

## ***TAINED BLOOD***

*The third novel in the Blackhearts series*

*By Nathan Long*

*Still shocked by the death of their comrade Abel, Reiner and his cutthroat companions, the Blackhearts, are horrified to learn that there may be a spy amongst them.*

*Imprisoned and forced into dangerous missions under threat of death, they are press-ganged into working as bodyguards for their 'employer' Count Manfred as he journeys to Talabheim, where the forces of magic are running wild. With enemies all around and a traitor within, can the Blackhearts solve the mystery and save the city from destruction?*



### **About the Author**

Nathan Long has worked as a screenwriter for fifteen years, during which time he has had three movies made and a handful of live-action and animated TV episodes produced. He has also written several award-winning short stories. When these lofty pursuits have failed to make him a living, he has also been a taxi driver, limo driver, graphic designer, dishwasher and lead singer for a rockabilly band. He lives in Hollywood.

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The following is an excerpt from *Tainted Blood* by Nathan Long.  
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Abel Halstiegs body lay at Reiner Hetsaus feet, his face frozen in a rictus grin, eyes wide, bloated tongue sticking through bared teeth. Abel's limbs were twisted to the breaking point by the poison that filled his veins. Reiner's companions – Pavel and Hals, Franka, the girl who disguised herself as a bowman, Gert and Jurgen – stared at the corpse as well. Reiner looked at them, knowing one of them had poisoned Abel, and had the power to poison the others with a word. But which one? Who was the spy?

They raised their eyes to him. Hals and Pavel grinned, as if sharing a secret. Gert's eyes twinkled with malicious glee. Jurgen

glared. Franka smirked. Dread dragged at Reiner's heart. Were they all spies? Was he alone? Was there no one he could...?

Reiner jerked awake, heart thudding. He blinked around the moon-rimmed darkness. He was in his bed in Count Manfred Valdenheim's Altdorf townhouse. Only a nightmare. Then he chuckled bitterly. What did one do when one's nightmares were nothing more than the truth?

Someone tapped at the door. Reiner rolled over and stared. That must have been what had wakened him. He wished he had a dagger, but Count Manfred allowed the Blackhearts no weapons in his house. 'Who is it?' he cried out.

The door opened. A slight figure eased in, candle in hand. It was Franka, still in her boyish kit, though the other Blackhearts now knew her secret. 'Only your valet, m'lord,' she whispered, closing the door and tip-toeing to the bed. 'Come to polish your... sword.'

'Eh?' said Reiner. His head was still clouded with the nightmare.

Franka smiled. 'Come, now. Surely a man as worldly wise as his lordship can't be so obtuse?'

Reiner stared at her blankly. She sighed and sat on the eiderdown, setting the candle on his bedside table. 'Very well, I will spell it out. Yarl has been dead a year. My mourning is over. Indeed, I waited a year and a week, so as not to appear in an unseemly hurry. But now...' She paused, suddenly shy. 'Now, I am my lord's to command.'

Reiner blinked. Since the Blackhearts' return from the fort in the Black Mountains he had been so trapped in his tortuous thoughts that the subject that had filled his waking moments – and his sleeping ones as well – had gone completely from his head. He remembered counting the days – the hours – until he could be with Franka, but now, though his lust for her was more enflamed than ever, now...

'Perhaps,' he said. 'Perhaps we should wait yet a little.'

'Perhaps...?' Franka burst out laughing. 'Reiner! What a joker you are! You almost...' She paused. Reiner wasn't smiling. 'You aren't joking?'

He shook his head.

‘But why?’ Franka asked, baffled.

Reiner couldn’t look at her. If she was only one of the legion of doxies and camp followers he had dallied with over the years they would already be hard at it, but Franka wasn’t the sort of girl you used and threw away. ‘We... we aren’t free. It would ruin it. I don’t want to be with you when we have to hide what we do.’

Franka scowled. ‘Is this the same man who wanted to have at me in a tent surrounded by our unwitting companions? Weren’t your arguments exactly to the contrary, saying we would be stealing moments of freedom? What has got into you?’

