

Returns and Departures

Game Master's Note: I set out to increase the intrigue in the game, and to heap more potential troubles - and with them potential directions - for the player to deal with. Also, I got to flesh out Mareth some more. The player focused on elucidating his relationship to the other characters, and in exploring his characters psychological limitation surrounding his liege.

Reinhardt's Comments: All I can say is :The plot thickens. For myself, I used some of the time to search Reinhardt's feelings and soul.

9 Helane 719, Caer Nurel, The Rectory

Reinhardt and Kamran were seated at the great oak table in the main room of the rectory, drinking the Sorkin Spruce Beer Jared had sent from the Peaceful Boar, waiting for their meal to be served. The windows and door had been cast open to freshen the air, the linens had been turned out and taken for laundering, and the furniture had been set to rights. On the morrow two village women would come with poles and re-pound the floor in those places where the tables tipping and the fire had marked the earth. The river breeze was refreshing, but their nostrils were filled with the smell of spiced pork sausages being fried with onions, and the two men found themselves they were uncommonly sharp set. Two large loaves of dark-rye bread were on the table with a round of sharp cheese, a jar of pickled vegetable spread, a bowl of turnips, and a small dish of salt.

"It's not really fit for a lord," Mareth was saying as she cooked, one ear cocked towards her boys who were playing in the rectory yard, "let alone a Baron. But it should appease your hunger in a right proper way, it bein' both hearty and much. My Olin loved this meal." Reinhardt thought of the banquet at Gardiner and then his thoughts fell on Elsbeth. He wondered if she worried for him when she had a moment away to herself. He had not been far from her side for many years, and now it seemed it would be an eternity before he saw her again. He snapped back as Mareth arrived at the table with the meal.

She served them large portions of the steaming food on wooden plates, one hand on a well-formed hip as she did so, in good spirits despite the mention of her late husband. "Now good gentles, that should take the edge off," she said with a half-cocked little curtsy, and turned back to cut more sausages and onions at the small table by the hearth. Mareth had taken it upon herself to settle the new lord and his men into the village with brisk efficiency, deciding of her own accord that she and her kinswoman, Ethne, would do their cooking, cleaning, and laundering. Reinhardt had the vague feeling they had been silently co-opted, but she brought a pleasant feminine domesticity to the air, and it would be well that he could employ she and her kinswoman as domestics. Reinhardt looked over at Mareth.

"Thank you," he said quietly, still a bit lost in his thoughts. His mind turned back to the present situation in Caer Nurel. Reinhardt realized the widows of the murdered guildsmen had no visible means of support, and in Mareth's case, had already taken risks on her new lord's behalf. Employing them as domestics made sense, for it filled several needs at once. To this end Mareth had helped settle their living arrangements as well, with Reinhardt and Bvarlan staying in the rectory, while the others would take up residence in Ethne's house in the North Hamlet. Ethne and her girls, it was decided, would move in with Mareth next door, and Faranir would have access to the smithy when he arrived. It went unspoken that the women's rents were suspended for the duration of the men's stay. Reinhardt watched her work, still pondering how best to reward her for the aid she had rendered.

"It's a good meal for hungry men, Mareth," Kamran said with genuine pleasure, breaking in on Reinhardt's thoughts. And indeed it was - both flavorful and filling. The Harper ate with gusto, and then extended his plate for more. "You're a fine hand in a kitchen."

"I'm glad you think so," Mareth began, but her voice trailed off and she looked at the open door. "It's too quiet out there. What are those little devils up to?"

It was then Bvarlan appeared in the doorway and said: "I've found our errant woodsman." Reinhardt's eyes lit up as if waking and he rose from his seat. He had not realized until that moment what Garoth had meant to him, what all his inner-circle meant to him. He peered over Bvarlan's shoulder, and there, sure enough, was Garoth, a proud eight-point buck carried on his rangy shoulders and a characteristically easy smile on his face. The woodsman appeared in the doorway as the grizzled old warrior moved to the table, accepting Kamran's second plate as he pulled out a chair. "That smells fit for a king, Miss."

