

The Baron, The Gentle, and The Warrior

Game Master's Comment: I wanted to give the players a chance to interact directly with one another as opposed to just interacting with me. This is also the first time we have any character interaction with Countess Curo's man: Bvarlan. The players fleshed out their plan, referenced at the bottom "off screen."

Reinhardt's Commentary: I was still feeling things out as to how to proceed to Nurelia when David threw this at Kamran. I also did not know how Kamran's player would respond to orders from me. Some roleplayers have a problem when a player is put into a position of authority over them. Kamran is a true roleplayer and rolled with it.

1 Helane 719, Gardirentown, The Dragon's Rest

Carnage was the only word that could adequately describe the scene at the Dragon's Rest, Gardirentown's noblest of inns. Three men had lain dead in the street, the dirt around them dark with blood, when Reinhardt had arrived at a full gallop with Faranir and Sir Trent - with four of his men - in his wake. Two of the men lay in the shadows at the mouth of the alley between the inn and a large stone storehouse.

The first, a man with three fingers on his left hand, had his head all but cleaved from his shoulders, and the second had been split from crown to Adam's apple - a wound that could have only come from an axe. The third man, with a grotesque harelip, had lain face down in the street with a deep wound in his back, clearly having fled whatever melee had occurred. There was a trail of blood from where he had fallen and tried to crawl to safety, and where his head had been cleaved from behind. Whether or not he had asked for quarter - he had been given none.

The men were not from Gardirentown, or the surrounding villages, and they had clearly come expecting a battle. They wore cuirasses and bracers of kurbul - boiled leather armor - and had been carrying broadswords. By custom the broadsword was a chivalric weapon, and the right to wield it was implicitly the domain of the gentle class, and their retainers. These men had more the look of mercenaries or brigands than of being gentle born, and they wore no livery. Rather, over their arms and armor, they had donned voluminous black hooded cloaks. The garments had served as macabre echo of burial shrouds.

Reinhardt had dismounted, handing the reins of his destrier to Faranir, ignoring the gathering crowd of onlookers. A hot-headed, red-tinged Reksyni plains horse who loved to run, the steed snorted and shook its mane, stamping its hooves in annoyance. Reinhardt and Sir Trent had ascended the stairs to the porch, their swords drawn, and entered the common room, stepping over the body of a serving girl no more than fourteen years old. The hardwood floor around her had been slick with blood. The scene before them was one of utter disarray.

Several of the common room's polished wood tables had been flipped violently over, and the one of the windows had been busted outward, its shutters and a fortune in rare glass panes, destroyed. In the center of the room, the man Bvarlan knelt over a tall, bearded, stork-like young man, a bloodied war axe lying beside him. The grizzled, one-eyed warrior had been in the process of cutting the young man's clothes, a sundered, blood-thick suit of russet wool proper for what he likely was - a tradesman of some sort.

The young man Kamran lay unconscious a few feet away, a noblewoman in her forties - his mother

from first impressions - and another of the inn's serving girls, rolling him onto his back. The noblewoman had a ghastly looking purplish bruise on her temple, but she seemed steady, her face set in a grim mask. Kamran had been wounded, but from Reinhardt's vantage point the wounds, a cut on the shoulder and across his ribs, didn't look life threatening.

"The fourth man escaped," Bvarlan said without preamble, nodding towards the broken window. "Just a moment ago, by horse."

Reinhardt looked at Sir Trent, who without a word moved quickly back outside. Reinhardt could hear Sir Trent yelling for someone who had seen a rider fleeing the scene to point the way. A moment later Reinhardt the sounds of Sir Trent and his men's galloping north from the town on the river road was heard. Bvarlan, pressing his hand onto the wound on the young man's side, had looked up and given Reinhardt a terse account. The young man was Master Jered of the Peaceful Boar at Caer Nurel. The innkeeper usually came into Gardiren twice a year to stock expensive spirits and purchase supplies he could not from Tonot.

He made his journey early this season - under the pretext of enjoying the Banquet of St. Claudia in Gardiren - on behalf of Nurel's peasantry, hoping beyond hope to gain an audience with the Countess, desperate to spur her to do something on their behalf. He was to be admitted to the castle in the morning - and four men had tried to kill him this night.