‘Poison!’ said Reiner. It exploded from him before he could stop it. ‘Poison has got into me.’

Franka shrugged. ‘But, it has been these many months. And you made no bones about it before.’

‘That isn’t the poison I mean,’ said Reiner. ‘I mean the poison of mistrust that has plagued us since—’

‘Since we found Abel.’

Reiner nodded. ‘One of us is a spy for Manfred. One of us cast the spell that poisoned Halstieg. You’ve seen how it has hurt us. I’ll wager our companions spoke not ten words to each other on our return to Altdorf.’

‘You certainly didn’t,’ said Franka. ‘But I understand. Gert and Jurgen are good companions. I’m as reluctant as you to think that one of them might be Manfred’s creature.’

‘Who’s to say it must be Gert or Jurgen?’ snapped Reiner, then cursed and clamped his mouth shut. Too late...

Franka looked up at him, blankly. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Nothing. Forget I spoke.’

‘Reiner. What do you mean?’

Reiner looked at the floor. ‘I know I am a fool, but I haven’t been able to get it out of my head since that day. Manfred might have turned one of us – one of the first lot – made some promise, offered freedom, gold, what-have-you, in exchange for spying on the rest.’

‘But, Reiner,’ said Franka. ‘All that’s left of us is Hals, Pavel, you, and myself. Surely you can’t suspect–’ She froze as a thought came to her, then stood abruptly, trembling. ‘This is why you don’t want to be with me.’

‘No, I...’

Franka stalked to the door. Reiner threw off his blankets and charged after her. ‘Franka, listen to me!’

She opened the door. ‘What is there for you to say? Do you truly think I am a spy for Manfred?’

‘No! Of course not!’ Reiner couldn’t meet her gaze. ‘But... I can’t be sure.’

There was a pause. Reiner could feel Franka’s eyes burning into him. ‘You’re mad,’ she said. ‘You’ve gone mad.’ She stepped into the corridor and slammed the door.

‘Yes,’ he said to the closed door. ‘Yes, I believe I have.’

The Blackhearts were fed in the servants’ hall to keep them out of sight of Manfred’s frequent visitors. These days the companions, who had once bantered and argued like Altdorf fishwives, ate like grim automatons, as they had since returning from the Black Mountains. Franka kept her eyes on her plate. Hals and Pavel muttered in each other’s ears, heads together. The brawny sword master Jurgen stared into space as he chewed. Gert shot sad glances at the others. The barrel-chested crossbowman was a born teller of tales, and it seemed to physically hurt him not to have anyone to talk to.

It was a relief therefore, when, the next day at dinner, just as Reiner was swabbing his plate with his bread, boot heels sounded on the stairs and Manfred entered the kitchen, ducking his silver, leonine head under the blackened beams. The cooks and footmen vanished at a wave of his hand, and he sat down at their table with a sigh. Reiner saw that he was tired and worried, though he kept his face as placid as ever.

‘I go to Talabheim tomorrow,’ he said, ‘accompanying the elf mage Teclis on a diplomatic mission. You will accompany me, as

my servants.’ He smiled as they reacted to this. ‘It would defeat your purpose if I called you my spies, wouldn’t it? And I am adding four to your number, who you will meet tomorrow.’

The others tensed at this news. Things were strained enough without adding strangers to the stew.

‘You believe you will have need of spies in Talabheim?’ asked Reiner. ‘It is not a foreign land.’

Manfred looked down and toyed with a table knife. ‘This is not to be spoken of, you understand, but something has happened in Talabheim – an eruption in the energies of Chaos so strong it woke the great Teclis from his sleep last night here in Altdorf. He fears that if it is not stopped, Talabheim will fall to Chaos, if it hasn’t already.’ He jabbed the table with the knife. ‘And when the tide of Chaos rises, it is my job to suspect agents of the Ruinous Powers. This is where you come in.’ Manfred looked up. ‘I head a Reikland embassy which will offer aid to our Talabec brothers in their hour of need. But while we are there, making speeches of mutual support, you will be hunting for the cultists and criminals and conspirators that I feel certain will be found to be the cause of the trouble.’