But Mareth seemed not to hear, for Ethne hovered just outside, her girls holding on to her skirts. She went and embraced her kinswoman in a teary embrace, and then turned back: "I'll just go and settle me kin into me house and then I'll come back and make some more."

"Take the time you need dear woman," said Reinhardt with a smirk. "We men can fend for ourselves when necessary." Mareth curtsied and inclined her head with a dubious smile.

As she ushered Ethne and her girls from view, her own boys in tow, Garoth turned his attention back to the room and said: "It seems I've poached one of His Excellency's deer."

"Well, at least you made yourself busy," replied Reinhardt, shaking his head. It was the same ol' Garoth. "In your absence we liberated a village."

"So I was told - it looks liberated enough," Garoth said, easing the carcass off his shoulders and laying it near the wall. "But this seems like a far cry from a keep does it not, milord?" Reinhardt knew better then giving the jocular woodsman too much slack to run with - Garoth's wit and sharp tongue would soon pick his pocket with a pun. Nevertheless, Reinhardt was glad to have him back and let him run a bit.

"As for poaching," said Reinhardt. "I shall make your punishment to serve out the rest of your years as my Master Warden." Reinhardt followed up with a facetious tone of superiority. "... but do realize the specifics of these duties are subject to change at the whim of the employer."

"And a just lord you are, too," Garoth said as he dished up the remaining sausages and onion. He returned to the table and poured himself a long draught of the Sorkin Spruce Beer, saying: "If I misbehave again I'll find myself punished into a knighthood." He looked towards the ceiling with a chuckle and added: "God forbid."

Reinhardt crossed and shut the door, latching it before he closed the shutters as well. Then he turned back to his men. "Much has happened in your absence Garoth," he said. "Let me explain while you eat and drink your fill, then pray tell, you can inform us of what you discovered on your mission." Reinhardt explained the situation and course of events that Garoth had missed, as the two arrivals ate. Then, when Garoth washed the last of his spiced pork with a draught of beer, he began to explain his adventure.

"Well, milord," Garoth said, leaning back laxly in his chair. "I headed north on the West Bank until I reached a rocky shallow I could use as a fording point a few miles up and crossed over. There wasn't

a trail to follow, it being two weeks old and cold as a... well, cold at least. And its summer and the road is in fine shape, hard-packed to the end, you'll be pleased to hear. I figured they'd use the road and then stick close to the river as a landmark and followed my gut. Sure enough, I was only a few miles into the lower Kanir when I picked up signs of a sporadic trail. Eight men in heeled boots, each leading a heavily-laden pack-mule - which matched our description fair enough. It wasn't a good trail and it kept fading in and out. I had to zigzag to keep track of it. And I had to circle wide a few times to avoid the loggers and charcoalers who are working that far north."

"Its rugged country - rich and verdant like," the woodsman continued appreciatively. "And it climbs into the foothills as you get to the Upper Kanir. Anyways, it was almost sundown on the second day when I found their camp. They had gotten all the way to the mine," he paused and shook his head in seeming disbelief. "It's the strangest thing. You hear stories about the Azadmerans. How they were worshipped as gods by the old pagans - by our ancestors. How they were more than men. It's hard for a man in our time to make sense of it, but..." Garoth leaned forward, more intense. He had everyone at the table's attention now. He made to sip his beer and stopped, looking up at Reinhardt. "Where it's at is a waterfall some two hundred or more feet high. It's the lowest of three falls in the span of a mile. A sight to behold. The river runs between a deep stone channel a hundred and fifty feet wide, each side topped and thick with oak."

"You have to go up broad stone steps carved into the natural rock on the East side to reach the top of the falls and the bridge," Garoth said. "It's not like our bridges, milord. Ours are wood, sometimes stone on the ends with wood in the middle. Aside from Naniom Bridge, which is also Azadmeran, we don't have anything like this," he looked around the table. "Have you seen Naniom?"

