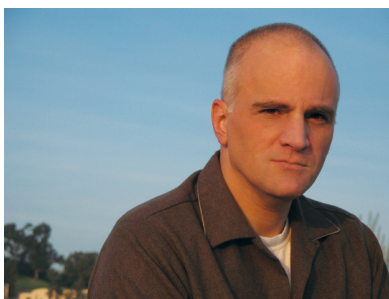
Ulrika, recently turned as a vampire, attempts to adjust to her new way of life. But when a fellow vampire is killed in Nuln, Ulrika and her mentor, Gabriella, are sent to investigate. Soon they find themselves facing danger from all sides as they attempt to solve a mystery that threatens the very existence of the Lahmian bloodline. How can they hope to destroy something with the power to kill a vampire?

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 enjoys 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.



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The following is an excerpt from *Bloodborn* by Nathan Long.

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THE SCENT OF blood was in her nose – blood not yet shed, blood still in the vein. She could hear the rush of it too, the frantic, frightened pulse throbbing in her ears like a lover’s moans. Her eyes saw the world in red and black, in looming shadows and ember-gleaming heart-fires – fires that would warm her and stave off the ever-encroaching cold of death.

The scent grew stronger, the throbbing louder, maddening her, driving all thought from her until there was nothing inside except hunger, a roaring emptiness that demanded to be fed. It told her she would die if it wasn’t sated, and that death would be no release from pain. It told her that nothing else mattered except feeding – not loyalty, not honour, not compassion. All that mattered was clinging to life, even unlife, for as long as she could.

She could hear the weeping of her prey now as she bounded naked after it through the winter woods. She could hear its feeble bleatings to its uncaring gods. Its heart pounded like a rabbit’s, and the stink of its fear-sweat was heady enough to make her drunk. Only a few more paces and her fangs would be in its neck, drinking deep, feeding the hollow blackness, basking in the glow of the heart-fire.

The man broke from the trees, racing across a snowy, moonlit field towards a miserable thatch-roofed shack, as if he expected its flimsy walls to protect him. She thought for a moment of letting him reach it, just to toy with him, to let him have one last false hope before she ripped the door off its hinges, but her need was too great. There was no time for games. Her hunger would not wait.

With a last lithe leap she hit him high in the back and brought him down in a rolling jumble through the powdery snow. He flailed, shrieking with fear, and tried to scramble away, but he was weak and she was strong. She pinned his limbs, scissoring them between her naked legs, then grabbed his chin, forcing it back and exposing the dirty neck under his scruffy beard. His carotid artery twitched beneath his skin like a mouse trapped under a sheet. Well, she would free it.

As her head shot forwards, something thudded into the ground beside her, kicking up a spray of snow – a crossbow bolt. She looked up, snarling, fangs bared. Who dared interrupt her while she fed?

Galloping across the moon-bright snow on horseback were a woman and a man, heavy sable cloaks billowing behind them. The woman was raven-haired and coldly beautiful in blood-red velvet under her furs, the man a hulking, golden-maned epitome of knightly strength clad in steel breastplate and high boots. A gilded crossbow glinted in his right hand, and he was already winching it back for another shot.

She barked angrily and returned to her prey, desperate now to feed before they stopped her, but as her fangs touched the peasant's throat, the woman's voice rang out over the field, freezing her before she bit.

'No, Ulrika! You will not!'

Ulrika growled low in her throat, then bent forwards again. The blood was so close. She could think of nothing else. They would not keep her from it.

'Stand, child!' called the woman. 'Obey me!'

Ulrika strained, but the words were like a chain, holding her from her prey. She could not go against them. She crouched over the peasant, trembling with frustration, and glared as the woman and the golden-haired knight thudded up on their horses and stopped before her.

'Up,' said the woman. 'Let him go.'

'I'm hungry,' Ulrika whined.

‘And you shall feed,’ the woman said, holding out a beringed hand. ‘But not here. Not like this. Not like a beast. Now stand.’

The urge to throw herself at her tormentor was overpowering, but Ulrika knew she couldn’t, and wouldn’t survive if she did. With a petulant grunt she pushed herself to her feet, her bare limbs shaking from hunger and suppressed violence, and raised her chin defiantly before the woman and the knight as the peasant mewled pathetically at her feet.

The knight’s lip curled in disgust as he looked her up and down. The woman’s face was as calm and cold as a statue’s.

‘You must learn control, dear one,’ she said. ‘Did I not promise your friends I would teach you to do no harm?’

Flashes of her former companions’ faces flitted through Ulrika’s mind – the poet, the wizard, the dwarf. What would they think if they could see her now, naked and savage, clawed and fanged like a wolf? She didn’t care. They were only meat after all.

‘I didn’t promise,’ she growled.

‘But I did,’ said the woman. ‘And I do not break a pledge lightly, so you will refrain. Am I clear?’

Ulrika remained glaring for a long moment, then lowered her head. ‘Aye,’ she said. ‘I will refrain.’

