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WARHAMMER

VALNIR'S BANE



A Black Hearts novel by
Nathan Long

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Blackhearts - 01
Nathan Long
(An Undead Scan v1.1)

This is a dark age, a bloody age, an age of daemons and of sorcery. It is an age of battle and death, and of the world's ending. Amidst all of the fire, flame and fury it is a time, too, of mighty heroes, of bold deeds and great courage.

At the heart of the Old World sprawls the Empire, the largest and most powerful of the human realms. Known for its engineers, sorcerers, traders and soldiers, it is a land of great mountains, mighty rivers, dark forests and vast cities. And from his throne in Altdorf reigns the Emperor Karl-Franz, sacred descendant of the founder of these lands, Sigmar, and wielder of his magical warhammer.

But these are far from civilised times. Across the length and breadth of the Old World, from the knightly palaces of Bretonnia to ice-bound Kislev in the far north, come rumblings of war. In the towering World's Edge Mountains, the orc tribes are gathering for another assault. Bandits and renegades harry the wild southern lands of the Border Princes. There are rumours of rat-things, the skaven, emerging from the sewers and swamps across the land. And from the northern wildernesses there is the ever-present threat of Chaos, of daemons and beastmen corrupted by the foul powers of the Dark Gods. As the time of battle draws ever near, the Empire needs heroes like never before.

ONE

Victims Of Circumstance

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 had slain 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 hotheaded. 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.”

TWO

A Task Simple In The Telling

“Very good,” said Albrecht, when all the prisoners had volunteered. “Now you shall hear your mission.” He indicated the grizzled veteran at his side. “Under the command of Captain Veirt here, you shall escort Lady Magda Bandauer, an abbess of Shallya, to a Shallyan convent in the foothills of the Middle Mountains. A holy relic lies there in a hidden crypt. Lady Magda shall open the crypt, then you will escort her and the relic back here to me with all possible speed. Time is of the essence.” He smiled. “It is a task simple in the telling, but I have no need to remind soldiers of the Empire, no matter how debased, that the lands ’twixt here and the mountains are not yet entirely reclaimed, and that the mountains have become the refuge of Chaos marauders—Kurgan, Norse and worse things. We have word that the convent was recently pillaged by Kurgan. They may still be in the area. You will be sorely pressed, but for those who survive, and return the relic and the abbess to me, the Empire’s munificence will know no bounds.”

Reiner heard little of Albrecht’s speech. He had stopped listening after “abbess of Shallya.” Another sister of Shallya? He had barely survived his last encounter with one such. Granted, that one had been a sorceress in disguise, but once bitten twice shy, as he always said. He wanted no more to do with that order. They weren’t to be trusted.

Erich, the blond knight, seemed to have some objections to the plan as well. “Do you mean to tell me,” he burst out indignantly, “that we are to be led by this... this foot soldier? I am a Knight of the Sceptre. My horse and armour cost more than he has made in his whole career.”

“Bloody jagger,” muttered Hals. “My spear’s killed more northers than his horse and armour ever will.”

“Captain Veirt also outranks you,” said Albrecht. “He has thirty years of battles under his belt, while you are, what? Vexillary? Bugle? Have you even blooded your lance yet?”

“I am a nobleman. I cannot take orders from a common peasant. My father is Frederich von Eisenberg, Baron of...”

“I know your father, boy,” said Albrecht. “Would you like me to tell him how many young knights you have slain and maimed in ‘affairs of honour’? You deprive the Empire of good men and call it sport.”

Erich’s fists clenched, but he hung his head. “No, my lord.”

“Very good. You will obey Captain Veirt in all things, is that clear?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Good.” Albrecht surveyed the whole group. “Horses are waiting for you at the postern gate. You leave at once. But before you go, your commanding officer has a few words. Captain?”

