

Voice of the Oak

Game Master's Comments: We had almost finished this scene when the game went on hiatus. When we started back up the Sir Reinhardt's player asked me to fill in the blanks at the end so we could move to the next turn. The player dropped the peasants Uther and Dugal into the scene (and my lap) as a means of furthering his own end of the story. It worked and I liked the characters so I ran with them. The whole "Voice of the Oak" bit is hokey, but the player himself notes that in the scene itself. I took the liberty, when filling in the blanks for the restart, of writing in the outline of a set of moves intended to put them in control of the village. I gave him right of refusal (of course), but he liked it and ran with it. After so many years of Game Mastering I like the give and take of the style we've developed. It means I have to react to unexpected elements, too.

Reinhardt's Commentary: Every story needs a few cliché's and brought in the two privy diggers as sort of a comic relief like the grave diggers in Hamlet. If you every play in David's games you have to learn to keep your guard up. It was my choice to keep my identity and title secretive as long as possible. I think I took it to David's dismay. He kept later trying to announce me, and I kept writing it out. At this point, I still did not envision how the liberation would proceed so I had to plan for contingencies here. Rosie the sow was a device to add depth to these minor NPCs.

6 Helane 719, The West Bank of the River Shem near Caer Nurel

The two men moved through the morning haze with cautious alertness, tracing the west bank of the Shem River with deliberate slowness, letting the roar of the river cover any sounds they might make. They were careful to make none, nonetheless, and they passed through the peeling pines and mossy oaks like ghosts in the darkness. The two men had left their camp well before dawn, the others still sleeping the deep sleep of pre-dawn blackness, backtracking almost a mile to find a fording place. Even in fall, with no run-off from the mountains, the river current had been strong, and the chill of the water still clung to their bones, despite the fact that they had stopped to change into dry clothes, and don their arms and armor upon reaching the other side. Both wore chain over gabardine with sturdy leather overlays, well-made riding boots, and leather gauntlets.

The first man, compact and rangy, wore his black hair loose about his shoulders and carried a hart bow in his right hand. A quiver of razor-honed war-arrows and a battle sword were strapped on his back. His alert eyes swept right and left as he advanced in a hunter's low-to-the-ground posture, taking in all they saw. His companion was taller and wore his tawny hair cropped short. His battle-sword was worn on his hip and he wore a shield slung on his back, its colorful design covered with canvas, a precaution in the greens and browns of the forest. He stepped through the ferns and mossy stones quietly erect his, expression somber, giving his companion enough lead so as not to hinder his predatory advance.

Having passed two miles northward from their crossing place, they could hear the nearby sound of axes striking wood. On their right, on its island in a wide point of the river, illuminated in the orangey-red morning rays that were just now breaking over the snow packed peaks of the Sorkin Mountains. There was a creaking and cracking of wood, only a few hundred meters to their left, and the throaty deep-pitched yell of a man calling out "timber!" Then there was a crash as the tree slammed into the ground, just far enough into the forest for their view of felling to be blocked. Another man's voice, course and angry snapped out: "Come now you dogs work!" Then there was the sound of a cracking only a few feet away and both men dropped into the ferns.

A grizzled man emerged from the trees, perhaps ten meters from where they had been standing near

the bank of the river and spat a dark sluice of tobacco onto a nearby tree. He was perhaps forty, wore weather-beaten boiled leather armor and a pot helm, and was unshaven, his unkempt beard salted with gray. In his hand he carried a shot leather whip and on his belt he wore a hand-axe and dagger. He threw the whip to one side and began unstrapping his hauberk, pulling it up in front so he could relieve himself. "Lazy fuggers," he muttered to himself angrily. "Have to watch the bastards every damned minute."

Garoth reached for an arrow and looked over at Sir Reinhardt, who shook his head. Reinhardt could see the desire for the first blood of retribution in Garoth's eyes. The emotion was coupled with disappointment when Reinhardt stayed his hand. Reinhardt would have liked nothing better than to send this sot-of-a-guard to God's judgement, but it would be detrimental to their current task. Should this guard go missing, it would cause great suspicion and put the Bailiff and the rest of his men on a heightened sense of alert. Moreover, it would be blamed on the innocent workers who would be punished harshly. No, it was best to keep their enemies ignorant of any presence for as long as possible.