Aside from Kamran none had seen the great Naniom Bridge. Kamran said: "It's an impressive structure" all stone and something of a fortress."

"Aye," Garoth said with a nod. "But this bridge is built right on the edge of the falls. Its center rests on a large rock that divides the flow of the falls as they go over. It's supported by eight arches that the falls run through, four on each side. Like Naniom there's a gatehouse you have to pass through about thirty-five feet from each end. You cross the bridge and then there are fifty broad steps down to a wide hewn-path leading to cleft in the rock. There's no real way to get anything other than a steady mule there, It's the only way to bring things in and out I can see - though, now that I think on it, the edges of the stairs had low-flat edges you could roll something on. Anyways, that's where they camped, right there before the doors."

Garoth paused pregnantly and smiled with a nod at Bvarlan who, sensing a long-tale, had began to pack his pipe, which had an ivory head dipped in beeswax that had turned a rich golden hued brown from use, his hands ever careful only to touch the pipe instead of the bowl unless he wore gloves. It was ornately carved - the head of a dragon. "The doors are eight men high, made of bronze, though its tarnished thick with green and part covered with hanging moss. I'd say they're at least a foot thick and heavy. The platform is thrice as wide as they. There are big rings set into the center of each. I think it would take ropes and many men or mules to open it. I saw no mechanism or such."

"Now," he continued with a frown, "for the strange part. There was a camp to be sure - there were the remains of seven men - all charred to the bone several days before. There was no sign of the eighth man. I can't credit it. It was like their campfire had exploded outward. And there was no sign of the mules anywhere aside from a few droppings and the remains of their feed. It's like they just up and vanished."

There was a forbidding silence. Bvarlan looked up from his pipe, which he was now puffing to life, the rich cherry-cream cured tobacco out from his nostrils and mouth like the dragon the pipe itself

depicted. "Strange he said," an eyebrow cocked. "I've heard some weird tales, but this seems uncommon odd." Reinhardt grunted in agreement, but said nothing. The wheels in his mind were turning rapidly with the new information.

"Well, anyhow, I knew I was over due and I'd done my duty," Garoth finished, "so I nosed around at the top of the falls and found a good place to bed down for the night. The next morning, just at dawn, I started back down. That would have been the seventh I think. I made pretty good time most of the way, but I ran across a respectable Taelda camp on the East Bank in the Lower Kanir, just a few miles from the northern most logging camp. Maybe a hundred men, women and children. I didn't know they came down this far on this side of the river." Reinhart raised an eyebrow and looked at Bvarlan.

"Normally they don't," Bvarlan puffed, staring at the crackling fire. "Sir Vaern and they agreed they'd stick to the Upper Kanir and the West Bank years ago as I understand it. About the time our good Baron was squired in Gardiren, if I recall. I had only been in the Earl's service for a brief time then. They only come down to trade. Or, at least that's what I understand the agreement was. It's been some time - I don't recall exactly."

"I decided to wander in and be friendly like," Garoth said nonchalantly, though Reinhardt wondered at the audacity of such a move. Bvarlan raised an eyebrow. Garoth continued: "They had fifteen or so hunters at best guess. One of the women spoke some Harnic, but not real well. She had those strange berry-dye tattoos all over her face and arms; might have been fetching with a bath. As I understand it this particular group is one of the ones who normally lives in the Upper Kanir in winter and Sorkin slopes during the summer. She said the 'Great One' - don't rightly know what that means - had out-hunted them and that game had run thin. Evertime I tried to get more information they started jabbering gibberish. They moved down river in the hopes their ancestors, at least, that's what I think it was - it could have just been 'voices' - would lead them to better game and provide them with food for winter. They had some pelts for trade - fox and beaver mostly - but not many. I gave their hetman four of my arrowheads as a gift." He smiled with a shrug. "They have almost no metal - all wood and stone and bone. It might be a way of opening communications with them. Trading metal for furs, I mean."