The woman smiled sweetly. ‘Good. Then come, climb up behind me and we will return to Nachthafen.’

Ulrika stepped reluctantly from the cowering peasant, then hopped onto the rump of the woman’s horse in a single bound. As they turned towards the dirt track that ran past the snow field, Ulrika saw a group of huddled figures standing before the entrance to the shack – an old man, a young woman and two dirty children, all dressed in meagre night shirts. They bowed low to the woman as she rode past and touched their forelocks respectfully, then hurried to help the peasant who still lay whimpering where Ulrika had left him.

ULRIKA HAD DIED two weeks before.

Adolphus Krieger, an ambitious vampire who had come to the besieged city of Praag searching for a relic of great power, had taken her hostage there in order to escape the end her friends Max Schreiber, Felix Jaeger, Gotrek Gurnisson and Snorri Nosebiter, had meant for him. Though initially Krieger had intended to dispose of her as soon as he won clear of Praag, he had taken a liking to her, and that affection had sealed her doom.

Travelling alone with the vampire for hundreds of miles as his coach hurried through the winter snows towards Sylvania, she had fought against his unnatural charisma, but eventually she had succumbed, and allowed him to drink from her. After that, her will was not her own, and when they had reached Drakenhof Castle, where he intended to raise an all-conquering army of the undead, she had not resisted when he told her that he would make her his queen and gave her the blood kiss – the ritual that had killed her and brought her back to life as a vampire.

Unfortunately for Krieger, her friends had not given up the chase, and had arrived at Drakenhof shortly thereafter in the company of one Countess Gabriella, the vampire who had long ago given Krieger the blood kiss, and who was now bent on frustrating his ambitions. Together, the two men, the two dwarfs and the vampiress had succeeded in killing Krieger, and in making Ulrika an orphan.

Gotrek had wanted to kill her as well, saying she had become an irredeemable creature of darkness, but the countess promised him and the others that she would see to Ulrika's education and teach her to do no harm, and the Slayer had reluctantly relented and allowed Gabriella to take her away.

When she had brought Ulrika to Nachthafen Castle that first night, the countess had told her that there had been a Countess von Nachthafen living there for more than two hundred years. Sometimes she had been the wife of the count, sometimes the daughter, sometimes a cousin or a long-lost niece, but no matter her name, and no matter if she were dark or fair, young or old, stern or sweet, it had always been

herself, a woman whose true name and place of birth had been hidden behind so many false guises and biographies that she had almost forgotten them, they had been so long ago.

In her current incarnation she called herself Countess Gabriella von Nachthafen, a well-travelled socialite, raised and schooled in Altdorf, who had inherited the castle from her aunt, tragically killed in a hunting accident ten years before. In the castle and the town below it, which shared its name, the countess was absolute mistress, kind and fair, but demanding of unquestioning obedience from her serfs and servants, all of whom knew precisely who and what she was, whatever name and face she might wear at the moment. That the countess seemed to think that she was absolute mistress of Ulrika as well, and demanded the same unquestioning obedience from her, Ulrika was having difficulty accepting.

‘You may not order me!’ she snarled as she paced naked around the dark, richly-appointed tower room Gabriella had given her. ‘I am no servant! I am a boyar’s daughter. I have commanded a hundred Kossars! I can trace my name back a thousand years!’

‘And I can remember back a thousand years,’ said the countess calmly, from where she sat in her crimson velvet in a high-backed mahogany chair. ‘Do you think your lineage means anything to me, who can trace her blood back to the royalty of Nehekhara? Your people are barbaric children, barely crawling from the crib. And you are an infant, little more than twenty when that fool Krieger turned you, and less than two weeks dead today.’

‘I am my own woman!’ shouted Ulrika, stamping a bare foot on the thick rug that covered the stone floor. ‘I still have free will!’

‘You do not,’ said Gabriella, and though she did not raise her voice, it suddenly had an air of command that made Ulrika tense as if expecting a blow. ‘Had I allowed Krieger to live, it would have been his responsibility to see to your education, but as he is dead, that responsibility lies now with me.’ She toyed with a gold and crystal hourglass that sat on the velvet-

draped table beside her. ‘I could have just as easily killed you, and saved myself a lot of bother, but as Krieger was my get, and you were his, I felt some familial obligation to you. I hope I do not live to regret it.’

‘I need no education,’ growled Ulrika. ‘I know how to feed.’

Gabriella laughed. ‘Like tonight? Child, a babe knows how to suckle at the teat, but you can’t take one to table.’ She stood and stepped towards Ulrika, who paused from her pacing and shrank back. ‘Every vampire has an obligation to every other vampire to be discreet – to feed covertly, to live privately – for when one is discovered, it riles the sheep and endangers us all. If I were to let you rage through the countryside, slaughtering indiscriminately, the witch hunters wouldn’t just come for you. They would begin to wonder who else might have hidden fangs. They would prowl about, asking questions and bringing lanterns and silvered blades into crypts. I can’t allow that, and so you must be taught. You must learn not to feed. You must learn to control your hunger lest it control you, exposing you – and me – to the cattle’s ignorant wrath.’