They waited for the guard to finish his business and head back to his brow beatings. Soon, the whip was cracking and the sot bellowing at the foresters again. With hand signals, Reinhardt gestured for Garoth to lead them around the camp. Garoth skillfully chose a path that presented the most ample cover and quiet footings. Reinhardt hoped an opportunity would present itself, and his wish was granted nearly an hour later and three quarters of the way around the camp. Here they found two peasant men past middle years digging a new privy ditch while filling in an old one. There was a large old oak tree nearby that would provide adequate cover. Reinhardt and Garoth made their way to it. The first peasant was a gray haired man, possibly in his sixties. He was talking to the other peasant who was slightly younger and bald, except for a gray beard and matching bushy eyebrows. Both men wore tattered homespun tunics and animal skin shoes.

"All Im'a sayin' is, me darlin Rosie, dunno what's be dun without her papa around," said the man with gray hair to his shorter, but rounder companion. The bald man visibly rolled his eyes...

"They got us here digging the privies and all you can think about, Dugal, is that bloody sow of yours." The bald man sighed in frustration.

"They've murdered her for bacon Uther, I can feel it in me toes - that damned rascal of a Bailiff and his dogs." Pain crept into Dugal's voice "Killed her for bacon, when she made the loveliest little piglets you ever did see."

"Now, you don't know that. Your pens are a good walk North of town, and you know how lazy they is. I doubt they gotten around to all that," replied Uther. "Bah, it's woe for hope in this place. Doom is upon us Uther, upon Rosie, upon me and you, upon this entire God-forsaken place."

Reinhardt and Garoth had taken good caution and settled themselves in, and positioned a few tree bows to mask themselves further. Reinhardt then called out quietly to the two peasants. "Take heart good fellow, for neither God nor Countess Curo had forsaken you."

Both of the men froze. Reinhardt had put enough whisper in his voice to ensure it would not carry far past the two men. Garoth, bow ready, was prepared in the event of any surprises; he kept vigilant watch in all directions. "Pray, be at peace and serenity both of you for we mean you no harm, and please continue at your task to ensure the guards do not bring their whips to your backs or raise their curiosity."

The men were still quiet and unsure, perhaps fearing a plot from the Bailiff's guards.

"I have spoken to Jered at Gardirentown," He added, sensing their disquiet.

The last, opened the door to their trust. The men looked at each other, and the gray haired man's face brightened. "He made it then. Praise be" said Dugal with mirth. Both men smiled. Just then, from across the way, the overseer's voice bellowed true.

"The Blessing will soon return to us, then," Uther agreed. Touching his knuckle to his head in belated reverence. He looked at Reinhardt: "When is their Countess's army to arrive?"

Just then, Reinhardt warning of the guards proved warranted.

"Get to work you two dogs, or you'll be diggin' that privy by hand with my whip on your back!" The guard flourished and cracked his whip to punctuate his point. The two men returned to their work, but this time with the new found vigor that came from resurgent hope.

"Don't forget your manners, Uther," Dugal said under his breath with a chuckle as he dug. "You haven't right introduced yourself - and this man talks like he be gentle-born."

"I'm Uther, Sir." Uther said with an inclination of his head as he worked. "And this here unlucky bugger is old Dugal."

"For now, call me the Voice of the Oak, for my identity need be kept secret in case loose lips may learn it."

"How many men, this side of the river?" Garoth asked, reminding Reinhardt to keep on task and that every minute they remained their chance of discover increased.

"Damned near all of them," replied Uther. "Forty-three men and nine older boys."

"And the Bailiff's men?" asked Reinhardt, knowing the answer from Kamran's report, but wanting it confirmed.

"Two. It don' take no more when they have your womenfolk and your children hostage across the river." Uther's point was well taken. Reinhardt pondered for a moment. "Will it take long, Sir?" Uther asked, his expression anxious. "For the new bailiff to arrive with the Countess's men and set things aright? The harvest is due."

"And the fall slaughter," Dugal added. "We won't survive the winter if we don't see the slaughter done. Sheep and pigs may be all we have to eat, and sell, when the Lord's share is taken."

Reinhardt raised a hand. Time was short. Then he nodded. "We will see you free soon. Justice and honor will be restored at Caer Nurel in the name our God, King Mingath, and Countess Curo. I wish to meet with the leader of the village men on this side of the river. Tonight, after moonrise, at the privy ditch where you stand. I will know him when he asks to speak to the Voice of the Oak. If he cannot make it we will return each night after moonrise." "As you wish milord, gods peed to you," said Uther.