"How far north are they?" Bvarlan asked.

"Six miles," Garoth said. "Maybe seven."

"Then we'd best hope their hunting goes well," Bvarlan said. "Or they might decide to raid for livestock and foodstuffs."

Reinhardt let out a weary sigh, "We will have to meet with these Taelda and revisit the arrangements. Perhaps, we can mutually benefit from trade; their hunters may also have knowledge of the Mine and the whereabouts of the eighth man. In time, perhaps a trading post can be built as a point of contact. A fur trade might be beneficial. I will think on this." Reinhardt then sat up in his chair and looked around the table. "It seems there is something more to this mine than we were led to believe," he stated. "Whatever devilry or witchcraft befell those seven men at their camp, we will have to uncover it in due time. Nevertheless, their misfortune is our fortune, for their knowledge of the mine lay dead with them. However, our path is now clear; there are two issues left for us to complete before our most prominent duty to the Countess can be fulfilled. We must capture or kill the four men in yonder Keep and do the same to this eighth man if he still lives." He paused a second to look at each of their expressions - there was a general mood of assent. "I would now like to hear council from each of you, as to how best we should proceed." He looked to Garoth on his right, which was Kamran, expectantly.

"Its wild country up there," Garoth said. "And I saw no tracks leading away, man or beast. If the man's a miner, that means he's used to civilization - not a woodsman. It seems to match what I saw of their trail: a bunch of bumbling townsmen on a hike. I doubt he would know how to cover any tracks he made. And even if he did, I'd probably uncover them anyways. If you ask me, he either fell off ledge and down the falls, or went into the mine. He might have worked his way up river - but that's some jagged and sometimes vertical rock - and to what?" He shook his head. "As for the keep, I've no notion of storming one and will leave that to more experienced heads - but we can make manning the battlements risky. If they're fool enough to expose themselves - and we've got some good shots - we might be able to reduce them by one or two."

"We have to be absolutely sure about this man," said Reinhardt. He paused for a moment and then a thought struck him. "I trust your judgment in tracking Garoth," he continued. "but I simply wish to be certain. My hunch is that if, and I say if, I was a sole survivor who managed to elude this death and your keen sight, would it also not be logical that this man would eventually return to his master to make a report?" Reinhardt nodded. "If he serviced he would make haste to the nearest Miner camp with his tale of woe, and then word would come here, to the Keep. Yes, if this man survived, someone will show up here attempting to report." Reinhardt finished and then looked next to Kamran.

"I think we need more men to consider a serious assault," Kamran said. "I've seen fighting on earthworks and embankments - and the defender always has the upper hand. With a keep..." he let his voice trail off as the increased difficulty went without saying. "But all of Kural's men are dead - none of the men within are directly loyal to him. Only his doxy is left from his own camp. It may be they are not united - am I to understand," he asked carefully, considering Reinhardt's words about the dead party of miners fate being their own fortune. "That none are to escape?"

"Let me be clear now," said Reinhardt in simple hushed tones. "Word of the mine's existence is not to leave the Barony of Nurelia, until I say otherwise. Those in this room now are the only minds that we can ensure will safeguard this information." He knew the order was asking the men to technically conspire to treason against the Crown. He attempted to quell any misgivings. "I am as loyal to King Mingath as the next man, and if he were in fine health it would be another matter." He wanted to say more about loyalty to the Countess and the fact that there was a chance that she may be the next Queen, but it was not the place or time to rally to her. That time may come soon enough is she called the Barony of Nurelia to her side in the coming days.

