

SNOWSCAPE



FRANK MARTIN

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Snowscape

By Frank Martin

Nobody but his boss knew exactly how he came to acquire the relic. Roger McCoy just rolled into town one day with the beautiful artifact neatly tucked into his pack. But slowly, as the local boys and girls began questioning him about his adventure, a wild tale began to emerge that quickly passed the status of myth and solidified the cowboy's status as legend.

Toward the end of his journey, McCoy told of a blanket of white that coated almost every surface of a dense forest. Where high evergreen trees towered up into the pitch-black sky, their thick trunks and branches completely dressed in the northern snow.

From atop Knight, his strong and loyal steed, McCoy caught glimpses through the forest canopy of the full moon sitting peacefully in the darkness. In between those moments, the lone cowboy was showered in thin, isolated rays of the moon's light that easily pierced through the small breaks in the trees.

For hours he'd been slowly traversing the rogue wilderness. The snow-filled forest was just the latest landscape he'd entered on his month-long journey to find a remote village purposefully hidden from the rest of this new, amalgamated world.

Having no idea where his quest would take him, McCoy had first departed the Republic of Texas under a hot desert sun, carrying a pack filled with everything he needed. Slowly but surely, layers of underclothing began piling up under his fur-lined duster and wool breeches. And despite not having enough time to grow a thick coat for himself, Knight carried on unaffected by the cold as he drudged through the soft, flaky snow.

McCoy held tight onto his horse's reins, slowly riding the ups and downs of the wooded terrain while scanning the scene ahead. With the brim of his hat pulled down just over his eyes, McCoy had a clear view of the forest littered with continuous daggers of light shooting down from above.

He didn't really know exactly what he was looking for. His boss had only given him a vague set of coordinates, but the confident cowboy rode on without a single doubt in his mind. The small, melon-sized rucksack draped over Knight's back constantly reminded them of their mission. As much as he hated travelling with the dreaded thing, McCoy had been ordered to do a job, and despite the cold starting to creep its way across his small patches of exposed skin, he found solace in the fact that he'd almost reached his destination.

McCoy tried to keep up his constant scan of the path ahead but was distracted by Knight's increasingly deep huffs and puffs. The horse never faltered on a single step, sometimes plunging through the snow up to his chest. Yet McCoy couldn't keep himself from noticing the cloud of breath exhaled in front Knight's nostrils had grown larger along with the raspy wheezes of cold air entering his lungs.

The cowboy reached down over top of the horse's mane and gave his old friend a strong, loving pat on the side of his neck. "Come on, ol' buddy. Just a little more."

After a short massage against Knight's coat, McCoy looked up to spot a small, faint light glimmering in the distance. He squinted just to make sure his eyes

weren't deceiving him. And when the strange sight remained, McCoy slightly adjusted course to head straight toward the beacon. His speed remained the same though, and so the shapeless light was gradually revealed as a flame full of life and vigor.

Although he could now discern the small, controlled fire in the distance, McCoy was still too far to make out anything else around it. He stayed the course, carefully resuming his scan of the area for any other signs of life. But the solemn flame stood as the only evidence of humanity amongst the natural world of snow and trees.

It wasn't until McCoy came close enough to make out the source of the fire to be a single torch planted in the ground that the veteran cowboy's instincts started to shout at him. Not because the solitary flare was an eerie reminder that he was a stranger in a foreign land, but because the snow around it remained pristine and untouched. Whoever lit the raging torch had done so in secrecy. And that meant he was being drawn toward it by design. Most likely into a trap.

Hidden under the collar of his coat, the hairs on the back of McCoy's neck stood on end as he continued his cautious approach. But the quick whizz of air under his neck forced him to immediately pull back on Knight's reins. Their sudden halt was followed by a loud crunch in the woods to McCoy's side, and he turned to see the long, sleek metal of an arrow embedded in the tree bark.

With his head turned and his attention distracted, McCoy next felt a brisk cold slide under his neck, and it wasn't until his eyes shot down that he saw the

edge of a large, steel broadsword pressed against his skin. Upon recognizing his dire predicament, McCoy's gaze followed the sword down to its handle and found its owner to be a large monster of a man. At the prime of his warrior life, a long, blond beard flowed off the man's scarred face, out from under his helmet and onto the thick hide intricately woven into a sheet of chain mail armor. Before that exact moment, McCoy had only heard rumors of what an actual Viking looked like. Unfortunately, he found the real thing to be much more intimidating.