"And you," Reinhardt said as he and Garoth faded back into the underbrush and forest. When they were safely away and near a bubbling brook, they stopped for water and some jerky. Reinhardt took a seat on a smooth mossy rock. Garoth began to re-fill his water skin. The sun was now beating down, peaking through the trees. The wind rushed through the bows above. The peasants had been right. Winter was blowing in, the snows would start falling in a month or so. Reinhardt's thoughts turned

back to his conversation with Elsbeth. Her beautiful face so striking in the glow of the candles in he chamber, her voice, I don't know how my brother learnt of the deposit, but he's fallen into the company of a master from the miner's guild, and has made an expedition with them to the upper Kanir.

A Few Moments Later By The River...

"Your Excellency?"

Reinhardt looked up, shook off the vision.

"Yes Garoth, what is it?" There it was, the title again.

"I asked if you wanted me to fill your skin?" Reinhardt gave a half smile and nodded, handing his skin to Garoth. The he took off his glove and rubbed his nose, coming to a decision.

"I am going to stay here and meet with the leader of the foresters when the moon rises and prepare them for what lies ahead. However, we still have another piece of this puzzle to identify. I am charging you with this task."

"Aye."

"Somewhere North of here is the miners' camp. It must be found. When the time comes, we must be prepared to size or kill them quickly, they must not be allowed to report the existence of the mine in the upper Kanir to the Miner's Guild or Crown." The word Crown stung as he said it. He was loyal to both his liege, the Countess, and her liege, the Crown, working against the Crown did not sit well. Reinhardt attempted to ease the thought and justify it. "The Countess knows what she is asking, and if King Mingath were in spry health our course might be different. But, he is not in good health and with no heir his death will bring civil war. Our Countess intact is our only chance when the pieces settle, and for that she will need that mine as a war chest..."

Garoth grunted, but offered no argument. In Garoth's view he was sworn in duty to the Countess, and in friendship the New Baron of Nurelia, not the King. Their oaths of fealty and duty to the Crown was their concern. Still, he could see the discomfort in his friends eyes, and though: I hope she knows what she's asking of him, this time.

"...It is up to us Garoth to ensure righteousness survives the coming tempest." Reinhardt continued. "I fear that the five of us - you, Bvarlan, Faranir, Kamran, and myself will determine the Countess's future. We must do what must be done."

Garoth quietly finished filling the waterskin. He said not a word, he didn't have to. He let the moment pass, then looked up and nodded to Reinhardt handing him the full water skin. Their eyes locked. "Find them Garoth, scout out their camps and we will meet back at the ridge camp tonight."

Later That Evening...

It was well after sundown, with Yael high above and the stars bright in the warm, midsummer's evening, when the sounds of axes and saws on wood ceased on the left bank of the Shem, and the campfire of the village men forced to work there were stoked high for the night. Reinhardt could see the glow of the fire through the trees by his hiding place in a cleft of ferns and rocks by the river bank, which he had returned to before sundown, having made a brief journey upriver to observe Caer Nurel from this side of the river for most of the day, considering what he had learnt from Kamran, and

working out the rough outline of a plan.

The keep had seemed half alive throughout the day. There was no watcher on the battlements, and a single stream of smoke escaping from a lone chimney was the only sign of occupation. A square, four story affair, it was constructed on a rocky island in the middle of the river, inaccessible without a boat or raft, for the water was too deep to ford, and the current too strong for a man to swim. The river, here, was three hundred feet across, perhaps more. And with the burnt husks of the boats on the far shore by the mill, the only boat in the area was the masted riverboat, some twenty feet long, pulled onto the island's shore. The village itself had come to life, with chimneys smoking and a small cadre of men, perhaps six or seven, and those women who were able, making their way to the fields. The fields looked, even from here, too sparsely planted for a village of this size. A gaggle of girls and young women made their way to the West common that sat between the village and fields where a large flock of sheep was kept, and after some discussion, some of the girls headed towards a the far side of a the copse of trees in the clearing, presumably to tend other flocks among the trees.

