

Nepenthe
The Price



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from the 'Nepenthe' series of short stories

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“Easy, MARCH!”

The regular, disciplined steps and rattling of gear gave way to a cacophony of clangs and dragging feet, as sighs of relief were heard from throughout the company. Groans and soft talking quickly followed. Marching in cadence through the murky paths of the marshes was no easy task and doing so in silence seemed even worse in this place. Hunfrid tilted his head, cracking his neck, and stretched his shoulders a little. Walking in a chain shirt was tiring as Hell.

“Second time” groaned Ulric from his left. “Second blasted time we fall from forward to easy. Ol’ Freda at the village used to say, what happens two will happen three. Mark my words. This ain’t over”. The Norman kept his voice low, Hunfrid noticed.

“Quit your whining, you big, bearded craven”. Inga’s voice blasted in their ears from behind them.

“We’ve had tougher and longer marches. You don’t see the pup here complaining, do you? You’re just afraid of the mist”. Ulric turned to face her, his eyes narrowed.

“You’re falling right I am! And you’d be too, if you had some sense in you, woman!” he blurted, but quickly quieted down again. It wasn’t self-restraint, Hunfrid noticed. It was cautiousness, the Nord veteran looking at the mist around him nervously. It unnerved them all, truth be told, and the newly fledged man-at-arms was no real exception.

It wasn’t thick, not much, but it felt ever-present. First of all, it had a faint odor, sharp and burning, even if distant. If he inhaled too hard, his throat would sting, as if drinking alcohol, although this mist’s burn felt sharper. Then, there was the dull color, ever changing as you looked at it, a cloud with faded, pearly, rainbow colors, dancing around and luring them.

“Nepenthe’s Breath” went on Ulric stubbornly, though he kept his voice low. “That’s what this is and no two ways about it. No mist. Sorcery of the wights hurled in that accursed Spire. The Breath comes out of the Spire itself, as if the blasted thing was alive. It hides their spawn, monsters made of nightmares. And it eats your thoughts, makes you forget the way back home and, in time, your friends, your loved ones and your name itself, until you are a husk for the Spirelords to play with. Aye. You know what ‘Nepenthe’ means, pup?”

“I’m from Vatsdam, Edhson” chuckled the young man-at-arms. “Just some tens of miles from here. I was raised with the stories you say. How ‘Nepenthe’ is that mythical fruit, the one that makes one forget, and how they named the Spire here so, because it looks like the flesh-eating flower of the fruit’s tree. It’s just one of the stories. I admit, though, I’ve never seen the Breath up close before, not to mention walk through it”.

“See, Ulric?” Inga cut in from behind. “Even the pup knows more than you and he ain’t scared of tavern tales. Are you, pup?”

“Then he’s as stupid as you are, Inga” Ulric rushed to answer for him. “Tavern-tales or not, the lands with Spires are cursed and that’s that. In Galania they have one, weirdly named, though the people call it Hag’s Smile. Heard how well they fare? Drought and plague, two years now, going into third. And there’s one in the Bitter Sea, you know, deep under the water, and any ship going near is lost. Some say the Spires are empty, relics or small palaces of the old gods, but that ain’t so. The Spirelords dwell in them, Exiles like the Weavers in the West. The Nords claim they are part gods, them Spirelords. Aye. Twisted, minor, cursed versions of their own Vanir, who once dwelled on the great tree.”

“That’s primitive, even for you, Ulric. Trust a Nord to worship gods living on a tree-house” a man from the front row said and everyone around burst into laughter.

“I ain’t no Nord, Grovich! But I’d rather be one, than be of the falling Polmags, like your mama. Won’t even ask about your pa. Doubt you’d know, anyway”.

It was Grovich that growled now, as those around them snickered and laughed. In the end, the Polmag chuckled himself, as did Ulric, the two men nodding at each other. Silence fell, as the captain shushed them, and it took some time for Ulric to talk again.