He sighed and stood. ‘We leave tomorrow before dawn. Sleep well.’ With a heavy tread, he walked up the stairs again.

Reiner and the others sat silently.

‘A tide of Chaos rising in Talabheim?’ said Pavel, at last, scratching under the patch that hid his empty eye-socket. ‘And we’re riding straight for it? That’s fine, that is.’

‘At least it ain’t the cursed mountains again,’ growled Hals.

‘Maybe we’ll all die this time and get it over with,’ said Franka, staring at her plate.

Her sadness stabbed Reiner in the heart.

Reiner sat in Manfred’s opulent coach, waiting for the count’s train to get underway. It was still as dark as pitch, and the coach yard flickered with yellow torchlight. Reiner was dressed in a plain grey clerk’s doublet, which still smelled faintly of clerk. An inkwell hung from his belt, and a beautiful parchment case rested on his knees.

Through the coach's windows he caught glimpses of Pavel, Hals and Gert filling their new positions – Pavel whistling on the buckboard of a provisioning wagon, Gert huffing as he loaded cured hams and sacks of flour onto it, Hals securing chests and baggage on a second wagon, his bald head shining with sweat.

Other men also assisted in the preparations. Reiner eyed them closely. They were not servants of Manfred's household. Were they the new Blackhearts? There was a swaggering, barrel-chested fellow with a bristling red beard seeing to the horses. A meek youth of about the same size, but with a slow, moping gait, followed red-beard around, helping him and laughing obsequiously at his constant jokes. Standing by a mule loaded with leather satchels was a thin young man in the grey robes of the College of Surgeons who blinked around him in a daze. Beside him was a tall, wiry villain with darting eyes who looked utterly unconvincing in the smock and leggings of a surgeon's assistant.

Manfred climbed into the coach, accompanied by Jurgen, in the uniform of the count's guard, and Franka, in page's livery emblazoned with Manfred's gold lion. Jurgen sat next to Reiner, trying vainly to keep his broad shoulders from crowding him. Franka sat beside Manfred. She wouldn't meet Reiner's eye.

Manfred smiled as he saw Reiner's costume. 'I believe you have found your calling at last, Hetsau. You look every inch a clerk. Perhaps one of those fellows who write letters for the unlearned at a pfennig a sheet.'

'Thank you, m'lord,' said Reiner. 'It is at least an honourable profession.'

Manfred scowled. 'There is no more honourable profession than defending one's homeland. It pains me that a noble son of the Empire must be forced to the task.'

'If I recall, m'lord,' said Reiner, 'we were not asked.'

'That is because I am an astute reader of men.' Manfred rapped on the ceiling. 'Kluger! Let's be off. We're late as it is!'

The coachman's whip cracked and the coach rolled forwards. Reiner saw Hans and Pavel out of the window wheeling their wagons around to follow Manfred out of the gate.

The procession wound through Altdorf's cobbled streets in the pre-dawn grey. The grand palace of Emperor Karl Franz loomed in the mist like a gigantic griffin guarding its nest, the buildings of the Imperial government clustering around it like its brood. After passing through the merchant quarter, they came to the river and the Emperor's private docks, a gated enclosure hemmed in on three sides by barracks, stables and warehouses and on the fourth by the river.

As they entered, Reiner began to understand the importance of their mission. He had assumed Manfred would travel with, at the most, an escort of knights and swordsmen, but the yard was crammed to bursting with the men-at-arms of half a dozen different nobles, all trying simultaneously to load their horses, wagons and equipment on four large, flat riverboats.