He had sent Kamran back to see what he could learn about the guards' habits, and to avoid raising suspicion, pleased with the young man's performance. It was clear the young gentle had been in his element. As Garoth had been in his when he had peeled off from the scene and proceeded north at a quick jog Reinhardt knew the woodsman could keep up all day. Garoth's expression had been grim. It was his war face. Reinhardt had seen it before, and knew Garoth was not a man who asked for, or granted, any quarter. Now, in retrospect, he wondered if he should have been more clear, for the more he considered it, the more likely it seemed he would never have to give the order to eliminate the miners. Reinhardt had said a quiet prayer for the safety of them both and studied the scene once more. The guards were not to be seen. Not very attentive, he thought. Do they drink into the night and sleep into the day?

With this question in mind, Reinhardt suddenly felt, at least in terms of setting the villagers to the task of preparing for winter. In two days - on Fourthday - the guard who stayed in the castle with Kural would bring the boat ashore to exchange the guards on either side of the river. If the boat could be seized when it came ashore, and the guards on either side of the river eliminated, then Kural would be trapped in his keep and the village could begin to breath again. But that would leave Kural, Master Orlan of the Miner's Guild, and the master's two-guards in the keep. And he had little doubt they could stay snug and warm within throughout the coming winter. And that would mean running a huge political risk, not to mention leaving Emily Fahy, Ian Fahy's daughter, in their hands. Could the Keep be taken without reinforcements? Did he have a choice?

Without answers Reinhardt had moved back downwardly in the dying light to resume his place of waiting for Ardan the Beadle, who was the senior-most villager on this side of the river. He wondered if the man would be able to come, and was considering returning to the camp to check on Bvarlan and the dead cooper's woman, Ethne, when the cracking of a twig brought riveted his attention back on the trees in the direction of the fire. A short, broad, squat man, fit from hard work, stood near the privy, peering about in the dark: "Voice of the Oak? You there? Lord Oak?"

Reinhardt couldn't help but smirk at the absurdity of using a false name, but he had enough experience with matters gone wrong to mask himself as long as possible. As Garoth had mentioned more that once, that the first arrow is the most important for it can alert the enemy and can give them your location. If Kamran or Garoth were captured, they would not talk, not for a while anyway, maybe not ever. However, the peasants would spill all they knew when loved ones were threatened. Moreover, anyone of them could sell the information to the Bailiff. Reinhardt was not well known in the kingdom, but he was well known to anyone who lived in the Countess's domain. Moreover, once the Bailiff learned that Sir Reinhardt was here, he would know the Countess was making her move in earnest. "I am here, good man," replied Reinhardt with quieted voice. "Are you Ardan?"

The man's eyes widened as if he was surprised the tale of the Voice of the Oak was true. He quickly looked around for any guards out of habit. "Aye, Milord I am Ardan." He made a half attempt at bowing to the big oak tree, but it became awkward for he didn't know if he should or not. "Dugal and Uther said you wished to see me."

"If you speak for the men on this side of the river, then their words are true. We have do not have long. For, I do not wish for your presence here to raise the eyebrows of your watchmen. Therefore, I shall be brief. Uther has told me there are but two of the Bailiff's men on this side of the river. I have observed them. I know they are changed every Fourthday - does this always occur at the same time?"

"Aye, Lord Oak," the man said with a touch of wryness in his voice. "Always in the morning, while the river mist is still rising. They unload just over there," he said, pointing to the river. "There's not much of bank for landing across from the keep."

"Countess Curo has heard your cries for help and judgement and is coming to Caer Nurel very soon. You and the men must be ready if you want to be rid of this evil, cleanse your village, and free your friends and family. When we are ready, we shall seize the boat and the three men on the far side of the river. At our signal you and your men must overcome the men on this side of the river. Then, we will bring the boat to bring you across. Your job there will strictly be to safeguard the women and children, and to get on with the business of setting the village back in order. I will appoint a man to assess the village granary and stores for those must not be lost or damaged with the coming winter so close upon us. All your men that can be trusted must be informed of what to expect, and what is expected of them. Do you understand?"

"Aye milord," he said heavily. "These men are tired and haggard, but they have spirit, and if they know their families are safe... well, two swords aren't much match for half-a-hundred axes. But can you do it? Deal with the guards and the Bailiff?"

"It is other we cannot overcome," Reinhardt assured him. "The coming winter is the real challenge we face."

"Then we can do what you ask."

"One final thing Ardan, have a trusted man come here at this time every night until we make our move, and ask for the Voice of the Oak. I will send word of the signal when I am certain of the time to move."

"Aye, Lord Oak. And we'll be ready." His expression was deadly in the moonlight. "Very ready."

— [David Queenann](#) 2006/02/16 11:14

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