

Beasts in Velvet

A Genevieve novel by Jack Yeovil

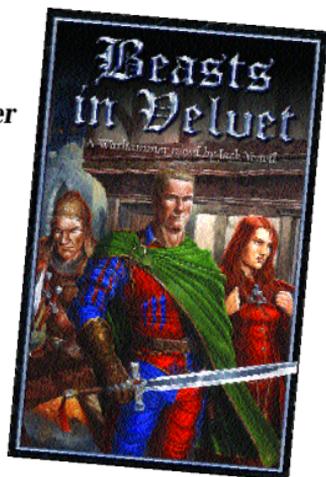
'WHAT HAPPENED?' ASKED Brustellin. 'For Sigmar's sake, Yefimovich, what happened?'

'It was the Beast,' he replied. 'He struck her down.'

The crowd hissed. 'The Beast, the Beast, the Beast!' Yefimovich could feel the emotions running through the mass of people: grief, horror, anger, hatred.

'Death to the Beast!' someone shouted.

'Yes!' cried Yefimovich, 'death to the Beast!'



JACKYEOVIL is a pseudonym for popular novelist Kim Newman. The Genevieve books were first published by Games Workshop in the late 1980s and quickly gained a cult reputation amongst Warhammer and fantasy fans alike.

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BARON JOHANN VON Mecklenberg, the Elector of Sudenland, was a good servant to his Emperor, Karl-Franz of the House of the Second Wilhelm. He could not refuse his master a thing, not even an archery lesson for Karl-Franz's son, Luitpold.

'Higher, Luitpold,' Johann told the youth. 'Keep the quarrel and the sight in line.'

The straw targets were set up in the courtyard by the palace stables, and all horses and men had been cleared out of the sometimes erratic path of the future Emperor's bolts. The heir would have preferred to practise in the great ballroom – the only place inside the palace which had the distance to make target practice a real challenge – but an inventory of the priceless paintings, hangings and antiques in the possible line of fire had convinced the Emperor that it would not be a good idea to grant his son that particular wish.

'There,' said Luitpold as he released the crossbow string. There was a satisfying twang. The quarrel brushed the outermost edge of the target and embedded itself with a thud in the wood of a stable door. A horse in the next stall whinnied.

Johann did not laugh, remembering his own shortcomings as a boy. His ineptitude in archery had caused a lot more trouble than merely frightening a horse.

Luitpold shrugged and slipped another bolt into the groove.

'My hands shake, Uncle Johann.'

It was true. It had been true for three years, since the heir had been knocked down by the traitor Oswald von Konigswald during the one and only performance of the original text of Detlef Sierck's *Drachenfels*. No one who had been in that audience came out of the theatre in the Fortress of Drachenfels the person they had been before. Some of them, for instance, had been carried out under a sheet.

Johann was perhaps an exception. For him, life had had its horrors as long as he could remember. Even before *Drachenfels*, he had become used to struggling with the creatures in the

darkness. Most people chose to ignore those things at the edge of their vision. Johann knew that such wilful blindness simply allowed the dark to close in. His years of wandering might be over, but that did not mean the threat was ended. The warp-stone was still working its wretched magic on the hearts, minds and bodies of all the races of the world.

Luitpold fired again. He hit the target this time, but his bolt was stuck askew in the outermost ring.

There was applause from above and Johann looked up. On the balcony, Karl-Franz stood, his voluminous sleeves flapping as he clapped for his son. Luitpold reddened and shook his head.

'It was useless, father,' he shouted. 'Useless.'

The Emperor smiled. A thin man with a mass of curly gold-grey hair stood by Karl-Franz, his monk's hood down around his shoulders, his hands in his sleeves. It was Mikael Hasselstein, the Emperor's confessor. A lector of the Cult of Sigmar, Hasselstein was rumoured to be a likely candidate to fill the post of Grand Theogonist once old Yorri finally got through with the business of dying. Johann worshipped at the Cathedral of Sigmar whenever he could, but he could never bring himself to like men like Hasselstein. Clerics should perhaps not be courtiers. Now, Hasselstein stood by his Emperor, his face unreadable, waiting to be called upon. No one could be all the time as cool-headed and even tempered as Mikael Hasselstein seemed to be. No one human. And Johann was hardly more impressed with his Emperor's other companion, the pock-marked and olive-skinned Mornan Tybalt, the Keeper of the Imperial Counting House, who was intent on replenishing the palace's coffers by levying an annual tax of two gold crowns on all able-bodied citizens of the Empire. The agitators were calling Tybalt's scheme 'the thumb tax,' and gamblers were already wagering on the percentage of citizens who would rather have their thumbs clipped than part with the crowns.