Now - an hour later - with the moon falling and the night sky lightening, Reinhardt sat in a wooden chair in one of the inn's rooms, where Kamran, and the innkeep, Jered, had been laid in the beds.

Kamran swam slowly back to consciousness, his head throbbing, and the blackness turning to blurred and doubled vision. He winced in the lamp light. Rough hands pushed him firmly back onto a bed. There were low voices, men's voices, which made him feel as though he was underwater. A cold compress was pressed onto his brow. The room, and the scarred face of the one-eyed warrior, slowly came into focus. "It seems the Countess has found herself a right firebrand," the man said with grim satisfaction; and then, as Kamran forced himself to sit, "slowly now, or you'll tear your stitches. Take the small beer."

He pressed a flagon of small beer into Kamran's hands. The third brewing of the ale, it had almost no alcohol content and less taste. It was a drink for children and the infirm, but it was safer than water, and he drank it with a shocking, greedy thirst. The man took the empty flagon and set it aside. Kamran, filled with concern, asked: "My mother?"

"Yer mother's fine, boyo," the man said, his Harnica accented with heavier gutturals and sharper glottal stops. It didn't have the Kaldoric burr Kamran was used to. "She's resting in her chamber. Its nothing she won't shake off by morning."

The young man: the stork-like tradesman with the trimmed beard and pipe came rushing to the fore of Kamran's mind. Had the assassin killed him? The man, sensing Kamran's question, flicked his eye to the room's other bed. The man lay still in the lamp light, his breathing low, drenched in the deep sweat of pain. Aside from an occasional grunt deep in his throat, he made no sound. His fine russet suit of clothes were a bloody mass, mixed with Kamran's own sundered clothes, on the floor between them. The man's abdomen and thigh were thickly wrapped in bandages. It seemed the bleeding had been stopped, but the linens were red with seepage nonetheless.

"You're damned brave or damned stupid," the man said, tossing him a finely woven suit of burgundy wool. "Either way, you got lucky."

"I've been accused of both more than once." Kamran replied, moving carefully as he donned the woolen suit. "Mayapple ethereal be a rematch one day – one where I'll not start out wounded and trying to prevent the murder of an unarmed man – and then we'll see the outcome, eh?"

"I'm sure the Wolf won't shy away from giving you another go," Bvarlan responded with dark mirth, a savage glint in his eye. There was something odd in the way the man spoke - his Harnic carried an accent, though it was well repressed. There was a hint of a guttural followed by a glottal stop. Kamran couldn't quite place it - the South, perhaps?

"The Wolf?" Perhaps he had been lucky. And who was this stork-like man, that one of the best – if not the best – assassins in Eastern Hârn had been hired to end his life? "In any case, I swore an oath to the Countess, and I'll not have brigands and assassins out murdering her people!" His face grew somber. "The serving girl...?"

"Dead before she hit the floor."

"I thought so. Damn! Still, there would have been another death, had you not appeared and allowed me to disengage from the outside melee when I did." Kamran gestured towards the wounded man, then caught sight of Sir Reinhardt, seated across the room.

"Sir Reinhardt", he said, inclining his head. "I'm afraid I am unable to make a proper bow at the moment."

Reinhardt had not spoken; he had been merely a bystander heretofore. He sat in his chair a bit slouched from fatigue and staring off into the shadows lost in thought and trying to piece the new information into what he knew. Kamran's words had brought him out of his concentration. Reinhardt took a deep breath and let it out quickly. Then stood up from his chair, reached over and shut the inn door securely. Reinhardt looked at Bvarlan. "Can he be trusted?" Asked Reinhardt, his eyes indicating the wounded innkeeper.

"Aye," Bvarlan said. "He had nothing to gain and everything to lose by coming here. He can be trusted, if he lives. And from what he has already told me, he can only return if the bailiff is removed."

"Very well. The Countess says that I can trust you, Bvarlan, implicitly, and her word is law to me. Therefore, I would sleep peacefully if you were sitting nearby with a dagger." Reinhardt turned and looked at Kamran. "You however Kamran are new to Gardiren, though your father is well known. Your actions and words tonight speak well of your loyalty. Nevertheless, I must be sure before taking the first step on the path coming before us. Do you Kamran, son of Verdis, swear upon your honor and mother's life that you now give your own life to the Countess's service and protection?"

Reinhardt stared like a statue at Kamran.