The warrior stood perfectly still in his threatening stance, and McCoy's attention was soon drawn to another figure approaching from behind the stern Viking. It was a woman dressed in the same kind of battle-ready cloak as the man beside her. Only instead of a blade, she held a bow and arrow ready to fire ahead.

As she continued to walk forward, the blond beauty kept the tip of her weapon aimed in McCoy's direction. Upon reaching the horse, she secured the armed arrow and bow in her front hand while using the other to reach up and pull the cowboy to the ground. The woman then proceeded to pat McCoy's sides as he stood with his head firmly upright to avoid tempting the blade still draped across his neck.

"You speak English?" McCoy asked while being searched.

The female Viking warrior eventually found and removed the cowboy's two Colt revolvers from their holsters at his sides. She then tucked both firearms into her belt before pulling back on the bow's drawstring even harder than before.

"I'll take that as a no," McCoy dryly remarked, his face tense with the arrow

now aimed point blank at his cheek.

The two Vikings remained still, each of their weapons patiently waiting to give a killing blow. Their eyes, eager yet calm, stared into McCoy's as another Viking woman with jet black hair emerged from the forest behind them. Unlike the blond archer's smooth countenance, the older woman's skin was wrinkled and weathered from years of brutal, harsh survival. And her grey hooded robe, wrapped tightly around her body, was a stark contrast from the armor worn by the warriors in front of her.

As she approached him, McCoy raised his hands innocently in the air and carefully gestured to the sack draped over Knight's back. "Look. A gift. That's what you wanted, right? I came to give it to you."

The Viking woman casually motioned with a single wave of her hand and the two warriors lowered their weapons while stepping away from their captor. She then stopped right in front of McCoy's face, staring him down with vivid green eyes.

Unsure what to do, McCoy swallowed deeply while forcing a friendly smirk to grow across his face. But after what seemed like an eternity, the woman snatched the small sack McCoy had brought her before yelling an order in a foreign language to her two soldiers.

The archer took Knight's reins and began ushering the horse forward through the forest. Clearly in charge, the older woman followed behind them. And lastly, the swordsman grabbed onto McCoy's arm and pushed him to bring up the

rear.

With the tip of the blade gently poking him in the back, the cowboy rolled his eyes before beginning to walk on his own. "Okay. Guess my journey continues. It's fine. I've only been travelling for a month now. What's another few weeks, right?"

"Shut up."

The coarse, grainy voice came from directly ahead of him. And although he couldn't see her lips, McCoy knew it had to come from the old woman.

"Great. At least there's one English speaker in the bunch," he muttered.

Continuing her march forward, the woman ever so slightly glanced over her shoulder before retuning her eyes to the path ahead. "And I can see that doesn't include you. Otherwise, I wouldn't have to explain what 'shut up' means."

Usually known to express his wit, McCoy decided the best strategic approach was to hold his tongue. For the moment, at least. It wasn't so much that he was their prisoner, for the cowboy sure loved to antagonize his captors, but that he sought out the Vikings to be their guest. And irritating them for the sake of his amusement wouldn't be the best way to receive a warm welcome.

It appeared as if their slow walk through the snow was producing much the same result as the hours McCoy had spent on horseback. But then, after several minutes of wandering through the dense, identical forest, the wooded space suddenly opened up to a village resting inside a small meadow hidden between the trees.

Their caravan continued forward, but McCoy's gaze slowly moved about in

awe at the Viking settlement. There were no fires or torches in sight, but without the forest canopy overhead, a large wave of moonlight illuminated the entire village from above. Small log cabins and stables were scattered about as Viking men and women busily went about their night. Even children, heavily dressed in dense fur and stitched leather, laughed and played in the soft snow enveloping their home.

"This was here the whole time? How could I not find you?" McCoy asked, wonderstruck by the peaceful magnificence of the secret village.

"Because you can't," the woman replied without ever looking back. "Not unless we want you to."