Torchlight glinted off the helms of Count Manfred's ten knights and those of the twenty spearmen and twenty archers from his Altdorf retinue, but these were a mere fraction of the assembled force. Here were the greatswords of Lord Schott, a captain of Karl Franz's honour guard, arguing with the knights of Lord Raichskell, Master of the Order of the Winged Helm. Behind them, the handgunners of Lord Boellengen, undersecretary to Baroness Lotte Hochsvoll, Chancellor of the Imperial Fisc, were engaged in a heated shouting match with the Hammer Bearers of Father Olin Totkrieg, representative of the Grand Theogonist, Esmer the Third, while the hooded initiates who accompanied Magus Nichtladen of the Imperial Colleges of Magic watched impassively.

Each lord also had an entourage of secretaries, valets, cooks and grooms that rivalled Manfred's own, as well as wagons full of chests, strong boxes, and provisions. Reiner had seen whole armies set out with smaller trains.

In the centre of this mad jumble was a white island of stillness that made Reiner and Franka catch their breath. Elves. Though Reiner considered himself a well-travelled, well-educated man, he had never seen an elf before. The fair did not leave their homeland often, and when they did, they didn't mix in at the Three Feathers or the Griffin. They met with heads of state, were feted with official banquets, and sailed home laden with fine gifts. So, try as Reiner might to remain cool and aloof, he stared along with everyone else at the six statuesque warriors in silver breastplates and white surcoats who stood motionless before the gangplank of the lead boat.

The elves' faces were as set as carved ivory: sharp, proud and cruelly handsome. Long, thin swords hung at their sides, and curved bows rose from leather scabbards on their backs. It was hard at first for Reiner to tell one from the other. They seemed cast from a single mould. But as he looked, he began to notice subtle differences – a beaked nose on this one, fuller lips on that one. He hoped, however, that he wouldn't be required to remember which was which.

'Wait here,' said Manfred. He stepped from the carriage and crossed to a half-timbered building. Reiner and Franka's gaze remained fixed on the elves, who looked neither right nor left, nor spoke among themselves.

'I thought,' said Franka softly, 'that they would only be men with pointed ears, but... they aren't men.'

'No,' said Reiner. 'No more than we are apes.'

He and Franka exchanged a glance, then looked away.

To hide his discomfort, Reiner turned instead to Jurgen, who looked down as if daydreaming. 'You seem unimpressed by our fair cousins, Rohmner.'

'I am impressed,' said Jurgen. 'They have great control.'

'Control?' Reiner asked. It was rare for the taciturn swordsman to volunteer an observation.

'They are aware of everything, and distracted by nothing. It is a trait to emulate.'

Reiner chuckled. 'You're well on your way, laddie.'

The clamour of the courtyard abated. All heads turned. Reiner leaned over Jurgen to see out of the other window. From the half-timbered building came Manfred and a cluster of officials, in the centre of which was an elf in snow-white robes and a high, mitred cap. He walked with a slight limp and steadied himself with an intricately worked white staff, but there was nothing weak about him. His demeanour commanded attention – majestic and terrifying at the same time. Reiner couldn't take his eyes off him. Though the elf's face was as smooth and unlined as those of his guard, there was an impression of impossible age about him, a depth of wisdom and pain and terrible knowledge in his opal eyes that could be seen even across the dark quay. The men babbled at his heels, all trying to catch his eye.

'But, Lord Teclis,' cried Lord Boellengen. 'We must come. The exchequer must assess the damages!' He was scrawny and chinless, with a bowl of grey hair, and looked, in his parade armour, like a turtle in too big a shell.

'The Emperor has asked me to survey the situation personally,' barked Lord Schott, a squat soldier with a trim black beard. 'I cannot disobey him.'

'The Grand Theogonist must know the extent of this plague of Chaos!' bellowed Father Totkrieg, a white bearded warrior-priest in black robes over polished armour. 'We will not be left behind.'

'If there is Chaos to be fought,' said the towering Lord Raichskell fiercely, 'the Order of the Winged Helm will not be denied the fighting of it. It is not honourable to stay in Altdorf while daemons stalk Talabheim.' His blond beard hung down over his enamelled green plate in two thick braids.

