

Songs for the Downtrodden

Game Master's Comments: After this scene the game went on hiatus for several months as I had no computer access. When the game started again, Scuba-Hero was unable to come back onboard. As a result this is Kamran's last turn as a player character. Scuba did a truly wonderful job with it. As for me, I focused on further defining Red Will, and establishing the former Reeve and Mangai (the Tradesmen). I also planted a seed for a side investigation, but I doubt, at this point, it will bear fruit.

5 Helane 719, The Peaceful Boar, Caer Nurel

The sun had fallen beyond the Sorkin Mountains in the west and Yael was now rising, casting the warm night of early autumn in a fey glow. The stars shone bright, the constellation of the Tylus - The Claw - loomed large above, and the crickets chirped in a loud cacophony of rhythmic sound. At the Peaceful Boar the windows and doors were cast open in a cheery defiance of the nearing change of seasons, and the tables were filled with peasants, their number dominated by women and girls. More than the modest inn had seats for. Far more. Those who had not been prompt enough, or honored enough, to have a proper seat sat on the floor, or the steps to the second floor, and more congregated outside the windows, jostling for a place to lean and look. The fire in the hearth was merely for ambience, and to augment the light cast by the lanterns, and the air was filled with the spiced smell of an old patron's cured pipe-weed mixing the languid sweetness of the Inn's rose garden outside. The mood, despite all the village had been through, was festive. For it was not every night a Harper set foot in Kaldor's northernmost settlement.

Kamran sat on a stool by the bar, where Donall, the brother to the owner of the inn, had set a mug of Haninale, watching the assembled villagers as he fiddled with his mandolin, gauging its tune before beginning the show. The day, for all he had learned, had been a disheartening one. And with few exceptions, every able bodied man and boy had been forced across the river where they were worked dawn to dusk, and sometimes beyond, logging what was properly the King's forest under the cruel hand of harsh task-masters. And the situation in the village was not much better. A hundred and a half women, children, and old men cowed into a state of silent fear, afraid to speak of their circumstances lest the hand of fate send retribution their way. Aside from the former Reeve, Ian Fahy, whose legs had been broken and never healed properly when he'd stood up to the bailiff, leaving him on crutches, and the few remaining tradesmen - Donall, the miller, the woodcrafter, and the Salter - the only able bodied men in the village were the Red Will and his seven brothers; and Dooley of Bendeth, who tended the village's flocks with the aid of those village girls who were old enough and could be spared.

And Kamran now knew, having had free run of the settlement all afternoon, that within the village there was little to work with. Red Will was, for all his size and strength, an opportunistic yes man, and was universally despised among the rest of the villagers for stepping into Ian Fahy's shoes so quickly. Especially since Fahy, and his father before him, was an exceptional Reeve who'd seen surplus after surplus year after year, while Red Will could kill a crop just by looking at it. And that, beyond having few men capable of standing up to the bailiff, let alone willing, was another cause for concern. Many felt, no matter what the Bailiff did, the powers that be would back him. Even with Red Will and his seven brothers working to plant as much of the fief's fields as possible in order to reap personal profit, the desperate hope their labors might see them survive to spring, there was a palpable concern that the village would starve anyways. Even were the Lord's share not taken the village would be on the brink of starvation.

The only bright point was Dooley of Bendeth. Despite Dooley's constant currying of favor with Red

Will, he had managed to protect the girls who helped him with the flocks from the bailiff's men, and how he had managed the feat was anyone's guess. The flocks themselves were having a bumper year, and though he'd been forced to let the pigs, who grazed in the nearby forrest, fend for themselves, he claimed he could round them up to the last curly tail. Even as he considered the matter, preferring not to think about the rough treatment some of the village women had seen in the absence of their men, Red Will elbowed his way into the room with Dooley a step behind him. The quiet jovial atmosphere became silent, and people parted for Red Will as he passed, the only nods or words of welcome being directed to Dooley in his wake. Red Will stopped at the table closest the bar where Ian Fahy and the tradesmen were seated and, with what seemed to be his customary scowl, snapped: "Yer in me seat Fahy. Take yer crutches and git."