Captain Veirt stepped forward and looked them all in the eye, one by one. His

glance shot through Reiner like an arrow from a longbow. “You have been chosen for a great honour tonight, and offered a clemency which none of you deserve. So if any of you attempts to abuse this kindness, by trying to escape, by betraying our company to the enemy, by killing each other or sabotaging the mission, I give you my personal guarantee that I will make the rest of your very short life a living hell the likes of which would make the depredations of the daemons of Chaos look like a country dance.” He turned toward the door and limped toward it. “That is all.”

Reiner shivered, then joined the rest as the guards began herding them out.

If nothing else, Albrecht made sure they were well kitted out. They were led through the castle and out through the postern gate, where a narrow wooden drawbridge spanned the moat. On the far side, on a strip of cleared land flanked by a fallow field, a pack mule and ten horses were waiting for them—their breath white steam in the chill night air. The horses were saddled, bridled and loaded with regulation packs, complete with bed roll, rations, skillet, flint, canteen, and the like. Reiner’s sabre was returned to him—a beautiful weapon, made to his measure, and the only gift his skinflint father had ever given him that was worth a damn. There was also a padded leather jerkin and sturdy boots to replace the ones taken from him in the brig, as well as a dagger, a boot knife, saddlebags full of powder and shot, and two pistols in saddle holsters—though not loaded or primed. Albrecht was no fool. A cloak, steel lobster-tail bassinet, and back-and-breastplate strapped over the pack completed the inventory.

Almost everybody seemed satisfied with their gear. Only Ulf and Erich complained.

“What’s this?” asked Ulf angrily, holding up a huge iron-bound wooden maul that looked bigger than Sigmar’s hammer. “Is this a joke?”

Veirt smirked. “’Tis the only weapon we know you’re competent with.”

“Do you ask a knight to ride a pack horse?” interrupted Erich. “This beast is barely fourteen hands.”

“We go into the mountains, your grace,” said Veirt dryly. “Yer charger might find the going a bit rough.”

“Looks tall enough to me,” said Hals, eyeing his horse uneasily.

“Aye,” said Pavel. “Can you make ’em kneel so we can get on?”

“Sigmar, save us!” said Erich. “Will we have to teach these peasants to ride?”

“Oh, they’ll pick it up quick enough,” said Reiner. “Just learn from his lordship, lads. If you ride like you’ve got a pike up your fundament, you’re on the mark.”

Pavel and Hals guffawed. Erich shot Reiner a venomous glance and turned toward him as if he meant to pursue the matter. Fortunately, at that moment Albrecht came through the gate, leading a chestnut palfrey on which sat a woman dressed in the robes of an abbess of Shallya. Reiner’s fears were somewhat allayed when he saw her, for Lady Magda was a stern, sober-looking woman of middle years—attractive enough in a cold, haughty way, but by no means the sort of dewy-eyed, waif-like temptress that had so recently been his ruin.

This woman looked like she measured out the charity of Shallya with an assayer’s scale, and healed the sick by shaming them into health. She seemed as unhappy to be travelling in their company as they were to be in Veirt’s. She looked them over with

barely concealed disdain.

Only when Albrecht led her to her place beside Veirt did Reiner see her show anything like human feeling. As the baron handed her her bridle he took her hand and kissed it. She smiled down at him in return and stroked his cheek fondly. Reiner smirked. There was some fire in the cold sister after all. Still, the moment of affection gave Reiner pause. Why would Albrecht leave a woman he cared for in such disreputable company? It was curious.

When they were all mounted, Albrecht faced them. "Ride swiftly and return quickly. Remember that riches await you if you succeed, and that I will kill you like dogs if you betray me. Now go, and may the eye of Sigmar watch over your journey."

He saluted as Veirt spurred his horse and signalled them forward. Only Veirt, Erich and Reiner returned the salute.

As they started down the rutted dirt road between tilled fields toward the dark band of forest in the distance, it began to drizzle. Reiner and the rest all reached behind them to unstrap their hooded cloaks from their packs and pull them on.

Hals grumbled under his breath as the rain spattered his forehead. "There's a good omen for you, and no mistake."