'The investigation of arcane threats is the responsibility of the colleges of magic!' said Magus Nichtladen, a sunken cheeked grey-beard in a rich burgundy robe. 'We must be allowed to do our duty!'

Teclis was deaf to them all. Accompanied by his guard, he walked up the gangplank onto the rover boat, spoke briefly to Manfred, then disappeared below the deck.

Manfred stalked back to his coach and slammed in, furious. 'Self-important fools,' he said, dropping into his seat. The coach began to roll forward, manoeuvring to ascend a ramp onto the back of the first riverboat. 'It was to be Teclis's guard and mine. A legation, not an army. Now we are more than two hundred. But if any of them are left behind the Emperor will never hear the end of it. Sometimes I don't blame the fair ones for sneering at the pettiness of men.'

They sailed north and east up the wide grey Talabec, winding slowly through farmland toward Talabheim, the City of Gardens, an independent city-state buried deep within the dark forests of Talabecland. Reiner looked forward to seeing it, for it was one of the Empire's marvels, a city built entirely inside an enormous crater, the walls of which were said to be impenetrable.

The riverboats passed green pastures and brown fields in which gaunt peasants ploughed under the stalks of this year's crop to make mulch for next spring's planting. The earth was fresh in many a country graveyard as well, for it had been a hard year in the Empire. Many farmers' sons had come home from Archaon's invasion in coffins if they came home at all. And there had been famine even while the wheat ripened on the stalk, for much of last year's grain had been sent north to feed the armies, and the farmers of the north whose farms had been burned by the invaders had come south and turned to banditry, stealing the rest.

Reiner, Franka and Jurgen were kept busy all day, acting as Manfred's servants, while the count held council with Teclis and the other members of the legation in his stateroom. Late in the afternoon, at the point the river entered the Great Forest, Manfred ordered the boats to land and the servants to make camp. No one thought less of him for this caution. Greater armies had disappeared without a trace under the thick canopy of the old forest, and even the river was not safe as it wound between the looming trees. As it was they would be within it for five days and nights before they reached

Talabheim. There was no need to press their luck by passing a sixth night in its shadows.

Manfred had a great tent erected in a fallow field, and dined with the other leaders. Reiner and Jurgen were dismissed and joined their comrades around a campfire, where Reiner was at last able to meet the new recruits. Only Franka, who was kept busy serving Manfred pheasant and wine, was not in attendance.

Pavel and Hals had already become friends – or at least amiable sparring partners – with the big redheaded groom, exchanging cheery insults with him as they spooned stew out of the pot as Gert chuckled appreciatively beside them.

‘One Talabecman is worth ten Ostlandmen,’ the redbeard was saying.

‘In a pissing contest mayhap,’ said Hals. ‘The only thing the Talabecland pike ever successfully defended was a brewery, and they surrendered after the beer ran out.’

‘Ha!’ countered redbeard. ‘The only thing Ostland pikemen defend is their sheep, and only if they’re faithful.’

Reiner laughed. ‘Hals, who is this fiery fellow you war with?’

Hals looked around, and it hurt Reiner to see the mistrust that crossed the pikeman’s face when he saw who addressed him. ‘Er, aye, captain,’ he said. ‘This is Augustus Kolbein, of Talabheim. He’s one of us. Kolbein, this is Captain Hetsau, our leader.’

Augustus nodded and touched his forelock with a hand like a ham. ‘A pleasure I’m sure, captain,’ he said. ‘Though I can’t say I’m happy with the terms of service.’

‘Nor are any of us, pike,’ said Reiner. ‘And while I’m pleased to have so strong a soldier with us, I am sorry you had the misfortune to be pressed into our cursed company. But, come, tell us how you fell foul of the Empire.’

Augustus grinned, making his beard bristle even more. ‘Ah well, it’s entirely my own fault, captain. Y’see I have a temper fiery as my hair, and there was a Reiklander captain of sword at a tavern in Altdorf, some nose-in-the-air jagger – er, beggin’ yer pardon, m’lord,’ he said, colouring suddenly.

