

## **The Dance of Nerull**

**By Patrick Williamson**

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Today is the festival called “The Dance of Nerull” also known as “The Hand’s Dance”, or simply the Dance. The Dance is one of Perrenland’s oldest festivals and has been part of the cultural calendar of the city of Schwartzenuin for longer than written records have been kept. The nature of the festival often leaves visitors to the country a little perplexed. How can a good society so openly celebrate a ritual to a god so dark and evil? In explanation, they mostly get simply a wry smile, a shake of the head, and comments like “Dumkoff Ootlanders”.

The nature of the festival is thus. Every year on the last day of Coldeven one speaker from the Old Kerk is chosen by divine oracle to take on the mantle of an individual known as “The Hand of Nerull”. Though the priest’s identity is often known, everyone treats him or her as an anonymous person. In fact to be quite correct “if” the person needs to be referred to at all whilst acting as the “Hand” then said reference is as one who has departed to another place. It is not deemed appropriate or polite to ever reveal any knowledge that one knows whom was acting as the “Hand”. This is because Nerull is the Flan god of Death, Darkness and Evil. Worship of him is considered heretical and diabolical in Perrenland, but the Old Kerk and indeed Perrenders in general still feel the need to placate him. This they do once a year with the Hands Dance.

The Hands Dance is said to hearken back to the days of the Ur-Flannae, an ancient Flan empire of the Quaglands, and beyond. It is said that the Ur-Flannae held many dark gods in high honor and Nerull as one of their supreme gods, and they openly worshipped him. For the Ur-Flannae, according to Perrendland's intelligencia, had no sense of good or evil being barbaric and uncouth. Yet, some traditions are best not forgotten no matter how much time has passed, lest the dark god’s fury be unleashed on this the coldest, darkest day of the year. The festival is based around the chosen “Hand of Nerull” performing the only duty that office holds within the Old Kerk. The singular duty of the office is the execution of Perrenlands most heinous criminals called the Kust. Kust is an old Flan word that roughly translates as both accursed and evil, and on this day they are condemned to hell.

The festival starts, as do most festivals, with the donning of traditional costumes (white hooded robes with skull masks), with dances, and a great deal of alcohol abuse. Everyone dresses for the occasion in long white shrouds, with leering skull masks. The fact that everyone has traditionally dressed incognito is said to have been the main cause over the centuries of the strengthening of Perrenlands old bloodlines with new blood, and couples locked together in wild embraces is not an uncommon sight on the streets of Schwartzenuin during the festival. Some scholars, in fact, refer to the festival as being dualistic in that aspects of fertility and renewal are as prominent as aspects of passing and death. The quickening of many wombs and a high birth rate nine months after the festival seems to bear this out.

About mid-morning the Hand enters the city via the “Rund Huis” or main ceremonial gate with his grim procession of Kust guarded by the famous Bruinsgardt of Perrenland. Down the PlazDerGoot he will lead his flock make a turn past the Zee-Acadame onto Bakkerstrât. Here they will pass the famous drinking establishment Der Aldboot before going out through Deaths gate facing the lake. Along the beach the possession will go up the hill to Deaths Bluff the promontory that overlooks Bruinsbay. From here the Kust have one last journey to make, the plummet to the Paleen rock below.

The place of execution the “Paleen Rock” is a wide jagged lump of yellowish rock that rests below Deaths Bluff, the highest point on the cliffs of the city. The fall of exactly 237 feet onto the rock has never failed to kill one of the Kust, or indeed anyone else. From the cliff each of the Kust is led by the Hand of Nerull, cursed for their crimes for a final time and then thrown to their death with the cheers of the crowd. Below, the Hands Helpers bear witness to the executions. No one ever touches the Paleen Rock during this festival.

So, thousands of people from across Perrenland brave the cold weather and converge upon Schwartzenuin, filling its taverns, Clanhuis and inns to the bursting point. Many also, who are more grim of mood, come to see justice done.