'Johann, show me again,' Luitpold asked.

Reluctantly, aware that he was being put on show, Johann took the crossbow. It was the best design Imperial coin could buy, inlaid with gold filigree along the stock. The sights of the weapon were so precise that it would take a fumblefingers of Luitpold's stature to miss.

In his mind, Johann heard the echoing cries of all those he had had to kill during his ten years of wandering. His ten years

on the trail of Cicatrice the Chaos champion and his followers, the altered monstrosities that called themselves Chaos Knights and his own brother, Wolf. When he had set out, with his family retainer Vukotich at his side, he had been as bad a bowman as Luitpold. But he had learned. When you shoot at straw targets, it is easy to be lazy, to settle for less and wait for the next turn. When you face bestial creatures in battle, you shoot true or you do not live to draw a bowstring again. Johann would never be as elegant in battle as a court-educated warrior, but he was still alive. Too many of the people he had known along his route were not. Vukotich, for one.

Luitpold whistled. 'Good shot,' he said.

The Emperor said nothing, but nodded at Johann and, with Hasselstein and Tybalt at his side, walked on, vanishing from the balcony into one of the palace's many conference rooms. Karl-Franz had a lot to worry about these days, Johann knew. But then again, everyone had a lot to worry about.

Johann held up the crossbow to his eyeline, checking the sight. He felt the wooden stock against his cheek. Back in the forests of Sudenland, he had learned archery with a longbow. He remembered the tight string against his face, the shaking arrowhead resting on his thumb. When he had fired at a target, they called him Deadeye. But whenever an animal had been in front of him, he had ended up nicking his knuckle and firing wild. Strange to think that, all those years ago, he had had an unjumpable fence in his mind. He had been unable to kill. Now, sometimes, he wished he had never been cured of that particular failing.

One skewed shot and he had lost ten years. At sixteen, he had been too compassionate to kill a deer, and had fired wild, piercing his brother's shoulder. That one mistake had meant Wolf had to be sent home while Johann and Vukotich remained in the forests to finish the hunt, and when Cicatrice and his Chaos Knights rode by intent on ravaging the von Mecklenberg estates, Wolf had been stolen away. Vukotich and Johann had followed Cicatrice across the face of the Known World, learning more and more of the mysteries, the horrors, that were hidden from most. In the frozen wastes of the north, on a battlefield where the monsters of the night fought forever, it had come to an end and Johann had found himself confronting young Wolf, grown into a beastman himself, twisted

by a hatred that still writhed in his old wound. Vukotich had sacrificed himself and, by a miracle that Johann still gave daily thanks for, Wolf had been restored to him, a boy again, given another chance. The power of innocent blood had saved his brother and that had been the end of the wandering for Johann.

He gave the crossbow back to Luitpold.

'Again,' he said. 'Try to keep your shoulders loose and your hands still.'

The youth grinned and wrestled another bolt into the groove, cocking the string with a grunt.

'Careful,' Johann said, 'or you'll put a bolt through your foot.'

The heir brought the crossbow up and fired. The shot went wild, the quarrel breaking against the flagstones. Luitpold shrugged. A door behind them opened and Johann turned his head.

'Enough,' Johann said. 'It's nearly time for your fencing lesson.'

Luitpold gently leaned the crossbow against the back of a chair and turned round to greet the newcomer.

'Viscount Leos,' he said, 'welcome.'

Leos von Liebewitz saluted and clicked the heels of his polished boots. Most famous duellists were distinguished by their scars. Johann, with more experience of ungentlemanly scraps than polite contests, was covered with them. But Leos, who had fought countless times, had a face as unlined and soft as a girl's. That, Johann knew, was the mark of a master swordsman. Leos switched his green cloak over one shoulder, disclosing his sheathed sword. The young nobleman had watery blue eyes and cropped gold hair that made all the ladies of the court go weak, but he never seemed to return their interest. Clothilde, grand daughter of the Elector of Averheim, had very ostentatiously made romantic overtures to him very soon after her startling transformation from spotty, spoiled brat to ravishing, spoiled young woman and was now suffering from a severely broken heart. Johann supposed that the young viscount's sister, the notorious beauty Countess Emmanuelle von Liebewitz, had enough devotion to the amorous arts for any one family.