‘Never mind,’ said Reiner. ‘Don’t care for the type myself. Go on.’

‘Aye, sir. Well, he were badmouthing Talabecland something terrible, saying we was all drunks and yokels and that we, er, performed unnatural acts with trees and the like, and I was taking it well enough. We Talabeclanders have thick skins about that nonsense. But then he had to go and say things about the countess, calling her a Taalist whore who rutted with filthy woodsmen and I don’t know what else. Well, I saw red and the next thing I know I’m in the brig and the latchkey is telling me I broke the delicate little thing’s neck and spooned out one of his eyes with me thumb.’ Augustus shrugged. ‘I’ve no doubt I did, but spit me if I recall it.’

Reiner nodded. ‘Maiming a superior officer. Aye, there’s no doubt you belong with us. Though again, I am sorry you’ve come to such a pass.’

The pikeman shrugged. ‘Better this than the noose.’

Reiner grunted. ‘You may come to change your mind about that.’

The others looked away.

Reiner turned to the big, moonfaced youth who sat next to Augustus. ‘And you, lad,’ Reiner said. ‘What’s your tale? Are you a killer of men, an eater of children? We’ve had all kinds with us over time, so fear not that you will shock us.’

‘Thank you, captain sir,’ said the boy in a high, nasal voice, ‘Thank you. My name is Rumpolt Hafner, and it’s an honour to serve under you, m’lord.’ He ducked his head. ‘Er I, I’m sorry to say I’m not much of a villain, though I will try my best not to disappoint you. And, er, I would certainly do murder if I met again the rotten blackguards who brought me to this.’

‘You cannot disappoint me if you do your best and put your trust in me as I put my trust in you,’ said Reiner. It sounded false as he said it, and Hals and Pavel shot him sharp looks over the fire as it sank in. He was glad Franka wasn’t there. ‘But tell your tale and we shall judge how much a villain you are.’

Rumpolt's lower lip stuck out. 'I still don't know why mine was a hanging offence. All I've done is steal a banner. It was a dare. I'd just joined Lord Loefler's handgunners in Stockhausen. There was another there who were Loefler's rivals, Lord Gruenstad's Men, and my sergeant and his comrades said if I truly wished to be one of their company, I must perform a brave deed against them.'

Hals and Pavel smirked.

Rumpolt clenched his fists. 'They told me I must steal Lord Gruenstad's banner and stand it in the camp privy! How was I to know taking a banner is considered stealing the Emperor's property?'

'It ain't just that, lad,' said Gert, his hands crossed over his heavy belly. 'Tis a company's honour. They defend it with their lives on the battlefield. You think they'd take kindly to some wet-behind-the-ears booby sticking it in a midden?'

'But I didn't know!' moaned Rumpolt. 'And when I was caught, and told the captain that the sergeant and his fellows had put me up to it, the villains denied knowing anything about it.' His looked around at them pleadingly. 'Surely you can see I've been wronged?'

Pavel, Hals and Augustus looked away, disgusted. Reiner heard Augustus mumble, 'How could he not know?' and Pavel reply, 'It ain't a question of knowing.' Jurgen as usual said nothing, and the other two new Blackhearts, the shy 'surgeon' and his hawk-faced assistant didn't seem to care.

'Well lad,' said Reiner, soothingly, 'never mind. There's more than one of us who claims he's innocent, so you're in good company. Welcome to you.'

'Thank you, captain,' said Rumpolt. 'I'll do my best. I swear it.'

Reiner turned next to the wispy-haired young man in the surgeon's robes. 'And you, physician, what is your name?'

The fellow jumped at being spoken to. 'Er, my name is Darius Balthus-Rossen. Of Nuln, originally.'

'You haven't the look of a soldier,' said Reiner. 'Surely Manfred didn't recruit you from the brig.'

‘No, m’lord. He found me in the Altdorf city jail.’ He shivered. ‘An hour before my hanging.’

