

Nepenthe

# Deliberations



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from the 'Nepenthe' series of short stories

By Konstantinos Oikonomou



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*Riismark - Vestbridge, 4th of Apuas, 657 P.R.*  
*Fields of Vestbridge*

“I heard the lad died and the Spire gods raised him from the dead.”

Few things are as serene as a clear morning in Vestbridge. Lying lazily on the grass, a bunch of farmers were half listening to the city-folk talk, enjoying the slow morning. Few times did they have the time to appreciate the land they worked. The wet fields glittered in the rising sun, gold and green mixing in a wonderful canvas. The softest of mists still lingered, adding mystery to the beauty of the land, while from the village the sounds of the waking city mingled with the calls of the forest. For most, Riismark was little more than a damp swampland but its beauty was there, for all who cared to look for it. Alas, most did not, like ol’ Grudher for example who was now picking at his wrinkled, broken nose, oblivious to the beauty around him.

“No, no, the boy is dead and gone” ol’ Grudher said, flicking its findings off from his exploratory finger, then, leaning forwards, he went on with lowered voice. “But a Spire wight is inside the lad, moving the body, aye, like those puppets during the Tanzlinde fair. It is spying on us, it is, through dead, cold eyes, and in the night it roams the streets and looks fer...”

“Oh, shut yer trap, ye ol’ fibber” cut in Hunbur, looking bored as he leaned on his pitchfork. “Spires! Hah! Filled with fables they are, not wights. Did the lad look dead to ye? Nah, he ain’t a spy nor a deadling. No matter what they fought, he’s just a craven, is all, and fled” he added, spitting over his shoulder.

“You watch your mouth, farmer!” it was Seidhig’s voice that boomed angrily. “My cousin was with them! The Spirelords took them!”

“You make me, blacksmith!” came the reply.

“Oh, I’ll...”

“Blast! Major’s coming! PLATOON! Faaaall-IN!”

For anyone watching from afar, the effect of the voice was as remarkable as it was immediate. Everyone, be one lying, sitting or standing, sprung up and fell in line, with clear knowledge of where to stand, obvious hours of practice behind the maneuver. In mere seconds, the platoon was formed and standing attention. Ol’ Grudher was the only one out of line, a step and a half left of the first row. Throwing sideways glances, he waited, as all movement stopped from the men.

“Teeeeen-TION!” the man screamed again and a single, thundering sound was heard as feet fell. Moments later, when Major Mikhlos was near enough, Grudher saluted.

“Sir! Platoon ready for inspection, SIR!” he shouted.

“Is it, Sergeant?” Mikhlos asked, returning the salute. Ol’ Grudher turned to look at his platoon.

“Militiaman Hunbur!” he shouted.

“Sir!”

“What is that pitchfork doing in my platoon? Where’s yer spear?”

At any other time, he was good ol’ Grudher, maker of fine shoes and finer tales, and Hunbur’s response would normally involve the spear being somewhere dark in Grudher’s posterior. But in the militia, he was Sergeant Padh Grudher, Vestbridge Militia and veteran of four battles, for those who knew better.

“Sir! Sorry, Sir! Me... me wife used me spear fer the chicken house.”

Muffled chuckles spread around the platoon.

“Will the chickens defend the land, mr. Hunbur?” asked the Major calmly, as he fixed the collar of another militiaman.

“No, sir” came Hunbur’s reply.

“Who will defend the land, mr. Hunbur?” went on the Major, as he kept inspecting.

“I will, sir.”

“Who will defend the land, mr. Hunbur?” the Major asked again, raising his eyebrow as he turned to look at him.

“Its sons and daughters, sir!”

“Platoon!” raised his voice now the Major. “Who will defend the land?!”

“ITS SONS AND DAUGHTERS!”

The cry echoed in the morning air, over the barricades and the city, reaching the terrace of Baron Schlutz’s mansion, home of King Villard’s most trusted advisor. The Baron and his King’s guest were sitting around a table on the terrace, having breakfast over conversation, while a manservant was attending to them. Another man was standing at the edge of the terrace, looking far, beyond the field where the militia trained. He wasn’t moving and his expression was blankly calm, but his foot was tapping the floor arhythmically, his fingers doing the same on the balcony rail. Now and then, his whole body would shiver but still he would not move, only stand there, eyes fixed in the distance, the conversation behind him leaving him seemingly indifferent.

“I am sorry, my Prince” said the Baron, between munches, pausing to lick his fingers from the juices of the berries. “Those are the King’s thoughts” he said after he swallowed.

Fredrik raised his eyebrow, the hint of a crooked smile on his lips.

“I do not care about thoughts, Baron.” He spoke in a relaxed tone, amused even. “I am calling the Eleven and my question is simple: does he deny the call?”

The Baron threw another berry in his mouth. “With all due respect, Your Highness, only a Count Palatine, an Imperial Margrave and another of the Eleven Kings may call for the Eleven Thrones. Now, I search among your many, truth is, titles, which befit your station and no doubt reflect your worth, prowess and other, many merits, alas, however, none of these three titles do I find.” He paused swallowing and throwing a sideways glance to the Prince, then added a polite smile.

“Come, good Prince. Such matters can wait. You are still recuperating from your ordeal. You need your strength yet you have barely touched your breakfast. Is it not pleasing to your taste? Should I have them bring something else?”

“Leave your servants alone, Baron. My ordeal, as you call it, is my only concern. They will come

again, soon. Of that I am certain.”

