

# WARPSTONE

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## A BARD'S TALE

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The twilight shed its reddish light along the dusty road. Even though winter was far away, the northern reaches of the Empire could hardly be considered a warm and welcoming place to be. A group of travellers was making slow progress towards Middenheim. Their faces showed the extreme exhaustion that preyed on their limbs. The road leading from Salzenmund to Middenheim was empty, the last coach having passed some two hours ago bound for Middenheim. It was then clear that they would not be able to reach the next inn before midnight.

Thanks to the efforts of the Graf's soldiers, the neighbourhood of Middenheim was a safe zone, at least in comparison with the surroundings of other cities of the Empire.

However, it would be an unwise traveller that one that chose to travel alone - let alone spend the night - in the dark forests. Anyway, they were still far away from the city of the White Wolf and still in the lands of Nordland.

"We could be warming ourselves in front of a fire..." said one of the travellers with a gasp. "Why did you have to start that brawl, Erwin? You certainly could afford to lose those crowns."

"Mind your own business, Klaus, or maybe I'll have to take care of your nose too." answered Erwin.

Staying in an inn could be risky business, especially if you had a weakness for gambling and had enough bad luck as to find a professional gambler. Erwin had played cards with the stranger and at first won a few shillings. However, the inexpert youth soon fell for the bait and lost a few crowns before realising it. He accused the stranger of cheating and a nice brawl ensued. It goes without saying that the inn-keeper would hear nothing about them staying in his inn, and a blunderbuss convinced them all that it would be healthier for them all to leave.

A gaunt man who was travelling with them stopped to look at the forest. He wasn't obviously one of their company, and was obviously tired of hearing the other two arguing. That was the third time in which that conversation had sprung up. He was tired of the old song, and consequently, after the two other men stopped their argument, he politely and with a slight accent which revealed his foreign origins, said:

"How far away was that inn? Ten miles, did they say? I'd bet we'll never get there before midnight. I suppose we'll have to make camp here."

"Oh yes, wonderful, make camp in the middle of the forest and enjoy our meal. Later someone will enjoy his meal, and we'll be that meal!" said Klaus.

"C'mon, Klaus, this hasn't been the first time we've spent a night in the open." Erwin reminded him.

"Yeah, but there were six of us then, not three. And one of us is just a minstrel." moaned Klaus.

The tall stranger cast a glance to Klaus, and after finishing chewing his tobacco, he spat into the gloomy forest. He travelled with them since the brawl, just because he decided to enter the fray to help the impulsive youth. After all, the youth seemed to need help

then. That meant that, in the end, he had had to renounce to a comfortable bed and a good hearty meal. If that wasn't enough, he had now to put up with their insolent remarks. He said:

"Appearances might deceive you. Certainly I'm only a minstrel, but that doesn't mean I can't take care of myself. Be it as it may, we should be making camp for tonight and lighting a good fire instead of indulging in idle talk. Otherwise we'll end up in the belly of some nice mutant."

There was a clear spot near the road in which they dropped their few possessions. They wished there was a water source, but there wasn't any. Erwin went into the forest to gather a few branches. They lit a fire and after resting for a while, began to eat their meagre rations. The forest was a scary place. Darkness was everywhere, and the beasts that roam the forest at night began their prowling. Some of these would be animals, some others maybe not. After an hour, Klaus threw a pair of branches into the fire, and then in a calmer voice than before he spoke again.

"Hey, *Mike*," said he, finding difficulty in pronouncing the foreigner's name, "it's high time you showed your talents to us, isn't it? How about a song from your foggy homeland to help us relax and prepare for the night? "

The stranger lifted his glance from the fire and looked at Klaus. He replied then:

"I don't think an Albionese song would soothe you. No, this night I don't feel like singing songs." He leaned on his backpack, produced a little more tobacco and began to chew it. After a while, he said:

"However, the night is fine for telling stories. If you want, I could tell you a little tale..."

"Sure. Go ahead, then." replied the others.

Then the minstrel began to tell a most strange tale...

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*It was a cold autumn's evening, just after twilight. A rather fat but smartly dressed man had just arrived at the old inn, 'The Last Bridge'. He was obviously fatigued, having been riding his horse for a long time. He appeared to be a wealthy man, but did not look like a brave soul likely to face the dangers that roamed the roads by night. So weary did he feel that after unmounting and giving his horse to the stable lad, he hurriedly entered the inn.*

*The inn was very crowded that night, its atmosphere warm and welcoming. Everyone in the inn turned his head to scrutinize the stranger. He took off his dusty hat and, after ordering some food and mulled wine for himself, he sat on a bench near the hearth. In those past days people were far more friendly and this stranger found that the inn's customers were very interested in his travels and experiences, and eager to hear the news he had to tell them. He loved to talk and be listened to, and hence spoke for a long time. When he had drunk enough wine, he let slip that he was carrying a very special merchandise to Herr Baumann of Beeckerhoven, a man whose name was known to everybody because of his fabled wealth.*