Bvarlan, who had been staring into the crackling fire intently, with one ear to the words of the other men, removed the pipe from his mouth, the bowl held in a dark, velvet gloved hand. "I think we should leave the keep for the moment," he said, looking at Reinhardt. "The current on both sides is strong - I can only imagine what it's like in spring - and they have no boat. We can post some men who can handle a bow and hole them up until we want to take the initiative. Let their tensions mount; play on them if we can get them to parley. And we know nothing about this Master Orlan of Tashal: who he knows, or who knows he is here, or who might know why. And how did Kural fall in with him - was not Kural raised in Yged? Nay - we don't know what questions might be asked - or who will ask them." Reinhardt eyed the old warrior respectfully and took a draught from his beer.

Bvarlan was silent for a moment, drawing on his pipe, and then exhaled forcefully as though considering something grave. "I'd like to speak to Sir Reinhardt alone for a moment," he said, looking at Garoth and Kamran individually before looking at Reinhardt himself. He waited until Reinhardt had nodded his assent and the other men had gone out - Kamran ostensibly proposing he introduce Garoth to the Brothers Baffel before making the rounds to ensure the villagers and Mangai arrived at the Peaceful Boar when expected - before he rose and went to the fire. Bvarlan stood there before the flames for a moment, puffing his pipe, and then turned to face Reinhardt. "Know you much about the cult of Naveh, milord?"

"I know little of the old pagan cults," Reinhardt said. "But I do remember Naveh was one of the proscribed gods even in ancient times: One of the Dark Ones - a god of assassins."

"That's right," Bvarlan said. "It's said the cult began in the Far East. They kidnap their recruits at birth, from noble families, and I am told their rituals are quite bloody: that they hunt one another so that only the strongest survive. And those that do, their services, through the cult, are available for purchase. They have a seat on the Heptarchal Council in Golotha where the Dark Cults reign, and have a presence in the Thardic cities, despite being banned by the other cults, as I understand it. To hire them one leaves pound one hundred on their step and says the name of the victim. It is said they never refuse and only send one man - the victim always dies within a fortnight. For their priests, failure is death. There have been rumors that there are Navean's in Kaldor - in Tashal - and that the Wolf is a renegade."

Reinhardt was not quite sure where Bvarlan was going with this, though his mention of the Wolf reminded Reinhardt that the assassin was still at large. He nodded to Bvarlan, "Continue."

"The Wolf charges the same for his services as the Naveans do, only one contacts him through the Lia-Kavir, and his terms are almost the same." Bvarlan stepped forward to his chair and bent down to remove a wrapped object from his satchel which hung there. He passed the object to Reinhardt, who removed the wrapping. It was a long-bladed dagger with serrated edges and a skull pommel. There were runes in a strange script he did not recognize on the blade. "But, that's a Navean ritual blade, which is what they always kill with. The Wolf was using a sword on Master Jarred, and he wasn't wearing the garments they're said to wear - a white skull mask and black hooded clothes with a red sash - but he had that in his hand when I walked in on him in Gardiren. I have a hard time believing Kural had so much silver to spare, let alone knew how to go about hiring a man like the Wolf. This Master Orlan may be the key to the puzzle."

A moment passed. Reinhardt rubbed his chin in thought, not pleased with how everything was unfolding. He would much rather be done with Kural and Master Orlan, he would like nothing better than to just send Kural to his grave and Orlan back to whence he came. But, even our in Nurelia the fingertips of politics reached. "Very well then, we will leave them be in the Keep and let it be their prison for now. Its relevance to our initial work is minor at the moment." Bvarlan nodded at the wise decision.

"With your permission, Sir Reinhardt," said Bvarlan. "I will ride for Tashal and ask some discreet questions. I could leave within the hour for Tonot and ride dispatch through Gardiren on my way to Tashal. I could be back in a fortnight or less, and then we might better know how to proceed." Reinhardt needed to get dispatches to Gardiren, and this was a most trusted method of doing so.

"Very well, we will keep the birds in the coup until you return. One thing, I trust Garoth's report, but I wish to be thorough on this matter of the mine. Do some snooping in Tonot and see if anyone has arrived recently with wild stories of exploding miners. At Gardiran you can give the report to Elsbeth yourself, tell her everything, and ask her to send any orders back with my man Faranir. I will give you other letters to take to Faranir as well. Now, if you will excuse me, I will pen the letters so that you can get started."