“Who, Sire?” the Baron said, the same polite smile still painting his face. “Who will..?”

“Nepenthe, man! Have you not been listening?” Fredrik finally burst out, making the third man flinch nervously in his corner. The Baron stared at the prince for some moments, smile still frozen in its place. Finally, he spoke.

“My Prince, I...” He paused, sighing. “You ask my King to believe in myths. And based on that belief, you ask him further to stop his men from working the fields, digging the mines, seeing to their flocks and performing their trades. And he would do so, honoring the old pacts, he would! But the only myth that does have merit in your story is the Breath. Not because the mist surrounding the Spire is cursed, of course not, but because it can create hallucinations. Too many an unsuspecting traveler have suffered from it and lost all reason, I hear. Much like your friend there. Something in the swamp fumes or...”

“You are saying I imagined the slaughter of a Steel Legion unit, a company of men-at-arms, one of mercenary crossbowmen and three knights, including my youngest brother?” He still sounded amused but there was a sharpness in his tone and in his look.

“I am saying that for all you just described, I have two witnesses. One who does not speak and shivers at all times, jumping at the loud noises, as if his mind is gone. And another who, a Prince of Brandengrand’s Throne may be, but has been exposed to the same fumes of Nepenthe and might as well have claimed he has seen Theos walking wearing Palas sandals and the feathers of Bakkus in his hair. I am saying that the King’s men have found no remnants of such a battle like the one you have described, nor have any other survivors made themselves known and-”

“Enough! Hunfrid has suffered at the hands of the Spirelords, Baron! You should respect the lad’s-“

He paused and both men turned to look at the young man who stood alone. He had made a sound, like a croak or cough, and was grabbing the balcony railing tightly, neck tense and veins swollen. Just as his face was turning red from the effort, he exhaled, exhausted, then whimpered, helpless.

The Baron turned to look at Fredrik.

“Your witness, my Prince” he added, motioning towards the young man. Fredrik just looked at him, eyes narrowed, lips thinner than parchment.

Some four hours later, Baron Schlutz was still on the same balcony, with lunch being served. He was looking in the distance, following the Prince, his companion and their platoon of militiamen growing smaller and smaller. It was a good touch, he thought, setting militiamen as an escort. The last in a series of insults he had done to the Prince since the morning. When the forest swallowed them and they could no longer be seen, as if on queue, the Baron was no longer alone.

“That was a good performance, Baron Schlutz” said a robed man, grey temples giving character to his clean face, as he pushed the curtains of the balcony door aside and came out.

The Baron gulped down hastily one last sip of wine, before he got up.

“Your blessing, my lord Bishop” he said, kissing the man’s hand, who in turn placed his other over the Baron’s head.

“You have that and more, my child” replied the man, looking kindly at the Baron. “You have the Lord’s favor” he went on, his wrinkled, clean shaved face smiling honestly “for you have served Him and your King well, this day.”

“I am pleased to hear that, your Excellency” Schlutz replied, almost subserviently but then added with

a crooked smile, looking at the two Sicarii who were bringing out a small chest. “The Lord is always generous in His favor.”

Bishop Madheus did not try to hide his disgusted expression. For a moment, he had hoped this was for something more about silver. For many moments in his life he had hoped the same.

“It was a provocative touch, assigning a militia escort” he said instead, taking his hand off the Baron’s head and walking past him, his eyes fixed in the distance.

“I am glad you liked it, Excellency” the Baron responded, smiling pleased with himself.

“I said it was provocative, Baron” the Bishop said, turning to face the man again, with a cold expression. “I did not say I liked it. It is never clever to provoke a lion.”

“Pah! That cub is no lion. I know of him. A sinner, my good Bishop, with a short temper and foul mouth, some say prone to violence. A bon vivant with strange ideas and a taste-”

“I know of him too” the priest cut in. “A sinner indeed. A sinner educated in the University of Pravia, where all his professors praised his intelligence almost as much as they condemned his drinking pursuits and, as you worded it, bon vivant mentality. His father ignored him and his sinful ways, focusing on his second son, but his great grandfather, King still then, sent him to the Academia Proelia, where he excelled in military history and tactics. He returned and submitted himself to the sponsorship of Sir Ghart of Rottdorf for knighthood. Changed, focused, trained by Legionnaires, he proved an excellent squire, despite his old age, and earned his knighthood by merit and merit alone, taking the Vow of Lions. Taking advantage of his father’s absence in Argem, he has already started organizing the counter offensive against Nepenthe, trying to force his King’s hand and not sit idle. Within months of his battle with Nepenthe, Rottdorf and Haubach have answered his call of the Eleven. Had we not intervened, your own King could have already agreed to join his efforts. No. You are entirely wrong, Baron. He is no cub. The Lord has spoken to me of him. He could bring together the Eleven Steel Thrones. He could counter Nepenthe’s threat. He is a promising leader and a great warrior. An exemplary noble of the new generation.”

He paused as he faced yet again the sin he had assumed for the Salvation of Man. Lowering his head, he muttered a prayer for the lives to be lost, the lives to be saved and, lastly, for his own, damned soul. When he went on, his voice was burdened, low and tired, but unfaltering.

