

# The Far Side Of The River

*Game Master's Comments: This scene is heavy, and has some religious dialogue from both the player and game-master. Its the first time such themes have ever been prominent in one of my games, despite the fact that I am open about my faith. Normally I've avoided such themes in my games as a matter of course. From my perspective it adds an unexpected and interesting aspect to the game and characters. And made Bvarlan suddenly human. As a result, I had to sit down and decide what to do with him in the larger context of the game, since he's not just the Countess' "professional boogey-man" anymore.*

*Reinhardt's Comments: David wrote me and asked if I wanted to play out this scene or deal with it anecdotally. I chose to play it. David and I are from diverse religious backgrounds (both of us are religious), but I think we are on the same page here. The story takes place in a time when religion was part of everyday life. It would be a false presentation to ignore or lighten it. I think it brings depth to the story and characters. The situation is heavy, but realistic based upon the circumstances.*

## 9 Helane 719, Caer Nurel

The boat had rushed down river and across to the western bank smoothly, touching a few hundred feet down river. Reinhardt had been able to make out four figures on the battlements of the keep as they crossed, and had heard shouting between the keep and the men on the common, but that had been cut short when the scream was heard. It had been a long, elemental scream of sheer agony – of a man subjected to unbearable pain. It came from the forest close to where Reinhardt and Bvarlan had landed, in the direction of the labor camp where the village men had been forced to work. Then there were only the sounds of the rushing river and a raven's harsh squawking as they finished pulling the river boat onto the bank.

Not bothering to drop the sail the two men began to make their way into the thick underbrush – old forest whose ground was thick with wind-felled, rotting tree trunks, ferns, lichens, and fallen leaves and boughs – moving as quickly as caution would allow. This area was predominantly white oak and hickory, shadowy but for the motes of light that managed to penetrate the thick cover above. After a moment, as they reached the embankment that rose up to overlook the labor camp, they came face to face with two middle-aged peasants who had clearly been headed for the river. The sounds of chaos could be heard somewhere behind them.

The tall one was Dugal, Reinhardt remembered. His short, bald and gray-bearded companion had been called Uther. Both men were ashen faced, a blank faced look of shock written on their features. Seeing Reinhardt and Bvarlan, the men stopped. Reinhardt looked at the men, and then spoke: "It is I, Lord of the Oak, my true name is Sir Reinhardt Maddox. Do tell what goes here?"

The men looked truly unnerved, they bowed their heads, Uther's bobbing and nodding repeatedly. "The guards are... dealt with," Dugal said, his voice barely audible. He repeated his last words "dealt with" in an ominously final voice.

"O Lord Above!" Wailed Uther as another agonized scream came from the other side of the rise. He buried his eyes in his hand and shook his head with a sob. Dugal touched his forehead and heart with a knuckle in reverence at the mention of the Creator, and then put his hand on his friend's shoulder to steady him. Uther looked up at Reinhardt, his eyes haunted as he blurted out: "They're murderin' em,' Lord Oak. God help us – murderin' em' most horrible!"

Reinhardt and Bvarlan exchanged a troubled glance and quickly began to shove past the peasants. Bvarlan was telling the men to go to the boat when the short, dark form of Ardan, the leader of the village men on this side of the river, appeared at the top of the rise. He was spattered head to toe with blood and held a bloody hatchet in his hand. "Lord Oak! Are you the Lord Oak?" He cried, gesturing emphatically for them to come. "Come quick! I couldn't stop them. They've gone stark raving mad!"

Reaching the top of the rise, Reinhardt and Bvarlan looked down on a grizzly scene. One of the guards, a tawny haired youth, had been hung from the trunk of a great white oak, a tree-spike driven through each of his shoulders, and through his thighs, just above the knees. Blood ran down the tree and pooled in the roots a foot beneath his feet. The sounds of chaos had given over to a pervading and ghastly silence, and most of the mob were now milling about as though in a daze – the shock and guilt of the individual beginning to emerge from the collective savagery of the inflamed mob upon them.

Reinhardt could see several bloody, axe-wielding men standing to one side, staring with blank shock at the scene, motionless like statues. One of them turned away and began to retch. "We couldn't stop them," Ardan said desperately as he stood next to Reinhardt. "We ran the other one down and when we got back... we couldn't stop them."

The guard on the tree began to scream again. Bvarlan swore under his breath and drew his long-knife, starting down into the camp to finish the man. Reinhardt turned with fury in his eyes. He grabbed Ardan's tunic by the shoulder and spun him. "I want all them men assembled down there in the clearing now!" Ardan's eyes grew wider and he dropped his hatchet. "Every last man-jack of them," spat Reinhardt. Ardan bowed and moved at the same time. Reinhardt was on his heels.

Bvarlan reached the dying guard. There was no pause for reflection. One short deliberate thrust put metal through the poor soul's heart. This time there was no cry of agony – just a long sigh of death. Reinhardt moved over to tree as Arden assembled the men, having them stack their weapons in a pile and saying "Tis Lord Oak – the Countess's man," to the men who were too sullen and mystified to understand what was happening. Reinhardt had little doubt the other guard had been hacked to pieces somewhere beyond the camp. From the sheer amount of blood on the axe wielding men, he feared, while swifter, the man's fate had been no less gruesome.

"What Godless butchery is this?!" Reinhardt roared as he spun on the men. "Is this a village of barbarians or of civilized men?" He stalked into the men, his wrathful mood combining with the authority of she who he represented to cause many to draw back in fear. He looked to different faces. "Noble battle is worthy in God's eyes, but this...this Devilry is unacceptable from the people of my village." Most of the men hung their heads in shame, a few stood in silent stoicism. Reinhardt let his words sink in, then took a deep breath and spoke more calmly. "I am now Lord in Nurelia. I understand the pain and humiliation Kural and his thugs put you through. Therefore, I will not pass judgment against any man involved in this matter."

A few of the men looked up. Reinhardt added a bit more intensity to his voice again. "However: God will judge every one of you for this, and we need all the favor we can get from God to see this village through the winter. I expect all of you to seek His absolution and to make whatever amends you can for the sake of His Name." He looked over at Bvarlan, who stood quietly nearby, his face cast in a dark expression Reinhardt had not seen heretofore. "Now, get that man off of the tree, and get the bodies wrapped up and ready to move for a proper burial. Bring them to the boat and prepare to cross the river. The village has been liberated, you are going home."

Reinhardt slowly walked back over to Bvarlan. The two men stood quietly for a moment as Ardan took charge of the villagers, snapping off directions in a hard, staccato voice.

"The small city," Bvarlan said, touching his hand to his heart before grasping Reinhardt's shoulder. "Is so seldom ruled by the breath of the divine that gives man life; all too often it is ruled by the human animal lurking just under the surface. It's a savage foe. None of us are free from it – all men are vulnerable and weak. I've seen it break men both small and great. Mastering it takes uncommon strength," his voice was that of a father conveying wisdom to a son. "And strength in that measure is naught but a precious gift from God." Bvarlan let his hand fall from Reinhardt's shoulder and shook his head, clearing it and changing the subject all at once. "We've much to do," he said simply. "And little time in which to do it."

"Five are down," said Reinhardt. "We must now look to our caged rat and decide our course. I want to get everyone back to the village as soon as possible. I will go with the first boat – you come with the last."

— *David Queenann* 2006/02/16 12:13

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Last update: **2006/02/17 00:08**