*When the inn-keeper heard this, he steered the conversation towards a rather unpleasant topic. He warned the weary traveller against the highwaymen who had been robbing a lot of unwary travellers of their belongings, especially near the bridge. Everybody in the inn admitted this fact and seemed so afraid that the traveller, reinvigorated after his meal, boasted that he was not afraid of travelling alone that same evening in the dark to Beeckerhoven. All the customers seemed scared of his intentions, and admonished him to stay until the morning, but he persisted in his attitude, and made light of their fears. The inn-keeper explained that the bridge was haunted, or cursed, or both. He told the traveller that forty years ago a man whose name was Jochen Lindemann was outcast by the count Reinhardt von Eckbert, a local noble, thereby losing all his wealth and honour. After that, in revenge Lindemann became the most ferocious highwayman of the region. He was hunted throughout the country, and only after being betrayed was he apprehended at the bridge and sentenced to death by beheading. It was a widespread belief that he returned from Hell to haunt forever the bridge where he was betrayed.*

*The traveller, lacking imagination, did not believe this story and mocked the other customers and the staff for believing it. He stood up, paid the food and wine and went out of the inn, followed by a scared group of worried customers. As he rode his horse everything stood still. When he departed, the great disgrace that could befall him was on everyone's lips except the inn-keeper's. Only a sinister smile lingered there for a minute or so, and then faded away to nothing.*

*Meanwhile the traveller headed for the bridge. His former high spirits, caused by the wine he had drunk, slowly disappeared carried away by the chilly wind. The scary woods cast looming shadows on both sides of the road, and he gradually became scared by the eerie noises that came out of the woods. Perhaps they were just the hunting cries of an owl... maybe not. The atmosphere was so unsettling that the traveller began to cast nervous glances over his shoulder. At last, he sighed with relief when he saw the bridge coming closer in the horizon.*

*When he was only a few yards from the bridge suddenly a rider emerged from the woods, all clad in black robes. The sinister rider breathed steadily the icy night's air, an air he should not have been able to breathe, because over his shoulders there was no head. His head was resting on his left hand, close to the rider's chest, for he was the beheaded off Beeckerhoven. With a deep, weird voice the spectre demanded the purse of the traveller while he aimed his pistol towards him as a silent threat. The traveller panicked, took his purse and threw it away. Then the rider moved his mount from the road and let his victim go. The scared traveller spurred his mount till blood came out of its flanks, and the beast began to gallop frenziedly like a stag hunted by a pack of bloodthirsty wolves. He was soon out of sight.*

*The dark rider waited for the hooves' sound to die away, and then unmounted and tied his horse to a mossy branch. Next, he placed his gun back in his belt, unbuttoned his shirt and slowly a blond head appeared above his shoulders where none had been before. It was the smiling face of the inn-keeper's son. He placed the hollowed pumpkin he was carrying in his left hand, which had been craftily carved and painted to resemble a head, on the grass. Then he took the purse, opened it and found some jewels inside. He laughed loudly, because he was amused of the traveller's gullibility.*

*Anyway, no one ever saw the inn-keeper's son again, neither alive nor dead. Many people believe that when the inn-keeper's son was ready to return to the inn he met the actual spectre, who had come forth from Hell to avenge his infamy. What is true is that when morning came and the disappearance was discovered, a thorough search was carried out but nothing was found. Well, something was found indeed, near the bridge. There, at the same spot where the highwayman had been betrayed forty years ago, the peasants found some odd things: a bulging purse which contained a few really valuable jewels and, surrounding it, everyone could see the grisly remains of a bloodstained, crushed pumpkin.*

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The minstrel ended the tale. It was clear that, as lots of times in the past, he had captivated his audience, even though in this case the audience consisted of two uncouth men. After a while, Klaus asked:

"Hearing you no one would guess you're a foreigner, barring your slight accent, that is. However, you seemed to talk from knowledge. Is it a tale from your country that you use to frighten our peasants and earn a warm meal and a bed for the night? "

"I've been living in this country of yours for a long time now, and I know it quite well. That story, be it true or pure fantasy, was born in your country. I heard it a long time ago, and have added not a little word to it." and saying this, the bard fixed again his glance in the flames.

"It's a good story, then. By the way, Altfeld, " and in this he used the Reikspiel version of the foreigner's surname, "what was the name of the town of the story?" asked Erwin.

"Beeckerhoven." answered the minstrel.

"Funny thing that. That's the name of the town we were in this morning, I believe." Erwin

seemed transfixed by a thought. After a while, he said "And, wasn't the inn in which we've been this afternoon, the one of the brawl, called '*The Last Bridge*' ? "

"Yes, it was that." said the minstrel.

"You naughty youth, what are you up to? " asked Klaus with a booming voice.

"I just asked because I saw something down the road when we camped this night, as I was looking for wood for the fire, just before the night fell." replied Erwin.

"And what was it? " asked Klaus.

"Only an old bridge, some fifty yards or so down the road."

Klaus seemed not to understand. When he did, he opened his eyes in astonishment and looked at the minstrel.

The minstrel was silent, and only a sinister smile appeared on his face for a while.

**THE END**