“What about you, pup? Hunfrid, was it? That’s a High Tellian name, aye? You ain’t some noble, are you? Here to spy on the plebs you pay?”

Hunfrid shook his head. “I am Riisman” he said. “High Tellian is preferred among us, though I couldn’t say how that came to be. Markeni, on the other hand, prefer Tradetell more. We are all taught both, however”.

“I thought you lot from Riismark were one clan”.

“We are, in our way. We are all Markmen but...”

His sentence was cut short, thuds and shallow splashes of galloping hooves reaching them from the south west. Everyone turned to look, many hands reaching for hilts of weapons or tightening shield straps.

“Easy, men. Keep the march” said their captain.

“Single rider” commented Inga from behind.

“Aye, light horse, no barding. Scout” muttered Ulric. Moments later, like some legend of a ghost in the mist, the faded image of a rider took form, galloping hard south, some dozen paces away from them. When the thuds and the heavy snorts of the horse faded in the distance, silence fell but did not last. With the violent intruder gone, the sounds of marsh life crawled back to fill the gap of sound. Reeves whispered in the softest of breezes, toads croaked and distant birds called, while insects buzzed annoyingly. Somewhere hidden in the mist, a cuckoo called ominously in regular intervals, a bad omen for most. Whatever good mood had survived among the men, finally faded. The Breath of Nepenthe was taking its toll, turning faces grim, eyes distant and voices to rest in silence.

The next voices they heard came from behind, half-covered by metal sighing and clanging, as half a dozen riders rode, trotting to their side. The noise was so loud that the riders’ words were lost to Hunfrid, but he cared little. The sight more than made up for it.

Apart from the scout with them, who was panting still, his mare sweaty and snorting tired, the others were clad in plate, riders and horses alike. The smoked metal looked gray, their helmets fierce and

gruesome. Rich plums, surrounded by horns or crafted wings, adorned them, dancing with the horses' move. Long, intricate lances were balanced on their saddle sockets, held by plated fists from over the grip, while swords with traditional gladius hilts rattled on their sides. Even the chanfrons were spiked and made to look savage, while bronze decorations flashed in orange and crimson glares for contrast to the dark plate, save for one rider, who had gold. He rode in the middle, his helm in the fashion of a lion, the King of animals, frowning regally. With his green eyes glittering almost mischievously, he smiled at the Captain who had turned to face them and was ready to order the company to a salute.

"As you were, Captain Hemark" the rider said in a friendly manner, yet with a voice confident about the effect of its words. "Have your men rest a while, why don't you. We're riding towards the commander, I'll let him know".

"As you command, my Lord" the Captain saluted, even as the riders were almost gone, then turned. "Company, HALT! At ease" he said.

"See, you grumpy old man?" said Inga smiling, as she was laying down her shield. "No forward march. That old Freda of yours was wrong".

"Aye" answered Ulric with a grim voice. "Though now I wish she wasn't".

"You're never happy, Edhson, are you?" commented Grovich from the front, already sitting and uncorking his waterskin.

"Rider comes galloping from our front, reaches the shot-callers and then we rest? You'd be unhappy too if you had half a mind. This ain't no stop. They're resting us for combat".

"Now you're just paranoid" another man said. "I was serving, last night. Heard the command talk and everything. We're on patrol, that's all. Exercise, I'd wager".

"Patrol? Sure. Patrol. Three companies of infantry, with half a dozen knights, sharing camp with a Legion last night and, hey, Rodhe!" Ulric raised his voice, looking over the others' heads, as if looking for someone. "Didn't you say there's some sharpshooters on our right?"

"Aye, that's the word from the Second. Crossbowmen, Junger's lot. Saw some of them added to the duty roster for tonight, too".

"Even so, there's nothing to fight here, Ulric" cut in Inga once more.

"Oh, there's something, alright" the Norman said with a grim voice "and don't you forget it". Most laughed. Some, gray-haired, more experienced, stayed silent, uncertainty dancing nervously in their seasoned eyes.