It rained all night, turning the road to mud. Spring was coming to Ostland as it did every year, cold and wet. The party rode through the moonless night huddled in their cloaks, teeth chattering and noses running. The throbbing pain of his brand was now only the first in a long list of miseries that Reiner mentally added to with each passing mile. They could see little of the countryside. The woods were pitch black. Only when they passed open fields, where the previous week's blanket of snow was melting into grey slush, was there enough light for them to see any distance at all.

This was wild land. Smallhof was on the Empire's easternmost marches and there was much forest and few towns. It was relatively safe, however. The tide of Chaos had crested, then receded back east and north leaving the land desolate, even of the bandits and beasts that normally terrorised the local farms and towns. The few crude huts they passed were mere blackened shells.

Just before dawn, as Reiner was nodding and swaying in the saddle, Veirt called a halt by a river. A patch of tall pines clustered near it, and into this he led them. It was black as a cave within the spinney, but the ground was almost dry.

Veirt dismounted briskly. "We'll rest here until dawn. No tents. And sleep in your gear."

"What?" said Reiner. "But dawn's only an hour away."

"His lordship said time is of the essence," said Veirt. "You'll get a full night's sleep when we make camp tonight."

"Another day of riding?" moaned Hals. "My arse won't stand it."

"Would you rather your arse was swinging by a rope?" asked Veirt darkly. "Now get your heads down. Urquart, help me."

While the company saw to their horses and made pillows of their bedrolls, Ulf and Veirt put up a tidy little tent for Lady Magda that included a folding cot. When it was finished and Lady Magda installed within it, Veirt laid down in front of it, blocking the entrance.

“Don’t worry, captain,” said Hals under his breath. “We don’t want none.” He laughed and nudged Pavel. “Ha! Get it? We don’t want nun!”

“Aye,” said Pavel wearily. “I get it. Now go to sleep, y’pillock. Blood of Sigmar, I don’t know which hurts worse, my hand or my arse.”

Reiner woke with a start. He had been having a vivid nightmare that Kronhof, Altdorf’s most notorious moneylender, was drilling through his left hand with a carpenter’s auger as punishment for unpaid debts, when someone in the dream had begun banging on an iron door. He opened his eyes and found himself in the pine spinney, but the pain in his hand and the banging continued. It took a moment to remember that he was now a branded man, and another moment to realise that the horrible noise was Veirt, banging his skillet against a rock and shouting, “Rise and shine, my beauties! We’ve a long day ahead of us.”

“I’ll make him eat that skillet in a minute,” growled Hals, clutching his head.

Reiner climbed painfully to his feet. He wasn’t sore from riding. He was a pistolier—born in the saddle. But lack of sleep made his bones feel like they were made of lead. They dragged at his flesh. The pain in his hand seemed to have spread to his head; while the rest of him was frozen, his head felt on fire. His eyes ached. His teeth ached. Even his hair seemed to ache.

Worse than Veirt’s banging and shouting was his clear-eyed alertness. To Reiner’s annoyance, the man seemed utterly unaffected by lack of sleep. Lady Magda was the same. She waited calmly outside her tent, hands folded, as clean and pressed as if she had just led morning prayers. Veirt chivvied them through a rushed breakfast of bread, cheese and some ale and then onto their horses. Last to mount up were Pavel and Hals, who lowered themselves into their saddles with much hissing and groaning, like men settling bare-arsed into thorn bushes. Less than half an hour after waking, they were on the road again.

The rain had stopped, but there was no sun. The sky was a featureless and uninterrupted grey from horizon to horizon, like a dull pewter tray hung upside down over the world. The party pulled their cloaks tight around them and leaned into a wet spring wind as they rode toward the Middle Mountains, which rose out of the seemingly endless forest like islands in a green sea.