Leos smiled sweetly. 'Highness,' he said, nodding. 'Baron von Mecklenberg. How is our pupil coming along?'

Johann didn't say anything.

'Fearfully bad,' Luitpold admitted. 'I seem to have more thumbs than are strictly required by law. I shall have to pay extra tax.'

'A sharp mind will serve you better than a sharp sword, highness,' said Leos.

'That's easy to say when you're the best swordsman in the Empire,' snapped Luitpold.

Leos frowned. 'My teacher, Valancourt, at the Academy in Nuln, is better. And that fellow they sing songs about, Konrad. And a dozen others. Maybe even the baron here.'

Johann shrugged. He certainly did not intend to get dragged into an exhibition match with deadly Leos.

'I'm rusty, viscount. And old.'

'Nonsense.' Leos drew his sword with one clean, fluid movement. The thin blade danced in the air.

'Would you care to make a few passes?'

The swordpoint darted by Johann's ears, whipping through the air. Luitpold was delighted and clapped encouragement.

'I'm sorry,' Johann said. 'Not today. The future Emperor is impatient to receive the benefit of your learning.'

The viscount's arm moved, too fast for Johann's eye, and his sword was sheathed again.

'A pity.'

An attendant was already clearing away the straw targets and archery impedimenta. A trolley had been wheeled into the courtyard. A fine array of swords lay on the upper tier, while masks and padded jackets were bundled below.

Luitpold was eager to get into his gear. He tried to strap himself into his protective jacket and got the wrong buckles attached. The attendant had to undo the Prince and start all over again. Johann was reminded of Wolf, the old Wolf of their childhood, not the strange young-old boy he had brought back from the Chaos Wastes. His brother was three years younger than him, twenty-nine, and yet he had lost ten years to Cicatrice and seemed no older than his late teens. His body had been restored and his soul purged of all the horrors of his years with the Chaos Knights, but the ghost of the memory was still with him. Johann could still not stop worrying about Wolf.

Luitpold made a mock ferocious face as he pulled his mask down and cut up the air with his foil.

'Take that, hellspawn algebra teacher,' he shouted, thrusting forwards and twisting his blade in the air. 'This, for your calculus and this for your dusty abacus!'

Leos laughed dutifully, fastidiously strapped on his chest-protector and pointedly did not bother with the mask. Luitpold capered, administering a death thrust to his imagined opponent. 'Lie there and bleed!' Johann could not help comparing the lively, unspoiled heir with the withdrawn, brooding Wolf.

He had come to Altdorf not just to do his duty at the court, but to be close to Wolf. His brother was supposed to be studying at the University, catching up on his long-lost lessons. And Johann was worried by the reports he kept receiving from Wolf's tutors. Sometimes, the student would disappear for weeks on end. Frequently, his temper would snap and he would get into some ridiculous fight or other and, holding back at the last moment, would be roundly pummelled by an opponent he should have been able to beat without effort. Whenever Johann saw his brother's face bruised and drained of expression, he could not help but remember that other face he had seen on the battlefield. His brother had been a fang-snouted, red-eyed, luxuriously-maned giant. How deeply had that creature been embedded in Wolf's soul? And how clean had his slate been washed by the power of innocent blood? Which, after all the House of von Mecklenberg had been through, was the real Wolf?

Leos was giving Luitpold a work-out now. Johann saw that the viscount was slowing himself, fencing as if wearing weighted boots and gloves. But he was still an elegant murder machine, prodding the prince's quilted torso with every strike, perfectly parrying the youth's counterthrusts. In a genuine duel, he would have cut the future Emperor into thin slices like a Bretonnian chef preparing a cold meat buffet.

There were a lot of stories about the Countess Emmanuelle's many love affairs and her strange preferences in the boudoir, but they were never told where Viscount Leos might hear them. The exclusive graveyards of the Empire were full of well-born swordslingers who thought they were better with a blade than Leos von Liebewitz. The countess had a lot to answer for.