“Which is why he will be not allowed to gather allies. In this historic moment, he cannot be a shining example for the nobility. While the news of a Spire attack is still hard to believe, he will be left to die alone at the hands of the Spire heathens. Then, his father, with the help of Theos and His faithful, will succeed where he did not. It is the Will of Theos and it is the only way to force the hand of the Conclave to break their shackles on the Church. His death will be the rallying cry that all Kingdoms will hear:

Theos be with us! The Demons of the Spires are attacking.”



*Austersia - Argem, 14th of Mea, 657 P.R.*

*The Conclave of Delegators*

“They are not attacking!”

The delegator from Lantony yelled passionately, his voice rising above the clamor of voices, that supported or dismissed him. It was the way of the Low Conclave. The formal, almost ritualistic, procedures of the High Conclave of Sovereigns, gave way to a maelstrom of yells, fitting more to a street market than an assembly of diplomats. Dorná de Rosmund, self-proclaimed Marquise de Feranque, winced annoyed with the noise. Did these men and women not care for their own procedures? Did they not respect their own roof? As her eyes wondered around the room for just the second time of her life, she knew the answer. Oh, it had been magnificent once, the Imperial Throne Room. The best of marbles and stone blended masterfully, forming giant archways to support a dome meant to inspire awe. Nine large windows brought light near the dome’s peak, revealing sculpted decorations in styles inspired by each of the provinces. Dorná smiled. The windows, she knew, used to give light to the room but never did the light reach the floor directly. It fell behind the Throne at times, and at others it stayed high, making the dome seem even more majestic. Only the elevated Imperial Throne would be showered in the golden light, once.

Broken were the stones and marbles now, dark lines scarring their once magnificent, clear whiteness. Time and lack of care had been allowed to eat away the features of sculpts and some of the windows had been barred, so the light only fell behind the Throne these days, throwing the room in perpetual gloom. It was, perhaps, for the best. The Throne itself had been shattered. They said that time had done this, but she was sure it was not so. Broken, parts missing, shattered stairs to lead to it, the Throne of the Emperor stood like a sad relic of its former glory, a Hollow Throne in more ways than one. The yelling and shouting, Dorná thought, as she turned her attention to the proceedings once more, was perhaps the smallest of insults this room had suffered.

“And you would know how, Delegator? Should we expect all Deists to know the plans of heathens? Do they consort with...?”

“Is that the official opinion of the Theist Church? That Deists consort with the Spires? Or is it just its puppet nobles that bel-..?”

“Vice-Chamberlain! I demand a retraction! I will not allow my Lord to be subject to such terms!”

“The Voice of the Cadeyrn will retract...”

“Thank you, Vice-Chamberlain.”

“...as will the Delegator of Sankt Volto for the accusation of consorting, unless it is the official opinion of his Delegation.”

“With respect to the Conclave, I retract.”

“Aye, as do I.”

“If my esteemed colleagues are quite done bickering again, Arburg feels that the Cadeyrn’s opinion on the matter is valid. We see no cause for alarm.”

“While the Queen of Lantony is no Cadeyrn and speaks not for all Braeons, Ravenbrough must agree. One incident does not qualify as a general assault. It should be this Conclave’s priority to investigate the incident in Riismark.”

“Köningstadt sees prudence in this. Assuming we believe this ridiculous claim, none knows what happened exactly nor, more importantly, why it happened. Knowing what sparked this alleged attack will help us avoid...”

“That is *not* the opinion of the Cadeyrn! The Cadeyrn is indeed far from convinced that this rumor is even true. She feels this Conclave has better ways to spend its time than discuss myths and folkloric nonsense! But, even if, I repeat IF, this report is true, a single incident like this hardly means the beginning of an all-out war with every Spire. Her Majesty is unsure if all Spires should be treated as one entity or if each acts independent and autonomous. In that case, Riismark’s problem is Riismark’s, not the Conclave’s.”

“We find it amusing how easily Braeonia and the Highlands take their distance, seeing as no Braenon King has a Spire in their lands. Alas, their circumstances have also sealed their ignorance. The Spires are no tales. Those of us who live in their shadows know.”

“Hear, hear!”

“Then we’d be happy to hear from those who live in their shadow.”

“Indeed. Where is Riismark? They pride themselves for eleven thrones yet none attend the proceedings they have caused with their report? Where is Brandengrand, whose Prince would have us talk of Spires?”

“Perhaps the people of Lerac should speak. Rather than execute spiritual leaders of their neighbors, they could share some insight after their dealings with the Spire of Haustellum. Or will they deny the Enque incident as well?”

“We would remind this Conclave that the druid Diagach died during a revolt at the hands of unknown parties, sharing the fate Count Phillipe de Lerac, the last of his name. The Delegation of *Feranque* denie-”

“Elysses demands a retraction! That term has not been recognized by neither the Conclave nor her piers!”

“There are no piers to the Marquise in Galania!”

“Only the Emperor and the Heir Apparent hold any title above ‘Count’ in Galania! It is an affront to claim before this Conclave that she-”

“The title of Her Ladyship, Dorná, Marquise de Feranque, is inherited by her father, may Theos rest his soul, the Margrave of...”