"You can't be serious" the woman said. "The Spires are empty shells, that's all, filled with tales, no wights or ghosts or witches" she added, frowning, but it was Hunfrid that spoke.

"That was the Crown Prince" he said, voice hoarse. "Fredrik, Margrave of Brandengrad's forces. And the other, the knight on his right, his youngest brother, Sir Villemfred, only just knighted, after the battle of Vestbridge. Princes don't really do patrols, do they?" he asked, looking around. Silence and baffled, frightened looks was the only response he got.

"Nepenthe" Ulric finally said and did the Aspect sign, warding off evil.



“Forward, MARCH!”

Forwards to where? wondered Hunfrid. The mist was thicker than before and the helmet wasn't helping. But the 'take arms' command had been given, tight formation ordered and now forward march. Commands to Junger's crossbowmen had been heard in the distance as well, the company walking next to their right flank, probably. So, no. Not 'forwards to where'. Somewhere in the deep, pearly mist there was something and they were marching towards it. The question was... Forwards to what?

At first, Hunfrid thought it was just another animal, though its call was new to him. Then, he noticed there were more than the one call, or that more had simply joined in with the first. Low growls, gurgling and wet, reached his ears through the mist, accompanied by strange crackling noises, like bones rattling with each other. Feeling his hair standing tall in a shivering wave, he looked around and saw he was not the only one. Everyone around him was searching with widened eyes for answers at their comrades' faces and none was receiving any. Until they all did.

They were hard to discern at first, the shadow of the shapes in the mist unfamiliar to human eyes. As they neared the creatures, however, and the mist cleared a little, what had caused their hearts to jump looked less intimidating. Standing but hunching like old men, rows of the creatures stood half-hidden behind tall shields, wielding short spears that looked almost primitive. Hunfrid could hear the creatures clacking their teeth and growling, behind masking helmets made of white bone. As the company's first row stepped into some shallow water with a splash, one of the men-at-arms, some half dozen columns to Hunfrid's right, chuckled.

“These are the fearsome Spirelords? These are primitive old ladi-..”

His last word turned into a wet, desperate gargle as an arrow pierced through the mist and the man's neck. A moment later, a rain of them fell on the right flank, dropping men and raising cries of pain and warning, shields quickly following, even before the command came.

Only a few moments passed, before a second volley came and Hunfrid felt the right flank pressing against them instinctively, while the commanders cried orders to keep the line. There was a puff of smoke from somewhere between their numbers and the hunching spearmen charged. They never shouted a warcry or yelled with might, their charge accompanied only by a low crescendo of growls and chattering teeth that unnerved the men of Riismark more than any voice. Captain Hermark joined his men's lines, ordering them to receive charge stance. From the left, Junger's crossbowmen fired their first volley, even as the third volley from the Spire marksmen landed once more on the right flank of the infantry. Panicked voices echoed in the distance, crying gibberish about three arms. Hearing his own pants echoing in his

helmet, Hunfrid drew his sword and waited for the clash.

It never came. The earth beneath his feet trembled, as hundreds of pounds of flesh and metal charged through the mist from the left. There was another puff of smoke and the spearmen stopped as one, turning to face the knights and setting shields and spears to receive the charge. They did so in time. It made little difference.

Crashing through their lines, the knights roared for Riismark as they skewered and trampled their victims, breaking the wall of shields like a wave through a sand castle. Fredrik, the wreath on his helm glittering gold, let go the lance and drew sword, lowering it again and again, growling like a lion with every blow, as the blade crashed through bone armor and flesh alike. Fear spread through the spearmen, some of which yelled for the first time, before another puff of greenish smoke burst from their ranks. As Captain Hermark ordered to charge the enemy flank, Hunfrid noticed that the frightened spearmen kept fighting, eyes widened and frantic with panic under their helmets. Ordering his frozen legs to charge, Hunfrid saw that the Prince had noticed the same. Covered by his knights, his sword had paused its killing while he was looking for the source of the smoke. Fredrik then lowered his sword, pointing at someone in the spearmen crowd. Before Hunfrid could see what, he was forced to turn his attention to the fight before him.