Kamran straightened, ignoring the strain on his stitches. "I swear to you now, as I swore to the Countess earlier this night – this head, this heart, this steel are the Countess's to command. On my honor, and my mother's life, I swear this to be true."

"Then I will hold you to this pledge Kamran, for the Countess has assigned you to my company. Your experience and your zeal will be very useful in the trials to come. You Bvarlan are not assigned to me directly, but remain her confidant. Nevertheless, I believe it is her intention for you to accompany us until she sends word otherwise. Now, let us get to the matter at hand. He turned to Bvarlan. My conclusion is that this assassin squad was sent by Bailiff Kural of Nurelia and his associates in Caer Nurel – would you concur with this Bvarlan?"

"Considering the target, time, and place," Bvarlan said, thoughtfully. "Aye. Considering the assassin: Kural has some mighty unusual associates."

"I shall consider him the culprit then until proven otherwise," continued Reinhardt. He bowed his head and looked down at the chair for a moment, then looked up. "He must feel himself powerful indeed or be rather foolish to strike so close to the Countess's own seat. He taunts her, the poor fool. Nevertheless, she has already acted despite this wickedness. I will be leading an expedition to Nurelia. We depart as soon as things can be arranged. Our mission is to remove the Bailiff from power and to ensure neither he nor any of his associates escape. This includes his associates in the local guilds. Let me make this clear men, none of them are to escape alive.

A low growl escaped Kamran's throat. "'Twill be an honor to bring to justice those who would commit treason against their lawful liege, who would concoct a scheme that leaves an innocent girl dead."

"Nurelia holds many of the Countess's natural resources," Reinhardt said. "Let me make this plain. Rumors are the King is ill. As you both know, he has no heir. If he dies, the possibility of civil war is great. Obviously, the Countess cannot avoid being swept into such a war. Therefore, Nurelia must be secured for her. She has appointed that task to me and now I share it with both of you. We serve the Countess in this; we must not fail."

"So are we charged, so shall we do." Kamran replied.

"One more thing Kamran, be sure to bring things for a long stay, we will not be coming back to Gardiren in the foreseeable future. There is to be a Baron of Nurelia when we are successful in our task. The new Baron will be needing Knights, those who see to it his seat is secured and are of noble birth will be high upon his list when appointments are to be made."

Kamran nodded as calmly as he could, trying not to let the excitement show on his face. A knight! A knight! And this was no pipe-dream or idle camp-tale; no, it was a real chance to attain that which he so earnestly desired. "I shall do my utmost to earn a spot on that list, Sir Reinhardt."

"We must ensure this innkeeper lives. We must know what he carries in his mind about the Bailiff and his associates. Bvarlan, what can you tell us about the current situation in Caer Nural? My feeling is the Bailiff will now be on guard for the Countess to make a move against him."

"I spoke with the innkeep yesterday, after he had been turned away from the castle gates," Bvarlan said. "He was hard pressed to come at all - even for a guildsman - standing up to the local lord, if you'll excuse the expression in this case, is a risky proposition. I know Kural dismissed the previous bailiff's staff and men-at-arms when he took up residence. He brought four of mercenaries, real brutes from all reports, and a painted harlot from Tashal. He seemed normal enough at first - the peasants barely saw him - but last winter he started overstepping the customary grounds. Things lord's are usually careful of. A village will endure a lot, insofar as custom is observed. He demanded one of the peasant's daughters come to the keep and cook for him every day. His prerogative, if he were to compensate the father for the labor. When the father complained, Kural ordered his men to break both of his legs and beat him half to death. Then, they raped the girl in front of him to prove the point. A few weeks later Kural demanded the men cross to the west bank of the river and begin felling trees, which he's been selling to one of the local timberwrights," Bvarlan paused, knowing his words were understood. The west bank of the Shem was held not by the Countess, but by the Crown. Reinhardt's nostrils flared in contempt.

"Come spring, when the Reeve complained that it was time for the first planting," Bvarlan continued.

"He was beaten into silence and replaced with a peasant more amenable to obeying orders. And to compound matters, Kural demanded the women tend the flocks and swine. Essentially, most of the able bodied men are kept on the far side of the river, while the women, children, and old men are kept in the village. A few of the women have been hazed, but most of them have been left alone. That aside, the fief is in a bad way: the village is in a sorry state of disrepair. The fallow fields haven't been properly maintained, and aside from the bailiff's fields, very little planting has been done. The peasants have already been worked beyond any sense of customary obligation. The village guildsmen weren't sure what they could, or should, do," the men could tell Bvarlan was building up to something. "A bailiff or a lord is akin to God in His manor."