‘And why were you to be hanged?’ asked Reiner.

The young man hesitated, glancing around uncertainly.

Reiner sighed. ‘We are a company of convicts and lost men, lad. You cannot be more evil than some we have called comrade.’

The scholar shrugged, splaying his hands. ‘I am nothing, a student of plants and the mysteries of life’s natural processes. I haven’t killed or maimed anyone, or stolen anything, or betrayed the Empire. I’m not a villain at all, really.’

‘You must have done something,’ said Reiner, dryly. ‘They were going to hang you, after all.’

Darius hesitated for so long Reiner thought he wasn’t going to speak at all. ‘I... I was found in possession of a forbidden book.’

‘What sort of book?’ asked Reiner, though he already had an idea.

‘Er, ah, it was nothing. Nothing. A treatise on the medical uses of certain, er, unusual plants.’

‘Then why was it forbidden?’

‘Because,’ said the scholar, suddenly angry, ‘my learned professors are blind, hidebound, incurious demagogues who have no interest in learning anything they don’t already know. How can the world’s knowledge expand if one is forbidden to try new things?’ He clutched his thin hands into fists. ‘An experiment isn’t an experiment if it’s been done before. We know so little of how the world works, why plants and animals grow, how the winds of magic twist that growth, how they twist us. The “wise men” are too afraid of the unknown. How—’

‘Magic,’ said Reiner, interrupting him. ‘So, you are a witch then?’

Darius looked up and saw the others staring at him uneasily. ‘No,’ he said. ‘No, I am a scholar.’

‘A scholar of magic,’ Reiner pressed.

The young man sighed. ‘You see? Fear of the unknown. Had I been a baby eater, you would have shrugged and welcomed me, but

because I have studied the arcane, no matter how academically, I am a pariah.'

'But are ye a witch?' asked Hals, menacingly.

Darius's shoulders slumped. 'No. No, I am not. Though of course you won't believe me now. I am a man of theory. I have less practical knowledge of the art than a village wise woman. I certainly can't hex you, if that is what concerns you.'

Hals and Pavel made the sign of the hammer, Gert spat over his shoulder.

Reiner coughed. 'Then why are you here? Manfred certainly didn't take you out of the Altdorf jail for your knowledge of plants.'

Darius shrugged again. 'The count told me that I was to see to your wounds. I have some small knowledge of physicking. My father was a surgeon. I can set a bone and patch a wound.' He looked down at his surgeon's robes with a weak smile. 'I seem the only man here whose garments are not a disguise.'

There was silence around the fire. It was clear the others didn't believe him.

Reiner didn't either. If Manfred had wanted a surgeon, he could easily have found one in a military brig who had battlefield experience. Darius had clearly been chosen for another reason. 'Well,' he said at last, 'it seems you have shocked us after all. But give me your word that you will keep your witching to yourself and I will welcome you. And I ask the rest of you,' he said, glancing around, 'to let the lad prove himself by his actions, like you have with all our other comrades.'

Darius sighed. 'I am not a witch. But nevertheless I give my word.'

'Can you magic the poison from our blood?' asked Rumpolt.

Reiner's heart lurched. Out of the mouths of babes! He hadn't thought of that. By Sigmar, if it was true!

Darius laughed. 'If I could, would I be here, enduring this interrogation?'

Reiner sighed. How foolish a thing hope was. Manfred would never choose a witch with so much skill. He turned to Darius's hawk-faced assistant, who was throwing twigs into the fire.

'And you, friend,' Reiner said with as much cheer as he could muster. 'Have you any dark secrets to share? Or at least a name?'

The man looked up with weary contempt. 'I ain't your friend, jagger. Nor friend to any of ye,' he said, his eyes darting to the others. 'Dieter Neff's my name. I'm here because 'twas a less certain death than the noose. And I'll be gone soon as I sort beating this poison, so there's no reason for how-de-dos and telling tales.'