They eventually reached a series of chairs neatly carved and assembled from several tree stumps. And finally having reached the center of the village, the woman stopped and turned to face McCoy at what appeared to be a formal meeting ground. "Sit. Get warm."

The swordsman behind McCoy grabbed the cowboy's arms and forcibly pushed him down on top of a seat. But McCoy was more interested in the archer who continued to walk Knight to the other side of the village. "Hey! Where are you taking my horse?"

McCoy continued to look at where his horse was headed, but the old woman standing by his side continued to stare down at him, demanding his attention.

"Your horse needs water. As do you. Drink."

The large swordsman dropped a leather-bound canteen on McCoy's lap before turning around and walking away. Hesitant to sip from it, McCoy carefully

watched the woman as she finally took a seat in the chair opposite him, the sack he brought still in her hand. It was a simple gesture, yet it had a profound impact on McCoy's comfort. For the first time since he'd met her, McCoy finally felt like the woman's guest, and he lowered his guard by taking a large swig of whatever was in the canteen on his lap.

He knew it was water once the liquid hit his lips, but it wasn't until McCoy finished three full gulps that he realized the water was more refreshing than anything he'd tasted in his life. It might've been the journey, or perhaps the Vikings had a magical spring. Either way, he didn't think of it again until he'd drained the canteen dry.

Once finished, McCoy sloppily wiped his mouth with the back of his gloves and looked at the woman while trying to catch his breath. "Were you expecting me?"

Unlike her visitor, who sat slouched in his seat, the woman's perfect posture sat completely upright in the chair. "Not you personally. But I knew eventually someone would answer my call."

Her eyes then shot to the ground and slowly worked their way up while carefully analyzing the man from head to toe. "Just didn't think the journey could be made by someone so..."

"Dashing?"

The woman waited a moment to process his suggestion before replying with a forced smile, leering through her teeth. "Sure."

She paused for a moment, allowing McCoy the opportunity to once again survey his surroundings. Although the scenery was certainly unique, life in the Viking village wasn't much different from the dozen he'd encountered of other cultures on his journey to get here.

The only particularly noteworthy sight was the small group of women huddled in the doorway of a home who continued to discreetly stare in McCoy's direction. "Why are they looking at me like that?"

"They've never seen an outsider before," his host answered.

Eager to start their business, McCoy turned back to face the woman. "That's because nobody's had a reason to come here before."

Completely understanding the vague statement, the woman began scanning the village faces for someone in particular. "Fair enough."

Upon finding him, she motioned over a young boy, who brought with him a small rucksack of his own. The boy took off after handing her the bag, and the woman began to explain while carefully opening it up to remove the single, flat object inside. "I could tell you where we found it, but you most likely wouldn't believe me."

She then finally pulled the bag away to reveal a colorfully designed mask decorated with pure gold, silver, and jade. The ornate piece was intricately crafted and awe-inspiring, yet its ferocious teeth and demonic eyes could instill fear at a moment's notice.

The legendary visage of the late Emperor Jimmu was everything McCoy had

imagined it to be. With a speechless gawk upon his face, he put his hands out as an asking gesture to hold the artifact, and the woman gently placed it in his palms.

"I don't know what your employer wants it for, though," she said. "We would certainly have no use for it. Unless there's a practical purpose to our salvage, everything we collect is used for scrap."

The impressed cowboy held the mask in front of his face, delicately spinning it around to examine every detail. "He collects stuff. For fun. You know, pointless things you do that make you happy."

But she appeared dissatisfied with the cowboy's tone and chose to push forward with their business by holding up McCoy's rucksack. "You have your bounty. Now, is this my husband?"

The cowboy readily stood from his seat, grabbed the bag, and turned it upside down, dropping a frozen severed head in the snow between them. "My boss owns several brothels. He was found in one of them. Took us a while to figure out it was him with the beard gone and all."

The woman stared down at the look of utter terror stuck on the dead man's face. "It is most definitely my beloved. I thank you for returning him to us."

"Yeah, well, when I heard you put a price on your chief's head I thought it was just a saying. But you Vikings are quite the literal bunch, huh?"

Satisfied with her own side of the transaction, the woman again motioned for the young boy to return. "Nobody abandons their duty. He had to be punished. And you've executed our will without hesitation. For that my people and I are

grateful."