The men-at-arms crashed into the spearmen, meeting the shields set to receive them with their own. Pinned on his own shield by those of the rows behind him, Hunfrid pushed the man in front in turn, willingly or not.

“To the Knights! Push them to the Knights!” someone yelled, as Ulric cried “Heads down! Watch the spears! Use your legs and shoulders, you mutts! Push!”

The panting breaths that followed were the most trying of his life, feeling every bone in his body being crushed, as dozens of men pressed from behind and more resisted from the front. For hunching old ladies, Hunfrid thought, the spearmen held their ground well, although it was obvious that the men-at-arms were gaining ground. He was following Ulric’s advice, keeping his head low and behind his shield while pushing with his shoulder. Feeling somewhat safe in the fourth row, he looked over his shield to see and...

He barely ducked in time, a spear clanging against his helmet, near the temple. The iron held but the blow was hard. He felt it echo in his mind like a numbing thud, making his knees weaken for a moment and his sight blurry. As the bitter taste of terror filled his mouth, he stood dazed, held standing only by the mere pressure of bodies around him. By Theos, he was second row now!

“Head down!” Igna warned, almost angrily. “And sword, pup, sword!” Ulric went on for her. Hunfrid nodded, trying to focus. He felt his right cheek getting wet and, whatever flowed from his temple, it was thicker than sweat. He tightened the grip on his sword, readying it for piercing strikes between the shield walls but then the lines broke.

Surprised at the change, Hunfrid gasped when he saw that instead of a comrade before him, there was one of the spearmen, looking as confused as he was. Too close for the spear, the spireling tried to shove the recruit back but the cadet’s training kicked in. He fell on his opponent’s shield with his own and put the weight of his body behind it, holding his ground as his comrades supported his rear. Hiding behind the shields, both his and the spireling’s, Hunfrid grimaced at the alchemical stench that filled his nostrils. Disgusted, he started stabbing blindly, the short range of his sword an advantage. Once, twice,

three times he stabbed, the spearman constantly trying to put distance between them but having neither the room nor strength for it. All three times, the sword met the bone armor, chipping at it with a sickening sensation, but not crashing through. The fourth was lucky. As the spearman was pulling his arm backwards to try and stab with the spear, Hunfrid's blade slid under the shoulder and pierced through the armpit. Gurgling in pain, the creature fell, only to be trampled by humans and spirelings alike as the battle moved. From the right and back, more death cries were heard above the chaos, then again, as two new waves of arrows spread mayhem to the flank and rear.

“What in the Fall are Junger's men doing?!” a man growled next to him. “We take two or three volleys before they even fire one!”

The spearmen, at least, were giving way, almost half of them dead or injured. Until now that is. Feeling his skin crawling as his eyes widened in disbelief, he saw a battered spireling, shield arm broken in two places and ankle trampled beyond repair, growl and shriek in pain as it got up. The one eye visible through the broken helmet was frantic with surprise, as if moving was not the creature's decision and it had to witness it's own body move. But up it did get and it held the spear, trying desperately to raise the shield with the broken arm as well, the command to do so obviously given, but the body failing to comply. Other spirelings like it did the same, ignoring wound and injury. Three or four spearmen lines behind, a puff of smoke died out. Above the frightened cries about sorcery around him, Hunfrid heard his Prince's voice.

“TO ME! INFANTRY! PUSH! TO YOUR PRINCE!”

As Ulric pushed Hunfrid to the side and took the front, shoving the spearmen and piercing blindly from behind his shield, the cadet fell behind him and helped push, looking over the lines of the spearmen when he could. Roaring at their prince's command, four knights spurred forward, swords landing blows one after the other, opening the lines. One of them fell, a spear piercing under his steed's neck, crashing down man and horse in a cacophony of metallic clangs. The rest kept at it, making way by delivering death with every step. And suddenly, in the crowd, Hunfrid saw him.