Their squabbling voices rose in volume and tension and lost all her interest, even as they screamed her name and debated about her rights and titles and lands. That matter would be settled in the High Conclave, she knew, while the Low Conclave would keep debating so that no status quo would be established in the meantime. The Count of Elysses would eventually respond openly to her claims, perhaps militarily, but not before the High Conclave. For now, assassination attempts were the main form of meaningful debate. Having survived three in as many months, she knew there would be more

but right now, she was safe. Not even the crazy fanatics of the Ourovoros Hunters would try anything in the capital of Argem. No, the title debate could wait. Should wait. There were other matters at hand. While her representative kept screaming at the delegator of Elysses, with other Galan delegations butting in, Dorná let her blue eyes scan the room, almost indifferently. She was casually rolling between her fingers a crystal ball, like a large, clear marble. Not finding what she was looking for, she sighed and closed her eyes with an expression of tired, if not bored, superiority.

The ball started dancing faster between her fingers, with a grace and dexterity that the greatest sleight-of-hand artists would envy. From index and middle to middle and ring, to ring and little...

The voices reaching her ear became muffled, distorted, as her thumb reached to bring the crystal ball from between the ring and little fingers back, over the index and again between index and middle.

...thumb and little to thumb and index, index and middle to middle and ring...

Her mind was fixated on the move of the ball, letting all sounds reach her unfiltered, without focus. The voices, the panting breaths, a soft exhale from her left, the rustling of robes and dresses, a shuffling of papers from somewhere behind. All sounds, small and big, of a giant room filled with people, mixed with their own echoes, as they resonated above, on the giant dome over the Hollow Throne, then they all came to her at once, a single, cacophonous symphony, rather than a sum of sounds.

...middle and ring to ring and little, thumb and little to thumb and index...

She picked the voice of her delegator and brought it in the middle of her attention. The ball started moving faster, the graceful rolling giving way to a nervous juggling between fingers. Then she picked another sound, then another and another, as if concentrating on a single instrument of a performing orchestra. The sickly cough of a man at the left side of the room drummed. The shuffle of papers echoed like cymbals.

...thumb and index to index and middle, index and middle to middle and ring...

She listened further, as the ball moved ever faster, between tense fingers that juggled, now obsessively. Near the center of the room, too far by all accounts, the Vice-Chamberlain sighed, tired. A noble with Norvmann accent was whispering to his delegator. Aware of the tension in her body, she felt the pressure in her mind increasing as she pushed further. She reveled in it, that uneasy feeling of her thought and focus straining, all her body's nerves feeling tense. A pouch of coins rattled at the far side of the room. A man whispered angrily at his companion. An old man cursed under his breath in the corridor. A priest's robes rustled as he made the Sign.

...middle and ring to ring and little, little and thumb to thumb and index...

A man was talking to someone. His accent fit, even if the tone was low. Another man commented, his voice deep and calm. There was a third person present, listening silently but he sipped from a crystal glass. They were in the second ante-room, east of the Throne Room. The accented voice spoke again.

...thumb and index to index and- There!

She snapped the ball inside her fist, trapping the spell in the crystal focus, a flaming wind that now danced within. Some of the people around her shifted uncomfortably, sensitive to the imbalance, the shift of reality around them but oblivious to its meaning. She leaned with her hand over her eyes, hiding a sly, satisfied smile. She then sighed in fake fatigue, head resting on the hand holding the sphere, a noble lady tired of the loud men around her and nothing more.

And she listened to the words inside the sphere.



*Riismark - Ladenbourgh, 21th of Jux, 657 P.R.*  
*The Field of Ladzig*

“Why in the name of the Fall are we even in this battle, Grudher?”

Grudher had no answer. He was full of comments, stories and, most importantly at this time, problems, but not answers. So he stuck to the problems. He hefted his polearm as he lowered it and brought his shield before him, screaming a command. The others next to him did the same and right on time. The charging men at arms crashed on them. He felt his right arm being pushed back, shocking his shoulder so hard, it almost dislocated from the slot. He winced in pain but did not complain. He knew the pull meant someone had fallen right on his weapon. One less trying to kill him.

This was a general truth, he realized as he was pulling his weapon free, not just a temporary one. Answers were a category he generally lacked in life. He tried to wonder why that is but a shield meeting his interrupted his thought and his mind was fixed on the moment, almost as much as his feet were fixed in the ground beneath him. Thuds, clashes and curses around him informed him that the men at arms had met his men in earnest, those not falling on the polearms meeting shield with shield. There was a short time frame here, he knew, that would decide if they'd live or die. He hoped for the former.

“STRIKE STRIKE STRIKE, ye motherless bastards!”

He screamed at the top of his lungs then moved his whole right side back, distancing his body from behind the shield while keeping just as much weight behind it as was absolutely necessary. He saw the tip of a sword coming round the side of his shield, ready to stab blindly but he heard the clangs and splats, as the second and third rows lowered their long weapons over the shield wall and on the enemy. The sword faltered for a moment, then fell.

“DOUBLE STEP!” he screamed and when the whole platoon took the two steps back he yelled again “THRUST!” making the first line thrust as one, picking their targets. That was the trick. Keep them far, exploit the polearms' range and the speed their lighter armor offered. It would not last, he knew, Gheorg falling next to him being a sad but expected affirmation. But it was the trick nonetheless.

At least the crossbowmen were not firing at them, Grudher thought, going through the moves of battle almost mechanically. His mind raced to questions again. Why in the name of the Fall were they in this battle indeed?