A bit turned off by how nonchalantly the child retrieved the decapitated head from the ground, McCoy looked to close out the meeting by proudly holding up the mask in his hand. "Your people pay well, too. Now if you'll excuse me, it's been a very long trip, so I think I better—"

The woman stood as well, but she was distracted and held a hand up to silence McCoy's farewell. "You were followed here."

"That's impossible," McCoy responded, almost offended by the assertion. "I haven't seen another soul in weeks."

The woman was still distracted though and stared off into the treetops. "That may be true. But these snakes sold their souls to Hel a long time ago." She then yelled out, speaking to the threat in the forest directly. "Haven't you, cowards?!"

"Look, lady. Maybe you've been living out here in the woods too long but—"

A quick whistle cut through McCoy's sentence before the mask was suddenly knocked from his hand. The antique flew to the side and landed in the snow, but McCoy looked around confused as to who or what had smacked it from his grasp. The Viking villagers, men, women, and children alike, came out from their homes both curious and on edge. The old woman didn't flinch, though. She simply retained her alert stare while carefully scanning the treetops.

The next sound McCoy heard was the scraping of hard metal as the large swordsman he saw earlier removed his sword from its sheath. With his head cautiously on a swivel, the Viking warrior slowly approached the mask in the

ground. But as he bent down to retrieve it, the snow in the branches at the village edge appeared to bounce off the tree and fly toward him.

The cloud of white hovered in the air as it fell, and only after squinting his eyes through the snow did McCoy see the sharp edge of a blade glimmer in the moonlight. The Viking apparently saw it as well and lifted his sword just in time to stop the blade from connecting with his face. The clash of the two refined metals pierced the tense silence of the village, and in that still moment, McCoy finally saw the perfect outline of a man dressed completely in white standing before the swordsman.

The standoff between the two was brief, though. They quickly swung their respective swords, immediately engaging in swift, unrelenting combat.

The noise from their fighting soon spread around the village as other Viking warriors also prepared their weapons. The branches on the outskirts of the meadow suddenly bounced up and down, sending more snow flying into the village. A cloud of white fell from above, and it wasn't long before the men hidden amongst it engaged the Viking fighters ready to receive them.

The aerial attack prompted a skirmish all around the village. In between the Vikings' furious battle cries, shouts and screams echoed through the air as scared women and children ran for cover. The Vikings were brash, swinging their weapons about with force and ferociousness. In contrast, their opponents moved about as little as possible. The mysterious fighters gracefully danced over the snow, carefully planning every movement and counter movement with technique and precision.

Everywhere McCoy looked was chaos, but the old woman still next to him stood calm as she uttered a single, vindictive word to curse her invaders. “Ninjas.”

McCoy, however, was much less at ease with the warzone around him. “What do they want?!”

“The fallen emperor’s mask. Don’t let them—”

The woman was cut off as the razor-sharp edge of a katana pierced her abdomen. Blood squirted out from the wound in every direction, and McCoy instinctively raised his arms to shield himself from it.

His host’s sudden death didn’t shock McCoy. In fact, he was surprised he wasn’t surprised. Probably because he didn’t have time to react.

The sword was pulled from the Viking woman’s gut as quickly as it emerged and her body dropped to the floor, revealing a ninja dressed from head to toe in white garb standing in her place. Only the man’s eyes were visible in the thin slit of his mask, two cold pupils staring at McCoy without a shred of emotion.

The woman’s murderer didn’t cheer. Didn’t gloat. He didn’t say a word. He simply raised his arm in the air, briefly blinding McCoy with the moonlight reflected off the ninja star in his hand.

Unable to move in time, the cowboy accepted his inevitable death as the ninja prepared to throw his four-pointed shuriken. But similar to the way the ninja’s blade unexpectedly emerged through the old woman’s chest, an arrow suddenly appeared implanted into the side of his head. The corpse abruptly dropped to the snow in front of McCoy’s feet. He then looked around confused, and quickly found

the Viking archer from earlier strutting toward him with her bow in hand.