'Dieter Neff!' said Reiner, with a laugh. 'I know of you. You're the "Shadow of Elgrinstrasse," the "Prince of Murder," with a hundred notches on your belt. I saw you once in Stossi's Place when I used to skin the marks there.'

'A hundred and seventeen notches,' said Dieter.

'So they caught you at last,' said Reiner.

'Never,' Dieter sneered. 'I was sold out by an employer who didn't care to pay when I done the job.' He threw another twig on the fire. 'He'll get his...'

Reiner waited for Neff to elaborate, but the man just stared into the fire. Reiner sighed. 'Well, if Master Neff won't speak, I can certainly tell you what I know. He is the best thief and assassin in Altdorf, known for getting into and out of places other men cannot. He once stabbed a man to death in the middle of Lord von Toelinger's annual banquet in full view of ten score armed knights and got out unscathed.'

Dieter barked a laugh, though he didn't look up. 'Y'don't know the half of it, jagger. The burgher I killed was the man who hired me. And I didn't kill him.'

'Eh?' said Rumpolt. 'What do you mean?'

Dieter paused, and Reiner could see he was weighing his contempt for his audience against his desire to brag. 'Berk was a wool merchant named Echert,' he said at last. 'Owed a lot of dangerous people money, so he decides the best thing to do is die. So he hires me to fake killing him and make it look good.' He

shrugged. 'Not my usual line, but I like a challenge, so I worked it out. Told him to go to that banquet, then jumped him during the fish course. Cut him up something horrid, but no stab wounds. Screamed very life-like too, 'cause I hadn't said I was going to bleed him. Then I tells him to lie still, and his servants run in and drag him out before anyone gets a close eye on him. Worked like a charm. He was off to Marienburg in a closed coach before they'd given up searching for me.'

Darius snorted. 'This Echert better hope we all die then, for you've betrayed his secret to us.'

Dieter's eyes blazed. 'I ain't never betrayed a client. Echert's dead. Died of the lover's pox two months after he ran, stupid berk. All that money he paid me, wasted.'

Pavel, Hals and Augustus laughed. Darius shrugged. Jurgen stared off into the darkness beyond the fire.

'Well,' said Reiner. 'While you may not intend to stay with us long, Master Neff, you may find the riddle of Manfred's poison harder to crack than you expect, so welcome. We are glad to have a man of your skills with us.'

'I take care of my own skin,' said Dieter. 'The rest of ye can fend for yourselves.'

Reiner sighed. 'Then you likely will be taking care of your own skin, for no one else will be eager to do it. Carry on, lads. I've done my bit.' He sat back and took a mouthful of stew, then swallowed hastily as he had a thought. 'Er, one last thing.'

The others looked up.

'I tell you now so there's no trouble later,' Reiner said. 'One of our number is a woman.'

'What?' said Rumpolt, looking around at the others.

Reiner laughed. 'Not these ruffians. Our archer, who plays page to Manfred at the moment. We have kept her secret, and so shall you.'

'An archer?' asked Augustus, dismayed. 'She's a soldier?'

‘Aye. A better one than some men I’ve known,’ said Reiner. ‘But hear me. If you get any ideas, forget them. The man who hurts her answers to me.’

‘And me,’ said Hals and Pavel in unison.

‘And me,’ said Jurgen.

The new men looked at the others curiously, but nodded.

As Reiner returned to his stew he heard Augustus murmuring unhappily to Hals and Pavel.

‘I know it ain’t right,’ said Hals. ‘But she won’t listen.’

‘And she can shoot,’ added Pavel.

Jurgen spoke in Reiner’s ear. ‘Someone watches us.’

Reiner looked around. ‘Who? Where?’

‘I know not,’ said Jurgen. He nodded toward the river, in the blackness beyond Manfred’s camp. ‘But they are there.’

Reiner stared in the direction the swordsman had indicated. He could see nothing. He shivered.

*More Warhammer from Nathan Long*

• BLACKHEARTS •  
Valnir’s Bane  
The Broken Lance