

A good death

By Samantha Norin

The city of Northport has given Frank an uneasy feeling ever since he arrived. He didn't notice it at first, but the more time he spent wandering the streets, the more he started to notice strange things. Regular people seemed more fearful than usual of the nobility of the city, often averting their eyes completely, even when doing business with them, while usually a friendly and lively city, the nobility seemed to cast a shadow of fear and sadness over everything they touched.

There was something missing in some of the noblemen and womens eyes, their smiles of the passersby seemed hollow and false, an emptiness he could not quite describe. There were ominous black spires seemingly built at random intervals in the city, locking both entrances and windows, and seemed to lack any function, only the nobility of the city seemed to pay any attention to these strange structures, often touching them as they passed by, as if the performing a ritual of some sort.

Worst of all were the priestesses that seemed to populate every part of the sprawling city. Strange silent women clad in black, and wearing grotesque masks of death and decay. They were silent, and easy to ignore at first, but as soon as Frank noticed one, he started to see them everywhere. From the docks, to the pleasure gardens of the rich trade districts, they were always present, always in the shadows, and always avoided by the locals.

When he later saw one of the strange priestesses sitting alone while having an afternoon beer, he simply couldn't resist interrogating her. After several glasses of whisky his common sense was severely hampered, and his curiosity won over his usually keen survival instinct. After finishing his last beer, he stumbled towards his target, his new local friends unsuccessfully trying to goad him back to his seat. He was not afraid of some stranger in an off putting mask, and after seeing the fear in the eyes of the traders and sailors whenever he mentioned them, he needed answers.

He made his way to the strange woman's table and laid a hand on her arm. He needed to make sure she was actually there and not a figment of his drunken imagination. He was about to start asking some questions of the strange lady, when he was cut off by the cold and emotionless voice of the priestess in front of him.

“Do you fear a poor death?” She asked plainly, casually continuing her preparations. Frank blinked in surprise and shock for a moment, he was about to object when the woman interrupted and again asked, “You are a sailor, are you not? Do you fear a poor death?”

Frank sat down next to the stranger, still holding on to her arm, he was barely registering it anymore. He was not one to take threats lightly, and even though alarm bells started ringing in the back of his head, and the cold arm of the strange lady put his hairs on end, he pushed on.

“What exactly do you mean by a poor death? Who gets to decide what my death means!” He blurted out a bit more angrily than perhaps he planned. He had seen enough death to be more familiar with the subject than he wanted to be, all seasoned sailors had, it came with the occupation.

His head had to hurt from a combination of the booze, the strange perfumes the woman was exuding, it smelled of moths, wild flowers and grave dirt. The masked woman nodded as he sat down, continuing her work as if she was never interrupted. If she was afraid or nervous, she hid it well, continuing to carefully set up her macabre little altar.

“I didn't mean to offend you” She explained softly, if not emphatically, “Everyone dies poorly, even if they are not aware of it, it is only natural, death is sudden, unexpected, and lonely, except of course, for those that can't afford better options” She gestured to the room, pointing at the clientele of mostly farmers, dockworkers and sailors, and then to the empty chair in front of her, at which she had been preparing circles of black salt before Frank interrupted her.

“Who are these others, the rich, the church, nobility? What other options are there!” Frank was almost shouting now, now more angry than drunk, he was determined to get answers, he had seen so many of his friends die for nothing, not to get answers, especially if there was another way, another option.

Frank was enjoying himself royally, he had gotten a grand bonus from his last job, and the ship wouldn't leave again for a few days, plenty enough time to enjoy himself. Northport was everything he had hoped for and more, exotic drinks, foods and even more exotic excitements. The city was massive, almost unimaginable so, a true capital. It seemed that he could spend an entire lifetime here and still not see it all.

As he was expecting, in such a city, there was also pain and suffering. During his short time here he saw murders, brawls, sickness and poverty. This is to be expected in all cities, especially one as big as this one. But one group stood aside from the fear, the death and the sickness.

The nobility of the city did not just seem unaffected, but completely unbothered by the suffering around them. He had seen a noblewoman unbothered wander through a crowd of sick dockworkers without as much as covering her mouth while coughing her eyes empty and glistening.

Many of them openly carried jewelry and found clothing in areas where, if it were any other city they would have been stricken down dead on the spot and robbed. Frank wondered what kind of power of fear these nobles could assert over the common folk, what security they had that they would not be harmed, he was not sure if it was bravado, a secret protection, or a combination of both.

"The nobles of this city" the priestess continued to explain, seemingly unbothered by Frank's sudden aggressive mood. "Do not have to face the indecency of an unprepared or indignant death like a simple commoner" she continued as she carefully removed Frank's hand from her arm, in order to be able to better set up a series of small black candles in the middle of the table..

"The priesthood can of course not bestow any form of true immortality to the united ofcourse, that would be against the contract, but in return for safety, we can fudge the numbers so to speak. We make sure that the nobles get the death they wish, and deserve." She explained as she carefully poured a ring of black salt around the cluster of lit candles in the center of the table.

"What would you do for such assurance I wonder, what price would you be willing to pay for such certainty of life and death." The woman wondered out loud, partly to the man sitting next to her, partly to the room in general and most unnervingly to a spot seemingly slightly over Frank's ear.

Frank collapsed back into his chair, if this woman was telling the truth, did that mean that the nobles were truly immortal, until their time was up? How was such power possible?

"I take it from your expression that you are not familiar with our customs, though you approaching one of my sisterhood so callously was also an easy tell" The woman gave off a gurgling sound that might have been a laugh at this statement. "Now, we can't actually protect them from chance, malice or their own stupidity. But what we can offer them is time, and comfort, to make sure that when their time comes, it is on their own terms and their affairs are in order." The priestess finished her preparations here, and finally turned her face towards Frank, her cold and empty eyes clearly visible under her mask.

“The nobility here does not fear death, not because they are immune to its whims of chance, but because they know, they will always face their end with dignity” She gestured once again to the empty chair in front of her. “The man I am to meet today was fatally wounded in a duel, six weeks ago. I was able to give him some time to settle his affairs, and, in his own words, be able to get one last drink in before the end.”

It was at this point that Frank finally realized how empty the bar was around the strange woman, even his drinking buddies had slunk away from his side, currently hiding at the other end of the bar. It seemed that, whatever was about to happen at this table, no one wanted to be directly involved in it, or its aftermath, not even the bartender was looking their way.

“Most of them avoid our order, they fear our magic, they fear our ways, and they fear us. They whisper at the price that we paid for our ascension, and the crimes that got us exiled from our homeland, they are all wrong of course, the truth is much, much worse.” The masked woman gave out another gurgling sound that could only generally be called a laugh.

As the spoke, a middle aged man sat down at the designated spot on the table, paying Frank no attention. The man had walked silently, and he seemed to lack a breath, his chest still and empty. Frank left as soon as the nobleman arrived, he knew better to get in the way of the ruling class of a major trade power. But this time it was something else, the nobleman's eyes were hollow, and his smile seemed, wrong . . .