As the day went on and they left the scrubby wastelands of the east behind, the forest grew denser and they came across a few villages, tiny communities carved out of the wilderness and surrounded by winter fields. But while these so typically Imperial sights should have cheered men so long from home, instead the convicts’ faces grew longer and longer, for the villages were empty shells—sacked and burned to the ground, with rotting skeletons strewn about like children’s playthings. Some still smoked, for though the war was officially over months ago, Chaos Warlord Archaon and his hordes having at last been pushed back beyond Kislev, fighting continued, and doubtless would for some time. The endless forest of Ostland could swallow armies whole, with scattered bands of marauders, lost or left behind by their fleeing compatriots, still wandered it, looking for food and easy plunder. Other northmen had reportedly fled into the Middle Mountains and stayed, finding the frozen heights to their liking.

Still reeling from its all-or-nothing fight, the Empire was too busy regrouping and rebuilding to send armies out to vanquish these scavengers, and so it was left to the beleaguered local lords to defend their people with the ragged remnants of their household guard. But here, in these forsaken hinterlands, no lord but Karl Franz held sway, and the villagers must fend for themselves or die. Most often they died.

In one village, decapitated heads rotted on spikes mounted on the palisade. Bodies decomposed where they had fallen because there was no one left alive to bury them. The stench of death rose from wells and barns and cottages.

At noon they passed a temple of Sigmar. The old priest had been crucified before it, his ribs pried back and his deflated lungs flapping in the wind like wings. Pavel and Hals cursed under their breath and spat to avert bad luck. Erich rode straighter in the saddle, his jaw muscles twitching. Franz shivered and looked away. Reiner found himself torn between hiding his eyes and staring. He'd never had much use for priests, but no man of the Empire could see such a thing and be unaffected.

After a lunch eaten in the saddle, a watery sun came out and the mood lifted a little. The forest receded away from the road and for a while they rode through a marshy area of rushes and clumps of snow that dripped into meandering streams. The men began to talk amongst themselves and Reiner found it interesting to see how the group sorted out. He was mildly surprised to see Pavel and Hals, a pair of Ostland farmers who had never left their homeland before being called to war, getting on well with the Tilean mercenary Giano. The typical insularity of the peasant, to whom even Altdorf was a foreign country, and who viewed all outsiders with mistrust, seemed to have been trumped by the commonality of all foot soldiers, and soon the three were laughing and exchanging tales of rotten provisions, terrible billets and worse commanders.

Behind them, little Franz and giant Ulf talked in low tones—a confederacy of the teased, thought Reiner. While bringing up the rear were Gustaf and Oskar, riding in glum silence and staring straight ahead—a confederacy of the shunned.

Veirt rode at the head of the party with Lady Magda. They were silent as well: Veirt constantly on the lookout for danger and Lady Magda, with her nose in a leather-bound volume, pointedly ignoring all that surrounded her. Reiner rode behind them, and much to his annoyance, so did Erich. It was inevitable, of course. Other than Lady Magda, Reiner was the only person of Erich's class in the party. He was the only prisoner Erich could acknowledge as an equal, the only one he would deign to talk to. Reiner would have been much happier swapping bawdy songs and barracks insults with Hals, Pavel and Giano, but Erich had attached himself like glue and babbled incessantly at his shoulder.

"If you were in Altdorf you must know my cousin Viscount Norrich Oberholt. He was trying to become a Knight Panther. Damned fine rider. Spent a lot of time at the Plume and Pennant."

"I'm afraid I didn't mix much with the orders. I was at university."

Erich made a face. "University? Gads! I had enough learning from my tutor. Were you studying to be a priest?"

"Literature, when I studied at all. Mostly I was just there to escape Draeholt."

“Eh? What’s wrong with Draeholt? Excellent hunting there. Bagged a boar there once.”

“Did you?”

“Yes. Damned fine animal. I say, your name is Hetzau? I believe I met your father on a Draeholt hunt once. Jolly old fellow.”

Reiner winced. “Oh yes, he’s always at his jolliest killing the lesser orders.”

There was a rustle in the dead grass beside the road. Giano instantly unslung his crossbow and fired. A rabbit bolted out of hiding and sprinted across their march. Before Giano could do more than cry out in disgust, Franz raised his bow from his shoulders and an arrow from his quiver and fired in a single smooth motion. The rabbit turned a cartwheel and flopped dead in the melting snow, a clothyard shaft between his shoulder blades.