They had been assigned to escort the Prince Fredrik lad during his trip to Brandengrad from Vestbridge. That had proved a long trip. Endless, really. Three months later and they'd traveled through half of Riismark but rarely had gotten close to Brandengrad from various routes, only to turn away from it. The Prince had met with all sorts of lordy types, even visited an Order priory and did that thing nobility did, which was talking a lot. And always during those times he had the militiamen close. He had been kind

enough to them, truth is, treated them like his own, Hel, he even spoke to them and got to know them by name, and how many Princes did that? Even after a proper escort of knights and his Household's Guards had met them, he still had not dismissed them. 'My private guard' he called them. Ha! So after the Prince lad had a bout with the Duke of Ladenborough, when he invited Grundher to his tent (to the ROYAL tent, thank you very much) along with Commander Mikhlos, neither felt like saying 'no', when he asked for a favor. The favor, which sounded suspiciously like an order in its wording, was "Hold the left flank front", while the Prince and the Duke settled their differences the way lordy types did. In Grundher's book, that translated as "keep people alive, without leaving the battlefield much."

"FIRST RETRACT! THIRD LOW!" he screamed, bringing his own weapon closer and securing it from the middle of its length under his shoulder. The third row lowered theirs at their full length, so that they slid between the shield openings, while the second kept theirs overhead, striking from above. When the men-at-arms crashed unto them anew, the militia had formed a spiked wall of shields and polearms, trying to keep them as far from their lightly armored bodies as possible.

"Oy, Hunbur, you alive?" he screamed, at a respite between clashes. He heard an 'aye' from somewhere in the back

"I know why we're 'ere!" he said "We're doin' a Prince a favor."

"Oh, yeah? That's some favor!" he heard an answer.

"Aye. And 'e said he's another to ask, if we all live."

"Take Argem?"

"Nah, deliver a message, then we go 'ome" he said, readying for another clash, as he whispered.

"Now, what 'arm could delivering a message do?"



*Riismark – Brandengrad, 24th of Jul, 657 P.R.  
Castle of Lions, Court of King Willem I*

Bishop Madheus closed his eyes and gave himself to the Grace of his Lord.

It was... perfection. It sprouted from his heart, joyful, eternal, like a spring on a mountain slope, endless and clear. It washed through him and he reveled at the familiar warm sense, as if the very light of Theos was shining inside him, on and from his very soul. He felt something beyond joy. He felt peace, he felt serenity...he felt salvation. Soon, he heard it. It whispered to him, a stream with the voice of myriads of soft prayers, uttered secretly, by the penitent and the faithful. The stream grew in intensity as more whispers where added, then more and more and... Taken by this endless river, he merely exhaled, his lips moving, tracing words of the different prayers that echoed softly and distantly in his ears. Moments later, his mindless muttering rose to a whisper, as he concentrated, reluctantly, to the task at hand. He searched among the stream of prayers, picking the words he needed.

By the sin of Man destruction prevailed, by the Sacrifice of the Theos' First, new balance came. In the name of that Sacrifice, I order thee, destruction, to depart!

He never knew if he actually spoke the words, nor had he asked or been told. He did not even know if other Ordained followed the same method. There was no recipe, no formula to the miracles, apart from the teachings and training before his Ordinance and his own understanding of faith. To Madheus it seemed as if he just gently tapped the words he needed from the endless prayers of the faithful, selecting them as they passed before him. Each time he knew which of them had been spoken truly and which of them were needed. That knowledge was enough for the miracle and it was certainly enough for him. Never did he feel closer to Theos than when he was opened to His Grace. The temptation to stay there, to keep feeling it forever, was great but the peasants' exclamations brought him almost violently back. His heart protested, yet his mind and body were thankful. No mortal could withstand the connection to the Grace for long.

"Be well, my son" he said smiling, but his hand trembled slightly from the strain as he pulled it from the man's head. It had been too long since he had last undergone his Confirmation. The rituals involved -the reaffirmation of his loyalty in the eyes of Theos and of the Mandates of Theos to him, as peers and flock prayed for him and lent him strength- allowed him to connect with Theos and offered the strength of will to keep both mind and body intact from communing with the overwhelming power of Theos' Grace. Still, he smiled bravely at the man before him, who was dressed in the standard armor of the militia, as the mundane reality of the material world came rushing back to him. Standing in the middle of the Court, he rose his hand and voice.

“Be well!” he said, his voice echoing in the throne room with the majesty of the power he served, as the Court of the King drowned in exclamations of wonder and praises to Theos. “Be well and walk with Theos!” the Bishop went on, smiling, thankful none applauded, as if he’d performed a trick. “All of you, brave men of Vestbridge! You have served your lords well and...”

King Willem rose his hand, drowning all movement and sounds in the Court and silencing the Bishop after a moment of thought. He was an old man, King Willem of Brandegrad, frail, a man of Court and prayer more than a man of battlefields. Only one guard of plated armor stood behind him, the royal Arms Master, but the rest of the men guarding the room and throne wore only robes and held a single sword. In a similar manner, the walls of the throne room, once simple and militaristic, now bore the symbols of the Theist Church under the banner of Brandegrad. Only the throne remained untouched, simple, small, a magnificent piece of bright steel with lions carved on the arm rests. The King sat in it in silence, studying the men and women before him, their uniforms as best presentable as possible.

“In fact” he said finally “good people of Vestbridge, you have gone above and beyond your call of duty.”

Apart from poor Hunbur, who still muttered “thank you” repeatedly for his healed shoulder, no other dared speak. They kept looking at the floor, throwing sideways glances at each other, the awe in their eyes after the miracle giving way to uncertainty before the words of a King.

