

Winter in Destruction

Ben Iser

JACOB SNIFFS the cold air as he climbs the mounting steps to the seat of his cart. ‘There’ll be a frost tonight.’

‘I fear there’ll be more than that. It’ll take all afternoon to get to the Kristall Lake Inn. You be sure to get there before dark,’ replies Marta.

Jacob settles into his seat and adjusts his tricorne hat. ‘Peasants’ superstitions don’t scare me.’

Marta frowns up at her husband, ‘It’s not the stories, witches and vampires that I’m concerned about. The Wächters have had reports of deserters from the war up north robbing travellers. They’re hunted men and getting desperate and dangerous as the cold weather closes in,’ she turns her head to stare out the town gate. ‘I feel evil days are ahead.’

Jacob grins in response to her intuition. ‘I’ll be fine. Even if the deserters have turned to brigandry, they’ll not want to steal a cartload of water jugs. Your brother will meet me at the inn tomorrow morn and together we’ll pass through Hoia-Baciu Forest for the market at Targoviste. We’re both well defended. We know how to use our weapons.’

‘You’re alone until you meet Manfred. Honourless mutineers and cut-throats will have your life before they bother to find out what you carry.’ Marta turns on her heel and enters the house as Jacob’s cart lurches forward, taking him towards the exit through the small town’s gates. He turns in his seat and waves her retreating figure a cheery farewell.

After an uneventful day’s journey, Jacob stands in the taproom of the Kristall Lake Inn, listening to the innkeeper give his spiel. ‘Beer’s a penny a pint and a hot meal is thruppence. Yer can spread yer roll anywhere in the taproom y’like, but a private room be a shilling. Someone to keep y’warm be another. I got three girls, but if yer tastes lead in t’other way Donkey, the stableboy, be already busy.’

‘Donkey is an odd name,’ says Jacob.

‘Not when y’know why ‘ees called that,’ the innkeeper huffs on the glass he’s holding and starts to polish it.

A cold gust of wintry air sweeps through the room as the front door is slammed back upon its hinges. Jacob turns to see several figures crowding the doorframe. All are dressed in a mixture of travel clothes and military uniforms, none of which has seen the spit and polish of a barracks room for months. Every one has buttoned his coat high at the neck, leaving empty black eyes as the only visible feature between collar and hat brim.

The innkeeper looks up from his polishing. ‘I’ll be right with yer gen’l’men as soon as I’m done with this ‘ere fellow.’

The leader of the group laughs and raises a pistol. The flint ignites the powder in the lock, the resulting explosion of flame and smoke sends a small lead ball singing across the room and into the innkeeper’s ample belly. ‘Oh dear God,’ he murmurs looking down at the crimson stain spreading across his gut. He crashes forward, scattering mugs and bottles across the bar top.

The brigands spread out from the doorway, attacking the patrons of the inn; some patrons fight back, while others scramble to flee out of doors and windows. Musket-fire from snipers surrounding the inn meets those who escape outside.

Jacob draws his pistol and drops to a crouch. He fires at the leader but misses, his shot catching another of the brigands in the throat. Hot lead rips through an oilskin collar to tear out the jugular, a torrential flow of blood spilling to the floor. Left hand gripping his pistol by the barrel, Jacob draws out his sword. Parrying a brigand’s blade with his own, Jacob smashes the heavy, brass-encased butt of his pistol into the man’s jaw. Blood, spittle and teeth arc across the room as the jawbone splinters. The man collapses, his final breath bubbling through bloody foam. Jacob turns to face another foe, finding himself staring into the cold face of the leader, an instant before she smashes her forehead into the bridge of his nose. He succumbs to the black oblivion of unconsciousness.

In the early morning, Manfred canters across the frost encrusted fields towards the Kristall Lake Inn where he plans to meet his brother-in-law. The nearer he gets, the clearer the inn becomes against its backdrop of rocky, forest-covered hills. It comes as a shock when he realises that the column of smoke he sees doesn’t promise warmth and good company.