The entire party turned and looked at the boy with newfound respect. Even Erich nodded curtly. “Neat shooting, that. Lad would make a good beater.”

Franz hopped lightly off his horse, removed the arrow and handed the rabbit to Giano, who had three more hanging from his pommel that he had shot earlier. “One more for the stew,” he said with a smirk.

“Grazie, boy,” said Giano. “Much thank yous.” He added the coney to his brace.

As Franz climbed back on his horse again, Reiner leaned in to Erich. “Care to bet on who pots the next one?”

Erich pursed his lips. “I never wager, except on horses. I say, have you seen the racers Count Schlaeger is breeding down at Helmgart? Damned fine runners.”

And on and on it went. Reiner groaned. Here he was, out in the world, freed from prison, his neck spared—at least temporarily—from the noose. But was he allowed to enjoy it? No. Apparently Sigmar had a nasty sense of humour. Erich was talking about his father’s annual hunt ball now. It was going to be a long trip.

Veirt finally called a halt in the lee of a low cliff just before sunset and the men fell to making camp. Reiner found it curious that the men all found roles for themselves without any apparent communication. Pavel and Hals groaned about how sore they were from riding while they fetched water from a nearby stream and hunted for wild carrots and dandelion leaves to add to the stew. Reiner saw to the horses. Ulf erected Magda’s tent and then assisted the others with theirs. Franz and Oskar collected wood and started the fire. Gustaf flayed and deboned the rabbits with an intensity Reiner found disturbing, while Giano seasoned the stew and talked endlessly about how much better the food was in Tilea.

The stew was delicious, if a bit garlicky for Imperial tastes, and they slurped it down eagerly as they hunched close around the fire.

“Draw lots for tents,” said Veirt between mouthfuls. “I’ll not have anyone pulling rank or any fighting over who tents with who. Yer all scum to me.”

The men made their marks on leaves and put them in a helmet. There were five tents: a fancy one for Lady Magda, a small one for Captain Veirt, and three standard-issue cavalry tents, which slept four uncomfortably, as the old barracks joke went, so the nine men could sleep three to a tent. Luxury. But when the helmet passed to Franz, he passed it on without adding a lot.

“Can’t write your name, lad?” asked Veirt.

“I’ll sleep alone,” said Franz.

Heads came up all around the fire.

Veirt scowled. “You’ll sleep with the others. There’s no spare tent.”

“I’ll tent under my cloak.” He looked straight into the fire.

Reiner smirked. “The army ain’t *all* inverts, boyo.”

“It only takes one.”

“Soldier,” said Veirt, with soft menace. “Men who sleep alone tend to be found missing in the morning. Sometimes they run. Sometimes something takes them. I will allow neither. I need all the men I have for this goose chase. You...”

“Captain, please,” said Hals. “Let him sleep alone. The last thing any of us needs is some excitable lad with a hair trigger cutting our throats for rolling over.”

A chorus of “ayes” echoed from around the fire. Veirt shrugged. It seemed that Franz’s stock with the company, which had risen after his display of bowmanship, had fallen precipitously once again.

When the lots were drawn—with a blank leaf holding Franz’s place—Reiner shared a tent with Pavel and Ulf. Hals, Giano and Oskar had another, and Erich and Gustaf had the third tent to themselves. Veirt took first watch, and the rest bedded down immediately, near dropping from their night and day in the saddle. Still, it took Reiner a while to get to sleep. He couldn’t stop thinking about what an odd lot of madmen and malcontents the company was. He couldn’t understand why Valdenheim had entrusted them with such an important mission, and with the life of a woman he obviously held dear. Why hadn’t he dispatched a squadron of knights to be her escort?

Reiner at last drifted off into fitful dreams without having found a satisfactory answer to his questions.