“Indeed, Your Majesty” spoke the Bishop again, looking at the sovereign before turning to the militiamen once more. “Above and beyond! You took, we hear, part in the battle of Ladzig, a battle between two Kingdoms other than your own. What urged you, I wonder?” asked the Bishop, as the King looked silently. “I hope the Duke of Ladenbourgh does not think that Vestbridge rose arms against him.”

More silence as the uncertainty now gave way to fear.

“Be at peace, my children” the Bishop spoke now, smiling, as he took his place, standing at the right of the King’s throne. “His Majesty, King Willem, knows you are not to blame for this. Is he right to assume that Prince Fredrik put you on the field, discarding tradition and the laws of Kings? Was this the Prince’s fault and not your own, my children?”

“Actually” Grudher said, but his voice came almost croaking, nervous to speak, which was a miracle as wondrous as the healing. He cleared his throat. “Ahem. Actually, yer Majesty, yer Bishopness, I’m sure the good Duke of Ladenbourgh has other matters in mind. Ye see, your Bishopness, ‘e got a right beating, ‘e did, and ‘is forces were routed all well and proper. Yer Majesty, yer son’s... ahem. The Prince’s forces ‘ave ‘im on the run still, I wager, no! No wager! I don’t wager, that’s a sin and yer blessin’ if it pleases ye, thank ye very much. We’re ‘ere for another matter. See, the Prince asked for a favor.”

“A... favor?” the King spoke over the soft chuckles of his Court, rushing them to a halt.

“Aye, yer Majesty, if ye will. Called me in ‘is tent, ‘e did, after the battle. Grudher, my man, ‘e said, ye are an ‘onor to yer people and yer troops, ‘e said, ‘e did. No man, Prince or King, should ever ask for more, for ye ‘ave already won me a battle. Ye held the line with bravery and skill and...”

Someone pulled his sleeve. An angry whisper echoed in the room and more chuckles spread among the Court.

“...right” said Grudher. “’xcuse me, yer Majesty, that’s neither ‘ere nor there. The Prince asked us to deliver this.” He presented a parchment, opened from his seal. “Now, I did not open this” he rushed to explain “t’was already opened. It be a message the Prince received ‘imself from someone else. ‘e just wished ye see it.”

“Guard, bring it” said the King but Grudher was faster.

“Yer Majesty and yer forgiveness and with all due respect, my fault fer not explaining, but ‘e meant the Bishop” Grudher said and offered the parchment to the guard. “If it pleases ye” he added as an afterthought.

There was silence in the Court as one of the Sicarii, after a nod from the Bishop, took the parchment and gave it to him. There was silence while the Bishop read it, gradually with a pale expression. There was even silence as he walked about, still reading it. When seemingly finished, he turned and looked at the King for a moment before he regained his composure.

“I fear, my King, that the letter proves nothing but the connection between your son to heretics and heathens” he said in the end. “Written by a mage, it explained their despicable spells, their vile practices and their unholy goals, as they eavesdropped through magic on the conversation of a Brother Bishop in Argem. What the conversation was, matters little, I am sure you agree. What is obtained through sin is tainted and cannot lead to truth.”

For a few moments that felt like an eternity to the Court, the King did nothing, said nothing. He sat on his throne and in Grudhar’s eyes he looked more of an old, tired man than a King. He looked outside the window silently and there was a thoughtful sadness in his eyes. In the end he nodded, slowly, almost reluctantly, in agreement.

“Such actions cannot be ignored” started the Bishop as he swiftly threw the letter in the hearth before the throne. “Your son...”

“My son...” he said, his voice low. “My son” he repeated. “Not always have him and I seen eye to eye, it is no secret. Not ever have I condoned his steps away from Theos’ path. But he is kind to his subjects, I am told. And a leader of men, no doubt. Even these good, simple men of Vestbridge followed him to battle. Shrewd, audacious and courageous, those traits he bears, I know. Who of us Kings of Riismark would so readily call for the Eleven? None. We would linger and debate, reluctant to invoke such ancient an oath. Yet he did, without doubt or second thought and some Kings listened. He started a war with a Duke who challenged his King’s land and achieved victory overnight. But he did so in my name and in my absence, to cause my spite and my unhappiness, not out of duty to his King.”

He looked up, his eyes passing all over his Court as he spoke, his voice hardening, his eyebrows furrowing. The displeasure of a King loomed over the room and the militiamen lowered their heads, as if by instinct.

“Before I left for Argem, I made my will known: My banners would carry the symbols of Theos. The Nuntium would be emblazoned on my flags. My armies would march with the grace of the Lord, their Bishop and his Sicarii with them. There would be no more tales of demons in this Court. Instead, he called for the Legions and marched with them for Theos knows what reason, then delivered my regiments to them. He chased my Bishop off my Court and he paraded around Riismark, rallying Kings as if he were one, spreading tales and bringing shame to this house, while making impossible claims of Demons and Spires and berating his own House!”

His voice boomed and echoed in the room as it rose near the end. No one spoke. No one even coughed or moved, until the King sat back again, catching his tired breath.

“I do not claim to know my son” he said in the end, voice calm and weak once more. “His sole purpose in life seems to be to mock me and our Lord and bring shame to this House. Yet I do know he has his Kingdom’s good in mind, however misled his decadent and sinful life has been. He dreams of a united Empire and I dare say he could put our House on the Hollow Throne. But I fear I see only

conceit behind his virtues, vanity behind his successes. As a King, I do not fear for the safety of my Kingdom, once I depart. That, he knows how to protect. But I do fear for its soul, as I do for my son's, as is a King's and father's duty."