The viscount was making Luitpold break into a sweat now and the heir wasn't disgracing himself. He was less clumsy with a foil than with a crossbow, and he had the strength. It was the

strength of a runner, not a wrestler, but that was what he would need to be a swordsman. Once he learned the moves, Luitpold would be a fine duellist. Not that Karl-Franz would let him get anywhere near a serious fight while still alive and Emperor. Luitpold was enjoying the lesson, even clowning a little for Johann's benefit, but Leos was taking it all seriously. The future Emperor's thick jacket was marked with a hundred tiny tears and the stuffing was leaking.

Watching Leos, Johann wondered about the viscount. During his lost years, Johann had fought many duels to the death, had survived many battles. He had bested men so grievously altered by the warpstone that they resembled daemons. He had killed many. The blood of all the races of the Known World was on his hands. That had not been a courtly game, with seconds and stewards and rules of etiquette.

He was sure that, if it came to it, if it ever got serious, he could take Leos von Liebewitz. But he was not looking forward to it. Not one bit.

Behind the clash of steel on steel, Johann heard something else, a clamour outside the palace walls. Luitpold and the viscount did not notice and continued with their fake combat, Leos ticking off the heir's errors and praising his good moves.

People were shouting. Johann's ears were good. They had had to be, in the forests and the wastes.

Six halberdiers, stumbling as they buckled on their chest-plates and helmets, rushed across the courtyard. Luitpold stood aside and Leos, hands on hips, frowned.

'What's going on?' Johann asked.

'The main gate,' huffed a young soldier, 'there's a mob there. Yefimovich is making a speech.'

'Sigmar's Hammer,' spat Leos, 'that damned agitator!'

The halberdiers ran off through the archway, heading for the palace gate. Luitpold turned to follow them.

'Highness,' Johann said, sharply, 'stay here.'

It was Luitpold's turn to frown. Anger sparked in his eyes, but died immediately.

'Uncle Johann,' he complained, 'I—'

'No, Luitpold. Your father would hang me in irons for the crows.'

Leos was pulling off his padded jacket. Johann could see trouble coming to the boil.

'Viscount,' he said, 'if you would remain here to protect the future Emperor. Just in case...'

Leos bridled, but a glance from Johann convinced him. He touched his sword to his nose and bowed his head for an instant. Thankfully, he was not one of those aristocrats – like Luitpold – who had been taught to question every order. The von Liebewitz household must have had a good, strict nanny in charge of the nursery.

Johann followed the halberdiers and found himself in step with a growing number of men as he followed a path through the interlocking courtyards. The noises beyond the gate were getting louder and there were more voices being raised. He heard a rattle and recognized it as the sound of the main portcullis coming down. It was as if the hordes of Chaos were inside the walls of the city, and the Imperial Guard were falling back to the last position of defence. But that could not be the case.

There was such a crowd of soldiers by the gate that Johann could not see through. He judged by the din that there were a lot of people beyond the portcullis gate, and that they weren't happy. It was always something. If it wasn't the incursions of Chaos it was the thumb tax, and if it wasn't some new religious zealotry it was a mob demanding that some unpopular felon be turned over to them for swift justice. The mob of Altdorf was a byword throughout the Empire for unruliness.

He heard one of the halberdiers saying something about the Beast and knew this was worse than any of the other causes. A ball of dried mud and dung sailed through the railings and burst against an arch, showering dirt down on a troop of the Imperial Guard. Halberds were being rattled.

Johann found himself standing next to a tall cleric of the Cult of Sigmar. His hood was up, but he recognized the man as Hasselstein.

'What's happening?'

Hasselstein turned his face and paused a moment – Johann imagined him weighing in his mind whether the Elector of Sudentland was important enough to be told anything – before giving a curt report. 'It's Yevgeny Yefimovich, the rabble-rouser. He's been whipping the mob up into a frenzy about the Beast murders.'

Johann had heard about the Beast murders. The news of each pathetic drab butchered down by the docks had filled him with

a secret dread. The slayings were so savage that many could not believe a human being was responsible. The Beast must be a daemon, or a beastman. Or a wolf.