Dismounting, he leads his horse through the ruined gates, crossing the debris-strewn courtyard to the stable. Entering the building, he gags when

he sees the stableboy crucified upon the wall, crotch a bloody mess, pelvic bone exposed as if gnawed upon by a large beast.

Stalling his horse and giving it a feedbag to keep it quiet, Manfred quietly crosses the yard to the main house, looking for Jacob among the broken furniture, spoiled food, and mutilated corpses of the inn's former patrons. He peers through a smashed window into the taproom that's been cleared of all its contents other than two brigands sitting hunched over a table playing knucklebones. The wrist of the hand to which the knuckles had once belonged is nailed to the wooden table by a long stiletto. The owner of the wrist is slumped in a chair, held upright by ropes; what little remains of his life slowly leaking out from the many cuts that cover him.

Seeing no sign of Jacob and confident that he is alone with the two brigands, Manfred decides to act. He removes his brace of pistols from his belt and carefully loads the charges and balls. He primes the locks and thumbs the heavy flint hammers into position. He fires with careful aim, and the shots take his enemies by surprise. His first shot takes the first knucklebone player full in the face, throwing him backward out of his chair and making his features burst out a spray of blood, mucus and pulped flesh. The other man receives his bullet in the leg, the kneecap shattering like a china plate dropped on a stone floor.

Manfried enters the room cautiously, his sword at the ready. Crossing quickly over to the wounded thug, he's just in time to smash his sword down onto the man's wrist. The heavy hanger's blade severs the hand, making it unable to grasp the pistol the brigand was reaching for.

Manfried crouches next to the wounded man. 'Where's your gang hiding out?' The thug spits a bloody gob of phlegm into his face as a reply. Wiping his cheek, Manfred continues questioning.

'Tell me what I want to know and I'll speed your death. Refuse me and I'll leave you to die in slow agony.'

The thug gives a chocking laugh. 'Ha! You won't find 'em. This raid was to get supplies for the journey south before the snows come. They've taken what they can carry and begun the march.'

Manfried leans in closer, 'If your band is heading south, what are you doing still here?'

'My brother and I were going east, home to Chechnya.'

'A prisoner was taken. Why?'

'The witch chose him as payment for leading us through the woods.'

'Where will I find her?'

'There is a concealed path that joins the road half-a-mile east of here. Her den is there.'

Manfried nods and draws his dagger for the promised coup de grâce.

The thug coughs, 'I pray the bitch does for you as you've done for me.' Manfred leans back as he slices the sharp blade across the man's throat, avoiding the gush of arterial blood that pours out over the thug's chest.

A hard ride and a brief search lead Manfred to a faint trail that takes him further into the hilly terrain. Finding a cliff face formed from boulders, he sees a glow of fire from the crevice. Sidling between the rocks forming the entrance, he enters a natural room, the furnishings reminiscent of a rustic farm cabin. Jacob lies on the bed, trussed up like a hog ready for slaughter. A large, naked woman stands over him, her arm inserted up to her elbow inside his anus.

As Manfred enters the room, he trips over a concealed cord that stretches across the entrance. A bell rings. The witch turns to face him, ripping her arm out of Jacob's body, blood and shit dripping from her fingers. She leaps towards her clothes and the weapons harness that sit on top of a chair near the fire. Lying prone, Manfred gets off a shot at her. She pulls up short and the wild shot slams into her gear, tipping the chair over and into the fire. The pouch of gunpowder quickly ignites, the resulting blast scattering burning debris across the room. An inhuman snarl issues from the woman. Manfred scrambles up and then falls back, the wood axe the witch has swung at his head nearly decapitates him. The witch bounds over him and flees out the cave entrance. Unarmed and unable to win, she seeks flight in order to fight another day.

Manfried looks down upon Jacob's shattered body. Burns from branding irons, cuts, and lesions from rawhide whips; myriad tortures cover Jacob from head to toe. Like the boy at the inn, Jacob's cock and balls are ripped away. A low groan emits from his lips, his face black from bruising caused by the broken bones beneath.

Manfried looks down upon the broken, disgraced, and dying shell that is his friend and brother-in-law. Calmly, he raises his pistol and shoots Jacob between the eyes.