"Two weeks ago the glebe, Mother Sarah, a young priestess from the Order of the Balm of Joy," Bvarlan said. "Demanded Kural let the men return to the village and prepare for winter. She threatened to write to her superiors in Tashal. Apparently Kural agreed and sent her back to the village. That night his men set the church's roof ablaze. When the glebe came out he ordered his men to gang rape her. The blacksmith was killed for trying to stop them. When they were through - it took some time from what I understand - they took bullwhips and flogged her to death in the street, in front of the peasants. "The guildsmen decided someone had to come to seek an audience with the Countess," he said with a gesture to the unconscious innkeep. "Jarred was the logical choice. He comes to Gardiren twice a year to purchase supplies and fine liquors, and it wasn't much ahead of his schedule. He left the inn in the hands of one of his Journeymen. His wife is with her mother, near Totonot."

Reinhardt was now simmering with wrath and thoughts of reciprocity on the inside, but doing his best to retain a calm disposition. It wasn't merely the contempt for custom that had been shown, or the abominable treatment of the peasants. The Priestesses of the Order of the Balm of Joy were not only celibate and chaste, but took vows of poverty as well. They were known for their humble compassion and good works. "Here is the strategy we must council on: With war possibly brewing, it serves the Countess not to risk her soldiers lives in direct confrontation with her own Bailiff, should he choose to make a fight of it, which seems likely. We need to discover a more shadowed path for this undertaking. Some of the men under the Bailiff's hand are part of the Countess's domain as well. I must believe they are simply following the orders of their liege. We need to cut the head off this snake, and let it grow a new one, but leave the body unharmed if possible. It is my belief that if the Kural and his cadre are removed, the men will follow the orders of the new Baron sent by their Countess."

Kamran nodded again. "Indeed, I have seen good men misled into unknowingly committing bad acts by an unscrupulous commander. Replace the current leaders with fit ones and the Barony is still the Countess's, intact, yes." He grew thoughtful. "A bailiff, even a corrupt one, cannot be simply removed by the Countess without her reputation as a fair and just liege suffering. We must expose Kural's treachery for all to see." He rubbed his chin. "No doubt I'll be a marked man as soon as the Wolf reports his failure to his employer. Perhaps I could be used to draw this dark conspiracy out into the open?"

"My sense of this issue is that it will not be noticed much outside the Countess's own domain, with the current state of the King, most eyes are focused on Tashal. The fool's theft of the King's timber is another matter, especially if the Sheriff pays him a visit. The new Baron will have to disclose this fact to the Sheriff and make proper restitution to the crown. This activity needs to be stopped in haste. The villagers also need to be returned to preparing for their own sustenance for the coming winter. We must move faster than I anticipated." He paused for a moment of thought. "The Wolf may seek a personal vendetta against you Kamran, but not Kural. We are but fleas to him. He wants to kill the Countess and be in a position to claim Nuralia as his own if the King dies." Reinhardt let his angst show for but a second. "This act tonight was but a step on the stairway he is climbing; he is building

up his courage to strike at her. But he is a snake, he will strike at her from the shadows under the rock, unless unchecked and allowed to build a force capable of direct confrontation." Reinhardt lowered his tone, "Roughly how many men are completely loyal to Kural?" asked Reinhardt.

Bvarlan scratched his jaw thoughtfully before speaking. "The four we know of. Then there's the guildsmen. I doubt their worth much in a fight, but they didn't come alone. They had a party of miners with them, as well as three or four mercenaries. We're probably looking at eight to ten combatants. If the guildsmen and their workers fight: more."

"Direct confrontation is out of the question, our expedition will arrive with fewer than ten men, including ourselves, and they will command the keep" said Reinhardt. He then walked to the window, and stared out at the dark clouds above. For a moment, the half moon was uncovered, and like a flash of light the idea hit him. He turned and looked at the men. "I have an idea, it is risky, but it might allow us to catch our query in a trap rather than piercing him with sword or blade."

— [David Queenann](#) 2006/02/16 03:18

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