THREE

In The Doghouse

In the middle of the third day of their journey, with the ground rising beneath them and the Middle Mountains looming above, Pavel and Hals began to look about them with increased interest.

“This is the road to Ferlangen, or I’m a goblin,” said Hals.

“And there’s the Three Hags,” said Pavel, pointing to a trio of mountains in the distance that looked from this angle like three hunched old women. “My dad’s farm ain’t half a day south.”

Hals sniffed the air. “I knew we was home, just by breathing. Lady of Peace, I could swear I smell my mother’s pork and cabbage cooking in the pot right now.”

Gustaf chuckled unpleasantly and spoke for the first time that day. “Don’t get your hopes up, yokel. It’s more likely your mother cooking in the pot.”

“Y’filthy clot!” cried Hals, trying clumsily to turn his horse toward Gustaf. “You’ll take that back or I’ll have yer guts for garters!”

Captain Veirt interposed his horse between the men before Reiner even noticed him moving. “Stand down, pikeman,” he barked at Hals, then wheeled to face Gustaf. “And you, leech. If you open yer trap only for that sort of garbage, yer better off leaving it shut.” He stood up in his stirrups and glowered around at the whole troop. “You’ll not lack for fighting before we’re done, I guarantee it. But if any man wants more than what’s coming to him, come see me. I’ll show you yer own spine. Am I clear?”

“Perfectly captain,” said Gustaf, turning his horse away.

Hals nodded, head lowered. “Aye, captain.”

“Right then,” said Veirt. “Ride on. We’ve twenty more miles to make today.”

At dusk they rode through a ruined town. The houses, taverns and shops were nothing but blackened sticks. Drifts of ash-blackened snow clung to crumbled stone walls. Pavel and Hals stared around in blank dismay.

“This is Draetau,” said Pavel. “My cousin lives in Draetau.”

“Lived,” said Gustaf.

“We sell our pigs in the market down there,” said Hals, pointing down a cross street. There was no longer any market.

Pavel trembled with rage and wiped at his eyes. “The heathen bastards. Filthy, daemon worshipping swine.”

Beyond the edge of the town they saw an orange glow through a stand of trees and heard faint cries and the clash of arms.

“Weapons out!” barked Veirt, and drew his sword. The men followed suit. Giano wound his crossbow and Franz nocked an arrow on his string. Reiner checked that his pistols were primed and cocked.

“Von Eisenberg, Hetzau,” called Veirt. “With the lady.”

Erich and Reiner jogged up so that they flanked Lady Magda. Veirt rode directly before her. Through a gap in the trees they could see that a small cluster of farmhouses were burning. The silhouettes of huge men with horns—whether sprouting from their helmets or growing from their heads it was impossible to tell—ran through the flames, chasing smaller silhouettes. Others drove off sheep and cattle. A few carried human prizes. Reiner and the others could hear the thin shrieks of women over the crackle of fire.

Pavel and Hals kicked their horses awkwardly forward. “Captain,” said Hals. “Those are our people. We can’t just...”

“No,” said Veirt grimly. “We’ve a job to do. Ride on.” But he didn’t look happy about it.

Erich coughed. “Captain, for once I agree with the pike. The village isn’t much out of our line of march, and we might...”

“I said no!” bellowed Veirt, so they rode on. But before they had gone another quarter mile, Veirt struck his leg with his gloved fist. “This is all the fault of those mealy-mouthed fools who surround the Emperor and fill his ears with cowardice disguised as caution. We are too extended, they say. The treasury is depleted, they say. We cannot afford to prolong the war. The fools! They can’t afford not to!”

The squad looked at him, surprised. From their short association with him, they knew Veirt as a taciturn man, who kept his emotions to himself, but here he was raging like tap-room orator.

“It wasn’t enough to push the hordes beyond our borders and into the mountains, and then return as if the mission were accomplished. It is as Baron Albrecht says. We must destroy them utterly. Otherwise it will be as you see—a little raid here, a little raid there, with our mothers and sisters never truly safe, the Empire never truly sovereign. Unless we want to endlessly fight for land we have called our own for centuries, we must seek out the barbarians in their own lairs and kill them to the last man, woman and child.”