His robes bore the pearly color of the mist, a dead shimmer of a rainbow on a field of black and violet. His imagination taking the better of him, he saw a monster at first. The weird mask looked like a trunk or tentacle sprouting beneath large, dead eyes, and leading to a fleshy bag at his side belt, which gurgled as if alive, gassy sounds of deep, hollow pants accompanying the wet gargles. Two horns came out of his back, hollow, for fumes kept puffing smoke, which now and then burst in clouds that spread around him. The smell of alcohol and sulfur reached the men-at-arms' nostrils. Some gagged at the stench of it but the line held, pushing still.

Fredrik roared, he and his knights making way towards the robed figure. The Prince raised his sword towards it, which stood there calm as Death himself. But for his apparent calmness, Hunfrid knew better. Close enough to see, he noticed the creature's eyes beneath the mask, searching, not panicked, perhaps, but frowned, calculating. As the men-at-arms closed off his escape, there was a burst of gas from the horn-like extensions on his back. It rose high, black and almost alive, until it reached some tens of feet in the air and burst in a smoke of sickening green. The spearmen opened around him, but kept fighting anyone coming near. Grabbing the opportunity to rest, Hunfrid looked around, panting. The other companies were still fighting spearmen further north, regularly showered by volleys of arrows.

“Are you him?” Fredrik yelled, as he jumped from his horse, his hand waiting on his side, after he

threw his blunted sword away. A knight put his own in his prince's hand, while the robbed figure shook its head.

"I am not identified as the Chemistry Variant" he said, his High Tellian perfect, even if spoken slow and calmer than Hunfrid had ever heard it spoken. The voice came deep, echoed under the tubed mask.

"The Alchemist, fiend! Are you him?"

"As already stated, that is negative. The Chemistry Variant is equal to the Alchemist you speak of".

"Equal?"

"The same", the Spirelord said with a tone one uses to explain to a child. "The two names are equal. They identify the same person".

"I have a message for him" Fredrik said.

"He would convey one himself, Prince of Men" the Spirelord said but the Prince waved dismissively, weighing the sword in his hand.

"One of the advantages of royalty is that I get to insist that you deliver mine first" Fredrik said. He pierced through the Spirelord's torso with his sword, then shoved harder, the other hand pushing from the bottom of the hilt.

With the men bursting in cheers around him, the Prince barked orders to the officers of reinforcing the north. Pressured by both spear and arrows, the other two companies were giving way, half their numbers lost and dropping fast. Helmet lost, blood dripping from his forehead like a river, Captain Hermark wiped his face with his sleeve and yelled for them to fall back in formation. Searching for his place, Hunfrid saw Inga.

"Inga! Where's Ulric? He's my mark".

The woman never replied. She looked somewhere behind, but the motion was unintentional, instinctive. Following her eyes, Hunfrid saw Ulric's body, hair braided in Norman fashion, face dipped in blood and mud. His head thundering, as if his wounded temple was besieged by a battering ram, he gulped, unsure how to feel or react. In the end, he simply fell in line. It did not matter which, he realized.

It took some time to make lines but even before the men-at-arms had charged to their aid, yells were heard from the south. Cries of Fredrik's name were mingled with triumphant yells.

"THE LEGION! THE LEGION IS HERE!"

Turning south, he saw them, many following his example, cheering at the sight. Clad in full plate, the likes of which even knights envied, the Legionnaires of Steel marched, their metallic steps booming in perfect tempo. Their great claymores were balanced on their shoulders, a ceremonial weapon for most, an instrument of death for these elite warriors.

They had no banner, not in the platoon Hunfrid could see at least, but the Armatellum Dragon flew prominently on their kilts, protruding from the plate, the Legion's own insignia carved on each legionnaire's pauldron. As the command to engage was given, Hunfrid had to stop looking but he heard them.

"Steel!" cried their commander.

"PARATUS!" answered the Legion and the marsh shook from their voices, as they opened their pace.