'But Yefimovich is an insurrectionist, isn't he?' Johann protested. 'I understood he was always rabbiting on about the privileges of the aristocracy and the suffering of the peasants. Just a typical fire-breather.'

'That's what's so silly,' Hasselstein said. 'He alleges that the Beast is an aristocrat.'

A phantom blade slipped between Johann's ribs and he felt his heart stop. After a long pause, it beat again, and again. But he would remember that thrust for quite a time.

Very deliberately, he asked, 'What evidence does he have?'

Hasselstein sneered. 'Evidence, baron? Yefimovich is an agitator, not a jurist. He doesn't need evidence.'

'But there must be something.'

Hasselstein looked into Johann's eyes and for the first time the elector noticed how ice-sharp the cleric's gaze was. Something about the man reminded him of Oswald von Konigswald. There was the same ferocious deadness in his eyes, the same compulsion for total control. Johann would not have liked to face Leos von Liebewitz over duelling swords, but he fancied that Mikael Hasselstein would be an even more dangerous enemy.

The cleric reached into his robe and took out the emblem of his cult. It was a heavy-headed hand-hammer. Obviously, it had some religious significance, but it looked as if it would be mainly useful if the Emperor's confessor ever felt the need to smash in someone's skull. Johann got the impression that the calm and suave Hasselstein often felt like smashing in someone's skull. It was always these icewater-for-blood, no-emotion-on-the-surface types that ended up in the town square taking an axe to the market-day shoppers in the name of some unheard-of lesser godling.

'Let me through,' the cleric said. The halberdiers parted and a path was cleared to the gate. Another dirt bomb exploded and Hasselstein shrugged it off. Johann stood back.

Yefimovich was held at shoulder height by his followers and was ranting.

'For too long have the titled scum of the noble houses of the Empire trampled us under their perfumed boots!' he was shouting. 'For too long has our blood been spilled in the services of

their pointless squabbles. And now one of them walks the night, dagger in hand, carving up our women...'

Hasselstein looked up calmly at the fire-breather, gently slapping his hammerhead into his palm.

'If it were duchesses and the like being butchered, you can be sure that the Beast would be in Mundsden Keep by now, properly chained and tortured. But no, just because these women don't have lineages dating back to the time of Sigmar, the Imperial court doesn't give two pfennigs for them...'

Hasselstein spoke calmly to a captain of the guard. Johann couldn't hear their conversation. Yefimovich was shouting too loud. However, musketeers were joining the halberdiers. Surely, the cleric wasn't planning to fire on the crowd. The Emperor would never allow that.

'We know who the beasts are!' Yefimovich shouted, his hands gripping the bars of the portcullis gate. 'You can see them in their cage, just like in a zoo...'

He shook the bars, his long hair flying behind him. One of the musketeers propped his rifle on its stand and took aim at the agitator, flicking back the flint catch with his thumb.

Johann knew he couldn't stand by and watch Hasselstein start a riot that would lead to a massacre.

He looked up at Yefimovich. He had heard a lot about the man, had even read some of his pamphlets, but this was the first time he had seen the agitator. He really was a fire-breather. His face seemed to glow as if there were flames under the skin and his red eyes shone like a vampire's. He was from Kislev originally and had got out a few horselengths ahead of the Tsar's cosacks. Some said his family had been killed at the whim of a nobleman, others that he was himself of the aristocracy, tainted by the blood of the vampire Tsarina Kattarin, and had turned against his own kind.

'Here I am!' he shouted. 'Are you afraid of me, you lackeys and minions? I drink the blood of princes, break the backs of barons and crush the bones of counts!'

Johann could see why Yefimovich had such a following. He was as magnetic as a great actor. If they ever wrote a play about him, only Detlef Sierck could take the part. Although, considering the fervour with which he advocated bloody revolution, perhaps the late and unmourned Laszlo Lowenstein would have been better casting.

Beside Johann, someone gasped. 'So that's Yefimovich.'

Johann turned. It was Luitpold. Johann felt a knot of anger, but pulled it straight.

'Highness,' he said, 'I thought—'

'It's always "highness" when you're being dutiful, Uncle Johann.'

Leos was with him, his hand on his swordhilt, his face blank. A man like the viscount could be useful just now. Like Johann, he was sworn to protect the House of the Second Wilhelm, and if Luitpold got into trouble, he would need the protection.