“Hear hear,” said Erich. “Well said. But then...”

“No,” said Veirt. “The relic Baron Albrecht has commanded us to recover is more important. It could turn the tide at last. It could mean the end of the northern curse for all time. Once m’lord Albrecht has it, he and his brother Manfred will be able to retake Nordbergbruche, their ancestral home, from the Chaos filth that stole it while m’lords were fighting in the east. Then it will become a bastion against the scum that hide in the mountains, and Valnir’s Bane will be the spear with which the Empire will at last drive out...”

“Captain,” said Lady Magda, sharply. “This is a *secret* mission.”

Veirt looked up at her and visibly composed himself. “Forgive me, lady. I let my tongue get away from me.”

Veirt returned his horse to her side and they got under way once more.

“Quite a speech,” muttered Reiner, dropping back a bit.

“Oh yes,” said Hals, grinning. “Old Veirt’s a firebreather all right.”

“You served under him?”

Pavel shook his head. “Would that we had. There’s one who wouldn’t run in battle.”

Hals laughed. “Not him. That’s why he’s here, trying to win his way back into Albrecht’s good graces.”

“Vent’s in the doghouse too?” asked Reiner, surprised.

“Worse than the doghouse. His neck’s on the block. Direct disobedience of orders,” said Pavel.

“He was under the command of Albrecht’s brother, Manfred, at the battle of Vandengart. Manfred told him to hold his position,” continued Hals, “but Veirt saw a troop of gunners being destroyed by some horrible norther beasts and couldn’t stand it. He charged. Cost Manfred the battle.”

“Lost him nearly a hundred men,” added Pavel.

“But Veirt’s pikes never broke,” said Hals proudly. “Slaughtered every last one of those nightmares. There’s a captain.”

“Aye,” said Pavel.

Reiner chuckled. “A squadron of the condemned led by the condemned.”

“It’s nothing to laugh at,” sniffed Erich. “I had no idea. The man’s cashiered.”

Reiner spotted more torches moving through the fields just north of the road. “Captain. On your right.”

Veirt looked where he pointed and cursed under his breath. “Right. We turn west. Von Eisenberg, on point.”

The company reluctantly turned off the road. With a last, longing look over his shoulder at the marauders, Erich nudged his horse forward until he was fifty paces ahead. They rode through fields and sparse woods in a large half-circle until the Kurgan torches were out of sight and all they could see of the burning farms was a faint orange glow on the underside of the low-hanging clouds.

At last Veirt turned them north again. A long finger of wood lay between them and the road. Veirt called Erich back until he rode only a few yards ahead, gave him a slotted lantern which emitted a narrow wedge of light but hid its flame from prying eyes, and they began to pick their way through the wood.

Though narrow, the centre of the strip of woods became thick and tangled with undergrowth, and their progress was reduced to a walk. The horses pushed through the brush as if breasting through a stream, and it was necessary to hack at the branches that dangled overhead to avoid being dragged off their mounts.

“Captain,” said Erich. “May I suggest we go about and circle this briar patch?”

Veirt nodded. “Turn around. Back the way we...”

“Captain,” said Lady Magda. “I believe my horse’s hoof is caught. I cannot turn.”

Veirt grunted and sheathed his sword in his saddle-mounted scabbard. “A moment, lady.” He dismounted, took Erich’s lantern, and squatted by Lady Magda’s horse. After a moment he stood. “Urquart. Her hoofs wedged between two roots. I need your strength.”

The big engineer dismounted and joined Veirt. As they hauled at the roots, Oskar’s head snapped up. “Do you hear something?” he asked tremulously.

The others fell still and listened. There was something, almost lost in the creaking of leather and shifting of horses—a rhythmic murmuring like a tide over a pebble beach, like... breathing. They looked into the blackness of the woods. On all sides of them, glowing yellow eyes reflected their lantern light.