"That's it, kid" said a man next to him, smirking. "The day is ours, aye?" Hunfrid nodded, smiling weakly. Aye, he thought. The day is ours, surely. He smiled at Inga, now next to him. She had not paid attention. She was trying to concentrate on the battle ahead but now and then looked around, annoyed.

They had reached the rest of the spearmen, but they stood far from the front line now.

“Damn it” she said. “Something’s up. You hear that? And where’s Junger and his sharpshooters?” Hunfrid looked around. The Prince and his knights were ready to charge again, break the lines of the last of the spearmen, or maybe seek the archers. The Legion was coming closer. In the distance, he thought he heard something else, something... weird.

“There it is again!” Inga said. “Hear that? Like someone’s crying, for Fall’s sake”.

Then, it came.

Hunfrid didn’t see it then. His eyes were pinned on three brutish forms from the north, charging at their flank, one falling, pierced in tens of places by Junger’s sharpshooters. It made little difference, really. Two of them were more than enough to crash the men-at-arms, each arm a battering ram holding a massive, bladed fist-weapon. From far to the southeast, he saw another trio, one of them slashing upwards in an uppercut. A man arched in the air some fifteen feet high, his limbs as lifeless as his crossbow that flew next to him.

“Steel!” cried the centurion’s voice again from behind.

“HOSTIBUS!” came the roaring answer and the Legion brought their blades on their hands, charging. If any could stop the brutes, it was them, Hunfrid thought, before he noticed they were charging west, towards the rear of the knights. Searching for their target, he finally saw it. Despite its size, it looked like it crawled, multiple legs flaying around in a sickening motion of unnatural joints. Clawed feet dug into mud and earth, propelling it forward with a speed greater than that of a galloping horse. While the legs looked beastly, the body was insectoid, the abdomen and thorax covered in a black shell of a bug or ant. The insect’s head was twisted on its neck, its mandibles turned upwards and backwards, but for a pale, humanoid mask that looked forwards, cold, expressionless. Long arms, like logs, protruded from the thorax and were pulled back, the abomination ready to fall on the knights and claw through them, like a thresher upon weed.

The Legion centurion got to it first. Holding his claymore upside-down from both hilt and blade, he roared as he pierced one of the abomination’s feet. It stalled the beast for but a moment, before he was crushed by the leg behind, but the charge had been interrupted. Rushing to their commander, great swords in hand, his men fell on the monstrosity with vengeance. Some tried to hit the joints, others the heels, while few pierced upwards trying to crash through the shelled abdomen. Black liquid and an alchemical stench run from its legs but the abomination paid little heed. With swiping moves, it lowered its clawed hands towards the humans that would pester it.

Hunfrid had never seen plate being slashed and pierced so easily in his life. In mere moments, it was standing on a spreading pool of crimson mingling with mud, dead bodies and torn plates around its feet. From deep within its body a muffled whimper echoed, like a soft serenade or lament. In his shock, the man-at-arms wondered if it were for the death and gore it caused or for its own, accursed soul. Seeing all this, a knight turned his horse to rush to the Legion’s aid but his comrade stopped him, pointing north, to the last of the spearmen that pinned them and their Prince in place. The Legion had bought them time. Spurring their horse to fall on the hunched drones anew, they yelled:

“OPEN THE WAY! CRASH THE STRAGGLERS! MAKE WAY FOR THE PRINCE!”

It would have been easy, but the brutes kept the men-at-arms fatally busy, those few remaining at least, that, unlike Hunfrid, had not been standing still, terrified at the sight of both abomination and brutes.

“How... how are Men supposed to fight such monsters?” Inga muttered next to him, frozen by terror where she stood. Hunfrid had no answer but a second company of Legionnaires replied, falling on the Brutes, while their comrades kept the abomination in place with their last breaths. He saw two of them falling shoulder first on a brute’s legs. As it was forced to kneel, a third took the head, his claymore finding the exposed neck an easy target. A fountain of black and purple liquid showered everyone near, filling the air with an burning stench. Four others fell on the remaining brute, two slashing at the legs, one parrying the blade-fist to the side, even while forced to kneel, a third finding an opening under the shoulder.