Hasselstein had finished talking with the captain, who rushed off to execute some order or other. Calmly, the cleric looked up at Yefimovich. If they had strained, they could have touched one another.

Johann felt as if he were witnessing an invisible battle of wills. It was almost intriguing, the man of fire outside, the man of ice inside. In their hearts, they must have a lot in common.

'Where is he?' Yefimovich was shouting. 'Where is the arch-coward himself? Where is Karl-Franz?'

Luitpold started forward, about to shout back. Johann laid a hand on the heir's shoulder.

'My father is a good man,' Luitpold said, quietly.

Johann nodded.

'Does he care about the murdered women of the dockland? Does he?'

Yefimovich drew breath, preparing for another speech, but said nothing.

'Citizens,' Hasselstein said in the pause, his voice surprisingly loud and strong, 'you are requested to disperse and return to your homes. Everything possible is being done to catch the Beast. I can assure you of that.'

Nobody made a move. Yefimovich was smiling, the sweat pouring from his burning red face, his hair streaming behind him like flames. He wore many badges on his tunic: the hammer of Sigmar, the sickle of the outlawed Artisans' Guild, the fish of the waterfront gang and the red star of the Kislevite underground. So many symbols, but just one cause.

'The palace, as you may remember, is equipped with many defences,' Hasselstein said. 'During the War of Succession, the troops of the false Emperor Dieter IV besieged this place and Wilhelm II repelled them by disgorging molten lead from the

row of exquisitely carved gargoyles you see perched above the main gate. Note the fineness of the detailwork. Dwarfish, of course. The faces are caricatures of the five daemon princes the young Wilhelm encountered and overcame during his years in the wilderness.'

The crowd, as a man, started to edge back. Yefimovich was sweating hatred and glaring death. Hasselstein continued with his lecture, as if pointing out features of architectural interest to a visiting dignitary.

'Of course,' the cleric continued, 'those were barbarous times and the current Emperor would never consider using such methods on his loyal subjects.'

Held breaths were released and the crowd pressed forward. Yefimovich grabbed the bars again and showed his teeth. He snarled like an animal and seemed fully capable of chewing his way through the portcullis.

'However, it is a simple matter to connect the palace's ingenious sewage and waste disposal system to the old defence pipes...'

He nodded and the gargoyles vomited filth.

A stream of liquid waste hit Yefimovich full in the face and he cried out in rage. His bearers deserted him and he was left hanging from the gatebars. Behind him, the crowd was running from the rain of ordure. People were knocked down and trampled in the panic. The smell wafted through the gates and Johann covered his mouth and nose.

Luitpold laughed out loud, but Johann wasn't sure if it was funny or not.

Yefimovich fell away from the gate. Someone had jabbed him with the blunt end of a halberd. Johann wondered whether it wouldn't have been more sensible to use the business point. The fire-breather slipped on a lump of fecal matter and fell badly. This experience certainly wasn't going to make the agitator change his views and become a lover of the nobility. Children were crying and people, covered in filth, were limping away. The halberdiers were laughing and jeering and making comments.

'You talk it,' one shouted, 'you might as well be covered in it!'

Yefimovich stood up, holding his side, blood leaking from his nose. Bright eyes opened in his brown-coated face. He had a scary kind of dignity, even in his current condition. He spat

through the bars of the gate and walked away. The last of the crowd went with him, wiping themselves off.

‘There,’ said Hasselstein, a thin smile on his face, ‘that is that dealt with. The Emperor has authorized me to say that there will be an extra ale ration this evening as a reward for your valorous service in his defence.’

The halberdiers cheered.

‘What started this?’ Luitpold asked an officer of the guard.

‘Some whore down by the docks,’ the man replied. ‘The Beast got her, ripped her apart.’

Luitpold nodded, thinking.

‘The fifth, she was,’ the officer continued. ‘They say it’s a bad business. The Beast just tears them up. It’s like he was an animal or something. A wolf.’

A wolf! Johann’s heart stopped again as he remembered the face of a boy who was also a beast.

‘Uncle Johann,’ Luitpold said, ‘if the people are unhappy because of this murderer, then it is our duty to catch him and make things right again.’

Knowing better, Johann lied to the boy. ‘Yes, highness.’



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