"As you like, Sir Reinhardt," Bvarlan answered. "And if I may, I will have broadsheets posted for a new cooper and blacksmith - and a bonded ostler for the troop of horse."

Reinhardt stood with an agreeing nod and went back to the bedroom. He retrieved his writing equipment and returned to the table. He began to scribe two letters,

Elsbeth, he began informally.

I hope my letter finds you in good health and high spirits as it leave me. I have arrived at my station and taken up my duties in Care Nurel. Our mutual friend will give you the most pertinent details. I would welcome any suggestions you may have in any of these matters. It may be spring before I move into the Keep itself, I will have to do some prior cleaning out of the vermin. Nevertheless, I will be doing everything that I can to fulfill your wishes Nurelia. I implore you to send me the man I requested for training my horses. I have sent word for Faranir to depart as soon as he has heard from you regarding any further dispatches for me.

On a personal note, my thoughts are for you r continued happiness and prosperity. I will miss the gardens of Gardiren, for there are no gardens yet here at Nurelia. Perhaps, you can send me some cuttings in the spring. May God bless you.

Reinhardt.

He left a space between the “you” and “r” in the word “your” on purpose. He never wanted to put Elsbeth, a married woman, in an uncomfortable situation indavertantly. If unauthorized eyes happened upon the letter, his indiscretion could be easily argued a slip of penmanship. However, the change in the meaning of the sentence would not be lost on Elsbeth, whose attention to detail was remarkable. He wished he could be with her, to hold her close against him in the long winter nights to come, but it was not to be. He hated himself for these unchaste thoughts. How could he pass judgment on the Miller's wife for her adultery with Kural's men, and then entertain the same thought himself with Elsbeth? Though her marriage was political, before God there were no such considerations. Reinhardt could not help himself; he could see her clearly in his mind, not the Countess, but the woman.

“Why have you punished me thus, dear God?” he whispered quietly. He had never been with Elsbeth, for she was married, though he had seen his own desire reflected in her eyes. He knew the sin, carried out, would destroy them. Reinhardt believed Elsbeth's marriage to Pallon was God's punishment for his own sins of thought with her. Yet, Reinhardt loved her harder and more deeply than any man ever would. So, it remained status quo, mutual desire unfulfilled. A lover left to suffer. Yet, deep down, Reinhardt grew strength from it, and perhaps someday fortunes would change. Bvarlan's words came back to Reinhardt, I have a hard time believing Kural had so much silver to spare, let alone knew how to go about hiring a man like the Wolf. His mind dwelled momentarily on his new found wealth: there were ways of eliminating the annoying Pallon, but Reinhardt flung the devil from his shoulder in a wrenching outburst of angry frustration that sent many he had lain out on the table tumbling to the floor. Reinhardt tightened his fists, containing his mounting tension, then relaxed. He stood and retrieved his parchment and quill. He picked up his beer stein and placed it back on the table.

He pulled out a fresh sheet and began the last letter:

Faranir,

I wish for you to make haste to Nurelia as soon as is practical. By this, I wish for you to ensure that all supplies you cannot oversee and bring with you have had transport arranged for. Please call upon the Countess before you depart and ensure that she has included any correspondence I may require. She may be sending one of her men back with you. When you arrive, prepare to get to work on the smithy. I pray for fair weather and safety for your travels here.

I remain, respectfully, at Caer Nurel,

Sir Reinhardt Maddox, Knight of the Holy Oak, Baron of Nurelia.

Finished with his letters, Reinhardt rolled them and sealed them with wax. Then, he picked them up, and stepped into the main room, where he handed them to Bvarlan, wishing the man well wishes as he left him to pack his things, heading for the Peaceful Boar.

— *David Queenann* 2006/02/16 12:13

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