The small victory gave some heart to the rest of the men. A handful of men-at-arms rushed to the knights, who were guiding the Prince away from the abomination, carving a path through the spearmen.

Then, from the back, someone yelled “Retreat”.

Officer or not, everyone complied. Dropping weapons, others crying, others still yelling for everyone to save their lives, the men started fleeing. Next to Hunfrid, Inga did the same, eyes widened and muttering “to the Fall with this”.

Hunfrid stayed, though not out of bravery. He was simply frozen. Through teary, widened eyes he watched the Legions trying to prevent the abomination from reaching the Prince, the two remaining knights opening way through the handful of spearmen desperately. He never saw the Brute that came.

He was grabbed and lifted from the ground, accepting the change of height with stoic surprise. From this new vantage point, Hunfrid noticed the slaughter around him, the abomination slashing through the last spearmen, knights and horses with just two swings, a trail of crashed and maimed legionnaires behind it. A single rider was spurring his horse desperately into the mist. Hunfrid smiled weakly, in a trance, at this small victory and turned to face his captor. The brute panted in his face, looking at him, oblivious to the crossbowman on its back, pierced on the spikes of its bone armor. Mad, simple intelligence glittered in the single eye that could be seen under the bone helmet, as it examined curiously the little man in its hand. Hunfrid opened his mouth to speak. He coughed blood with a gasp, as the brute, bored, squeezed him and threw him to the ground. The world faded in darkness around him.



He woke up, eyes closed and a burning scent in his nostrils. His lungs felt wet and filled, his left arm sending flashes of sharp pain that swallowed his thoughts. He tried to cough but the moment he opened his mouth, something was shoved in it and a burning liquid rushed down his throat. He gagged, but the liquid kept coming, drowning him, as it filled both lungs and stomach. Moments later, his body started spasming in excruciating pain, from the toe-nails to his hair.

He opened his eyes, gasping and choking. A spearman holding a flask was crouched next to him, making eager, subservient sounds, as it turned to look over its shoulder. Two figures loomed over it, tall men, perhaps, with wide shoulders and masks with large eyes. Between them stood a being, tall and regal, slender but armored. If that was its face, the skin was pale grey and blue, with almond eyes made of darkness. It wore robes, perhaps, and shoulder plates that made his head look small compared to his bulk, but Hunfrid never saw the details, his mind taken by pain and his body still in spasms. He barely heard the voice, calm, superior, cold.

“Your body is being repurposed” it announced in High Tellian, fingers crossed before it, then sighed, bored with the additional explanation needed. “That means it is being rectified. Healed. The side-effect you are experiencing will last for but an hour or so. Do try to focus, in the meantime, will you? Your new function is to deliver two messages. Firstly, inform your Prince that this was but a sample. If he terminates his father and succeeds him, a mutually beneficial trading partnership would be welcomed. Inform him further that death is also a trade I excel at, if he wishes to pursuit this futile transfer of his resources to me. To your King say this”. It motioned to its side. Ever in spasms and choking, Hunfrid’s eyes followed the motion.

All around him, guided by robed figures like the one in the battlefield, countless hunched creatures were gathering the bodies of the fallen, human and spireling alike, throwing them into piles. Above them, a dark cloud loomed, like a ship with a balloon instead of sails, ropes with hooks dangling under it and reaching the ground. Hunfrid cried and gasped in pain and horror, as he saw the bodies being hooked on the ropes for the ship to take them. With a regal air, the creature turned to leave, his last words piercing Hunfrid’s whimpers.

“Nepenthe remembers. I always get paid”.

*In times of old, but after the Fall,
The Riverking ruled over land...
...Iron bones and eleven steel thrones
No more, no less. Its hardened flesh
rich earth and mud, dark rivers for blood.
Hail Rismark!*