He paused for a moment, scanning his Court once more, his look lingering over the lowered head of the militiamen. Bishop Madheus looked at him in the eyes and nodded reassuringly when their glances crossed.

"Until he repents in the eyes of Theos" King Willem went on "and until he apologizes to His Bishop. Until he brings my army back with the symbols of this House's faith on their banners. Until he leaves his pride and vanity aside, kneels before his King and Bishop and kisses his God's symbols. Until such a time, he is to live in exile. Any man or woman of Brandengrad that follows him while in exile will be a traitor, any King or Lord of the Eleven that offers sanctuary, an enemy. He will leave not only Brandengrad but Riismark and he will return with Theos or not at all."

Silence fell in the Court before comments and whispers rose to a murmur that filled the Court. Soon everyone was talking. Everyone but the men of the Vestbridge militia, who looked at each other nervously, afraid of the moment their presence would be remembered.

"I shall pray for your son, Your Majesty" said the Bishop finally. "As I am sure your Court will. I shall pray that the Lord helps him leave his sinful ways behind and that He brings him to us once more."

"Pray no longer, Bishop."

The murmur rose to a clamor of surprised yelps, as Prince Fredrik walked out from amongst the militiamen, throwing back his coif and dressed in their manner. The King turned to look at him frowned then shook his head.

"Your taste for the dramatic has not waned since you were a boy, I see" said the King bitterly.

"My hand is forced" came the reply, as Fredrik walked slowly towards the throne. "When the dogs in my yard bite, I must come to my house a thief."

"My house!"

"His house if anything!" Fredrik cried, pointing at the Bishop, who still stood by the King's right. "Where are your guards, Father? Where are the men sworn to this House and trained to protect its King? Who are these men that guard the throne of Brandengrad, who look for another man's approval before yours?"

"This House is a House faithful to the Lord" spoke the King. "His Sicarii and His Grace will protect your King, since you insist on dragging his armies to unnecessary wars."

"You and I both know the reason of this war! I have respected your denial with my silence, thinking it eases your pain and guilt but I will not sit idly when our people are threatened. I have acted as the leader of our forces, which you named me. I spoke with other rulers, in Lerac, where the Spire also meddled in the affairs of men, and a Polmag Prince that claims he has found a new Spire. A new Spire! The Conclave must know of the danger in their lands, the power sleeping in our midst! But only Kings speak in the Conclave. I had hoped you would when you went to Argem but now I know it is not so. Even after I sent news of the attack, you spoke with priests and Bishops instead, as if prayers would keep the Spires away."

"You insist on this fable! And what is your proof? The accounts of decadent Galans and heretic Polmags?! This House does not deal with heathen, let alone demons! Even if the Spires dared to show themselves, my banners would carry the symbols of faith to meet them! My armies would march to victory with the Lord!"

“The Lord? Was it then His gold and silver that paid officials and denied me audience at four Courts of the Eleven? Was it Theos that kept me from Brandengrad until your return? Was it He that paid the Duke to attack me, once our army joined with me? Or was it He that convinced you that I am lying about Nepenthe and..?”

“Enough!” the King slammed his fist on his throne before getting up. “Enough of your blasphemy! Enough of your lies! You will not drag this House to Belzul’s Hel with you! I will not allow it! You are to leave this House and not return until my death!”

Silence fell for some moments. Then, as Fredrik turned to leave without a word, the Bishop spoke.

“But first, Prince, you will tell your father where the body of your brother is” he said, calmly. “Your father deserves to bury a faithful son with proper rituals.”

Fredrik paused, his back turned on the King and Bishop. His head tilted for a moment, his eyes narrowed in thought. Then he turned again, looking at his father.

“You truly believe this?” he asked.

“You may deceive men, Prince” said the Bishop “with lies of Spire demons. But you cannot deceive the Lord.”

No man had ever been ignored more than the Bishop was by Fredrik.

“What he implies but does not say” went on Fredrik. He had turned once more to face his King and was now walking slowly towards the throne. “You truly think it too? That I staged all this and killed Villemfred?”

“Some sins even confession cannot undo” kept answering the Bishop for the silent King. Willem was not looking at either, as his son was coming closer. His head was resting on his fist, looking out the window. He wore a torn expression, a hurt expression, but he showed no sign he’d answer.

“You paid too much to teach me to think, father” Fredrik said, standing now before his father. “I urge, nay, plead you do the same! Think me a sinner, think me malicious, if it pleases you, but do think, father! Tell me you see how no gain would come to me from Villemfred’s death, even if you do not believe it would only bring me pain.”

Silence.

“Then tell me you see he spat his poison out of turn because he heard you keeping me as heir. Tell me you see his provocation, thinking himself safe, for I would fear the Conclave’s judgement, should a noble touch a priest. For the good of the Kingdom, my King, think! See the string’s he’d put on you, using your grief, your anger and your guilt for sins that are not yours, to see his dream come true, to see the Church bear arms” Fredrik pleaded.

The silence kept. Fredrik, leaned over his father, kept searching, pleading for his King’s, his father’s, gaze. The Arms Master took a step closer, a reminder he was there to all who watched. Yet still the King would not speak and would not move, eyes nailed on the window.

“So be it” Fredrik said, sighing. “Only the King can speak to the Conclave and I need them to listen.”