But rather than offer his thanks, McCoy issued a demand in his own sarcastic wit. “Now would be a good time to have my—”

Seemingly having read his mind, the Viking woman removed McCoy’s pistols from her belt. She then handed them to the cowboy, who this time was able to show his gratitude. “Why, thank you.”

After letting go, the archer turned and began firing, immediately immersing herself in the battle. But returning to his mission, McCoy quickly scanned the war-torn village and saw what he thought was the outline of a man running near where the mask previously laid in the snow. The blur of dashing white could’ve been anything, but then McCoy saw the faint shimmer of moonlight against the colorful mask as it pumped up and down in the sprinting ninja’s hand. He was making a break for the tree line, but there wasn’t the slightest sense of urgency in McCoy’s stride as he walked in that direction. He just calmly checked his loaded ammunition and whistled high above the clashing sounds of the warfare around him.

Emerging from within a stable on the far side of the village, Knight broke into a trot, fearlessly crossing the battlefield. With arrows and pointed stars flying all around, the horse reached his rider in only a few seconds, neighing as he stopped on a dime beside him.

With his composure still contained, McCoy holstered his weapons and mounted his steed, who thankfully still wore his saddle and bridle. “Good to see you too, pal. Let’s get this pajama wearin’ clodhopper.”

But as he gave Knight a light kick with his heels, the fleeing ninja quickly flung a chain-sickle up toward the treetops in mid-stride. The weapon firmly planted itself in a thick branch, and with nothing more than a tug of his wrist, the running ninja suddenly flew up the chain, landing softly on the branch and immediately resuming his escape.

Now heading at full speed toward the glade, McCoy's eyebrows shot up, impressed by the ninja's feat. "Well, that wasn't expected. Won't matter though, will it? Come on, boy. Yeehaw!"

The pair broke through the tree line in hot pursuit of the thief, but Knight's sturdy hooves only tapped the snow before kicking up into a fluid gallop through the forest. A drifting cloud of snow puffed up behind him as he sped on, but neither horse nor rider turned to see the line of delicate footsteps left in their wake. With his eyes locked firmly in front him, the horse lowered his head and darted between the trees, weaving in and out of the wooded obstacles without ever slowing down.

McCoy held onto the reins and lowered his head, turning his horse and him into a single bullet of speed and force. But despite their pace, they had yet to catch up to their target. The cowboy's eyes continued to glance between the path ahead and the trees above, where he could hear the shallow patter of feet dancing from branch to branch.

The ninja's pristine, blank dress covered every inch of skin, completely blending him the wintery backdrop. Without a fold or crease, the outfit perfectly

matched the sea of white, creating only a soft blur in the shape of a man. The ninja's legs constantly moved with the weight of a feather, barely touching the branches as he used them to spring forward in a dead sprint through the treetops. When the gap was too wide for him to cross by foot, the ninja unleashed his weapon through the trees, using it to swing like a vine in a seamless transition of his escape.

McCoy was amazed not just by the ninja's grace and agility, but by how the man sprinted through the forest canopy faster than most could run on land. Faster even, it seemed, than Knight could gallop.

McCoy screamed out, snapping Knight's reins for him to catch up. The scene of snow and moonlight began to pass him by faster and a faster until he realized they weren't gaining ground. He had to act now or risk losing the mask forever.

Completely trusting his steed with his life, McCoy let go of the reins and allowed Knight to continue on his own path through the forest. With his hands now free, McCoy shot them down to his sides and snatched the two revolvers from their holsters. Then, using the small trail of falling snow as a guide, McCoy began firing up into the trees.

He kept his thighs clenched against Knight's sides, riding the bumpy terrain the best he could while his arms were extended out in front of him. And with each blast of gunpowder flashing in his face, McCoy had to focus his balance to keep from falling off the saddle. Having heard of the ninjas' legendary discipline and

tolerance for pain, the cowboy wasn't necessarily listening for a scream. But after each shot rang out, he knew he'd missed his mark as neither blood nor body fell in front of him.

Throughout the multitude of action bombarding his senses, McCoy still kept count of every time he pulled the trigger. The routine was a natural adaptation that came from a lifetime of firefights. He didn't even know he did it anymore. Not consciously, at least. And by the time he counted to eleven, McCoy held up before firing what would most certainly be his last chance.