The countess turned from Ulrika and clapped her hands twice. The door to the circular room opened and a handsome young man in homespun doublet and breeches stepped in, bowing low, then waited, head lowered, his hands clasped nervously at his waist.

‘Now,’ said Gabriella, turning to the table. ‘Johannes here is eager to receive your kiss. But he is the youngest of my flock, and you must be gentle with him. You must also be patient.’ She picked up the hourglass. ‘To learn restraint, I would have you wait until these sands run out before tasting him, and when you do, you must do so without passion or violence – or slaughter.’ She turned the glass over and crossed to the door. ‘I will return when you have finished. Farewell.’

Ulrika barely heard the door close behind the countess. She could only stare at the silvery grains trickling down into the empty lower chamber of the glass. They went so slowly, like drifting snowflakes. Her eyes slid to Johannes, who remained

quaking at the door. His pulse was as hard and loud as a marching drum in her ears as he bowed to her. She could smell his fear, and also his arousal. The two smells boiled up from him like the fragrance of some jungle flower, rank and fleshy, but intoxicating. Her fangs and claws extended of their own accord as she inhaled it. She forced them to retract. It took every ounce of willpower she possessed.

‘Mistress—’ he began.

‘Shut up!’ Ulrika snapped. ‘Don’t speak.’

She cursed and looked away from him. How was she to do this? She had fed correctly before, but never after so long a wait. For the first few nights after her rescue from Krieger, the countess had let her feed almost hourly, but always under the closest supervision, and always upon victims for whom she had no regard – the last tattered remnants of Krieger’s hangers-on, hunted down across the Sylvania countryside. But since returning to Nachthafen, Gabriella had been increasing the time between feedings, and only letting her sip where once she had guzzled. Ulrika had not felt sated once. The hunger had never released her, and now it was killing her with its grip.

This last gap had been the longest and worst. She had not fed for over two nights. Of course she had made it worse for herself by escaping. The countess would have no doubt let her feed earlier this evening but, in her blood-madness, Ulrika had broken out of her tower room as soon as the sun had dipped below the trees and gone charging naked through the forest after the scent of human blood. That and being caught and dragged back and lectured to had taken time, and now she was hungrier than ever before.

She turned back to the hourglass. Ursun’s teeth! The sand must have stopped! Hardly any had piled on the bottom of the chamber. This was intolerable.

She faced Johannes again. His pulse pounded in her ears like it was her own. He shrank back against the panelled door, whimpering, and Ulrika realised that she had advanced on him without meaning to. She forced herself away again, taking her

embroidered robe from her canopied bed and pulling it on as she looked up at the arched window from which she had earlier that night smashed the diamond panes and torn the iron bars with her bare hands. It was shuttered now, in preparation for the coming of morning, but it would be nothing to tear away the shutters like she had the bars. She could flee again, but she knew she would only be dragged back and chastised once more.

A tremor of hunger went through her and she clenched her hands to her sides, fighting it. She must be strong. Was she not the daughter of a boyar? Had she not endured pitiless winters and terrible pain? Had she not lived through loss and sickness and privation? She had the iron will of the Kossars in her. She was a Kislevite, born with ice in her veins.

But that was before – before Krieger had killed her and resurrected her in his own image, before he had turned her into a monster, before he had weakened her spirit with his corrupting whispers and bloody lips. After his kiss, she had been reborn, this time with nothing in her veins. Their emptiness hurt worse than winter, worse than the death of loved ones, or the loss of honour. They needed to be filled.

She shot a glance at the hourglass. Not even a quarter full. Without turning she could feel the blood heat of young Johannes radiating against her back like the warmth of a hearth. She wanted to be nearer to it. She wanted to warm her hands in it. The cold of winter might not harm her any more, but the void within her empty heart ached like it had been plunged into a frozen lake.

‘Mistress, what are you doing? An hour is not yet passed.’

Ulrika found she was approaching the boy again, though she couldn’t remember turning towards him. She tried to speak, to say something reassuring, but her fangs got in the way and her words became a guttural snarl. He pressed himself against the door, eyes wide. His fear-smell maddened her. She snatched at him, claws lengthening.

With a yelp he turned and scabbled the door open. She kicked it shut, catching his right hand in it, then jerked him

away from it and threw him into the table, upsetting it and knocking the hourglass to the floor. His fingers remained in the door.

He shrieked on the floor, staring at the crimson stumps of his digitless hand. She grabbed his shirt front and hauled him up, his feet dangling above the ground. He continued to scream.

‘Shut up!’ Ulrika cried. ‘Stop that noise!’

He would not.

She snapped her head forward and tore out his throat with her fangs.

He was silent at last.

BLOODBORN can be purchased direct from this website and GW mail order, Games Workshop and other hobby stores, and better bookstores.

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