He reached and drew the Arms Master’s sword from its sheath. Bishop Madheus yelled, screaming a prayer to protect the King. An excellent opportunity, he thought. The priest protecting a King from the sinful. Theos protecting his chosen. His Lord would be-.

His neck was pierced through, his eyes widened, his prayer fading instantly, along with the life from his eyes. He fell, the thud unheard among the screams and cries of the Court.

## Epilogues

“Now at that point, I told ‘is lordshipness”, ye ain’t talking to me like that, ye ain’t, noble or no noble. I am a citizen and I ‘ave rights.”

“You didn’t, ye ol’ fibber” cut in Hunbur, looking bored as he tested his shoulder for the millionth time since the Bishop had healed it, bringing his mug to his mouth.

“I did, I did” ol’ Grudher kept at it calmly, eyes crossed as he looked for remains on his finger, which had gone exploring again. “On me grandma’s goat’s beard, I did. I ain’t none of yer hounds, I told ‘im, aye, I am a citizen and I ‘ave rights. The-”

“Yeah, the guards keep readin’ them to you, every other fortnight!” someone cut in.

The comment sent the lot of them into a huge laugh. Seidhar the smithy’s echoed in the tavern, as he patted the joker, young Jebho, in the back, while others voiced their teases. Calm, stoic, used to it, Ol’ Grudher faked preoccupation as he kept looking at his finger, ignoring the lot of them but inside he was fuming. The boy had stolen his line.

“Oy! Cut the jokes!” screamed Kirrin the innkeeper. “What happened to the Prince?”

“‘e’s a’ight” the shoemaker replied. “‘e’s to be taken to the Conclave next year for judgement. Apparently that’s what ‘appens to noble-types that kill priests. The King of a father weren’t though. ‘e started screamin’ then ‘e kinda choked, graspin’ ‘is ‘eart. Poor sod, too ol’ for such excitement ‘e is, I think. ‘eard ‘e’ll pull through though.”

“I thought we’d hung for sure” butted in Hunbur.

“Aye, but we didn’t. The Prince kept screamin’ at the Arms Master we ‘ad nothin’ to do with all this.” Grudher gulped down some ale before he went on. “To be fair, I’m pretty sure we’re lucky the ol’ King almost kicked it. ‘e would have seen us hang, I wager.”

Everyone around nodded.

“Still” said Kirrin. “Clever.”

“What’s that?”

“The Prince. He wanted to speak to the Conclave, didn’t he? Now he will. And he removed an enemy of his in the process.”

Thoughtful nods and exclamations acknowledged the cleverness, before people turned to their mugs once more. Best not linger on the affairs of the noble-types, everyone thought. Everyone but Grudher.

“Well, ‘e better tell ‘em about our bravery. Wouldn’t mind a medal from the Conclave” he said and those who did not throw things at him, laughed.



A solar circle had been completed. The lord demanded it. The lord had ordered. The Indigo Imperative complied.

The Imperative walked through the tunnels of Nepenthe’s higher levels with the purpose its name implied. Some dronelings made way and bowed as it passed. It took a lot not to cringe at the very ugliness of their existence. “Form must equal purpose” his mandates taught. “Purpose equals beauty.”

The Imperative knew the words of the mandates but its nature found it difficult to understand the meaning. This was neither positive nor negative. It was simply proof that the Imperative's own purpose was not to understand. It was a higher form of life than the dronelings but it was still a clone. Such meanings were beyond its understanding.

It reached the curtains of its master's chamber, jade crystals dancing on a series of strings made of nerves and it stopped. There was no need to announce its presence nor use in trying to hide it. The Master knew.

"Proceed" the beloved voice spoke melodically, pheromantic scents filling his thought with calm and purpose. It entered the room and its mind rejoiced at the sight of the Master's back. True to the Master's name, the Chemistry Variant, the Alchemist as the locals called the Master, was hard at work in the laboratory.

"Flesh of my flesh" the Master communicated, without turning, the praise more attention than the Imperative felt it deserved.

"Purpose of my purpose" came the response, freely and willingly, no protocol needed. "The time limit is past. The price has not been paid nor your message answered."

"I affirm" the Master communed in perfect clarity. "The results of the Infiltration units?"

"They confirm disarray and lack of purpose. The local populace war each other. Within the House of the Counterparty, the Patriarch and the Progeny warred in words. The Progeny discontinued an authority figure of the One Unseen and is to be tried for unauthorized discontinuation. There is no force opposite ours."

There was a sense of purpose fulfilled, from the Master. The reports were an expected outcome.

"I affirm, Flesh of my Flesh" the Master spoke in the words of humans. It was to serve as training for both of them, the Imperative knew, but it was still unsettling. "A solar year has passed and the Prince did not take up my offer. Instead of killing his father, he kills a priest. The House of the Counterparty has first denied what was agreed upon and then refused my proposal. The next price should match the offence."

The Indigo Imperative stood patient and uncertain. The words of men did not commune orders as clearly as the Speech. Sensing its uncertainty, the Master made the order clear.

"Mobilize the Second Force to the assigned target. Harvest everything. I need more resources" the Master said and went on, making sure the order is understood.

"Delete Vatsdam."

*"A great bush of wild roses,  
that is what the Kingdoms are.  
Endless thorns and blossoms of crimson blood  
sharing a distant, common root."*

*- Charles Armatelli*