He used his left hand to holster the now empty revolver, then grab back onto the reins dangling by Knight's mane. And as he did, the ninja's ghostly figure suddenly leapt into a clearing of the forest canopy, turning his body to face his pursuer as he flew forward.

It was the first time McCoy had gotten a good look at the man he'd been chasing, and the ninja seemed to hover in place for a moment, like the air around him grew thick. He then used that almost infinite amount of time to wind up and hurl his chain sickle straight at McCoy's head.

Instinct drove the cowboy to pull back hard on the reins, causing Knight to neigh in protest as he slid on his hocks. The sudden halt forced the horse to turn sideways and McCoy's face did the same, narrowly moving out of the way as the sickle's sharp edge shaved the rough edges of his stubby facial hair.

Now free from the attack, McCoy took his time aiming at the defenseless ninja still defying gravity by slowly falling through the air. He pulled the trigger, and

the echo of the revolver's bang was immediately followed by the ninja suddenly dropping straight down into the snow below him.

McCoy couldn't see the ninja's body lying between the trees, but a splash of sprayed red and the glistening mask beside it told the cowboy all he needed to know. Before dismounting, McCoy sat for a moment to catch his breath.

It was bizarre to watch the chaos of his action-packed chase end so abruptly, immediately returning his surroundings to its natural serenity. Just like when he'd first ridden in on Knight, the forest was now a peaceful snowfield of silence and tranquility. McCoy and his steed were so far from the hidden Viking village that the battle they'd fled was already a distant memory. And the silence that distance came with only made it easier for the cowboy to now conclude his journey.

McCoy lifted his leg up and over Knight's back before sliding down off the saddle. His feet made a soft thud as they landed in the snow. He then wasted no time slowly approaching his downed opponent while reloading the firearm still in his hand. There didn't appear to be any movement coming from the vicinity. But this was McCoy's first close encounter with a ninja, and the rumors he'd heard of them being quite resistant to death were in the forefront of his mind.

As he drew closer, the scene came into full view, which McCoy easily processed into three distinct components. The first was Emperor Jimmu's mask resting peacefully in the snow, just waiting for someone to reclaim it.

Less than ten feet from the mask was the ninja's body positioned at an awkward and, if he'd been alive, most uncomfortable angle. If McCoy had been

strolling through the forest he might've missed the ninja's corpse, which almost completely blended into the snow encompassing him.

The only sign a human being lay on the ground was the third component: a mosaic of blood sprayed out into the white canvas between the trees. An almost picturesque red halo started at a large, gaping hole at the top of the man's head and trailed off into the distance above him. Never one to take note of such simple moments, McCoy couldn't help but find the image both beautiful and horrific at the same time. And just below the injury, where the pattern of blood began, were two unblinking eyes, coincidentally frozen so that they stared directly in McCoy's direction.

When he had enough of the sight, McCoy continued on toward the mask, picked it up, and tucked it into his coat, this time without admiring what he now concluded was its overstated beauty. Once it was secure, McCoy took one last look at the ninja's body and, for the briefest of moments, considered lowering the astonishing warrior's mask.

The cowboy had killed many people while working for his employer and he wanted to see the face of the man who'd proved the most difficult. But McCoy quickly deemed the curiosity pointless and, more importantly, not profitable.

So, he simply strolled over to his horse and pulled himself up on the saddle before giving Knight a soft pat on the side of his neck. "All right, boy. Time to head home."

About the Author

Frank Martin is a comic writer and author that is not as crazy as his work makes him out to be...seriously.

Since his writing career began he's had multiple short stories published in horror anthologies by both Burning Willow Press and Stitched Smile Publications. Frank has also had comic shorts appear in the "fluff noir" anthology series Torsobear and the all-ages horror anthology Cthulhu is Hard to Spell. Frank also wrote and produced the comic anthology series Modern Testament, which featured a wide ensemble of artists throughout its four volumes. Frank's novels included the YA sci-fi thriller Predestiny published by Crossroads Press and the zombie horror Mountain Sickness published by Severed Press.

Frank currently lives in New York with his wife and three kids. To hear more about his work you can sign up for his mailing list at www.frankthewriter.com or follow him on Twitter/Instagram @frankthewriter.