"It's your chair now, Red Will is it?" Fahy replied with the glint of challenge in his eyes.

"That it is," Red Will said, growing suddenly wary. "Seein' as I'm the village Reeve and you aint."

Kamran noticed Dooley was not repeating Red Will's words or confirming all the big man said.

"Ah," Fahy responded. "That you are. But it's never given a man at Caer Nurel the right to another man's chair, or another man's beloved."

The room's silence had grown tense.

"I've never taken that which aint mine own." Red Will said, looking dangerously around the room, daring those present to contradict him.

"And was that not you lookin' with desire in your heart at dear Rosie, and with Dugal across the river for shame and mercy's sake?" Fahy said, refusing to be cowed. A quiet murmur of assent rippled through those assembled.

"I'll take that from no man!" Red Will said, stepping forward with menace shaking his massive fist in Fahy's face. "Why, if you weren't on crutches I'd send you through the wall like the scamp you are!"

"And why don't you then?" Fahy said jutting his chin forward to receive the blow, his voice a hiss through clenched teeth. "Seein' as, with me sittin' in this chair, I'm still holding my head higher than any of yer blighted kin can."

"That's it!" Red Will exploded. "Your going down on me list!"

"On your list is it, then?" Fahy said with a bark of a laugh.

"In me Book!" Red Will confirmed with satisfaction. "Do you hear me Dooley?"

"Aye Red Will," Dooley said with a sigh, fishing inside his vest for a small, folded sheet of parchment and a narrow piece of charcoal. "I hear ya', the Reeve goes on the list."

"What?" Red Will asked, turning to eye Dooley with suspicion, unsure he'd heard the diminutive man's slip.

"Ian's to be put on your list, Red Will. On the list."

"That he is!" Red Will said, turning back to Fahy who was looking at Dooley's parchment, which had been set on the table so Dooley could add his name to the list. "And what do you say to that, Fahy?"

"It would seem I'm in good company," Fahy said, looking Red Will right in the eye. "And that's Fahy: 'F-A-H-Y,' No 'E' if you please, Reeve Darlin'."

"Got him down, Dooley?"

"That I do, Red Will," Dooley said. "Right here. On your list." Then under his breath too quiet for Red Will, in his self-possession, to hear: "Right next to half the rest of us."

Feigning triumph Red Will turned to Kamran, taking the stool and flagon Donall had brought out from behind the bar for him without so much as a word of thanks. "Well, Harper, what will you play?"

Despite following the action closely, Kamran was ready for the question and immediately leaped from his stool and bowed deeply in front of the Reeve, at a distance carefully calculated to sweep the tip of the feather in his cap across Red Will's bulbous nose, causing the big man to sneeze. As soon as the sneeze was finished, Kamran straightened, repeating the treatment with the same result. A couple of the villagers could not keep from snickering, and Red Will's face darkened as he opened his mouth to speak, but Kamran cut him off.

"Ah, good Reeve, the village will have musical merriment, a feast for the ears and sustenance for the soul such that it will be spoken of for months after! Traveled have I and played have I from cold Orbaal in the north to strange Melderyn and yea, even to far Kindly in the West, but never have I seen a village like this one." Kamran paused and lowered his voice dramatically, forcing the assembled village to lean in for his next words.

"There is a strength here, like the bedrock of the mighty Sorkin mountains. There is a tenacity here, like the fields that sleep every winter yet awake every spring. There is life, and spirit, that would put mighty fiefs of great nobles to shame." He raised his voice back to normal volume. "So, what shall I play? Why, a hearty song for a hearty village!"

Immediately, Kamran launched into 'The Merry Village', a well-known song throughout Kaldor that celebrated the fief and every person's place in it. If truth be told, it had been written by the nobility to help keep the peasantry contented with their lot, but the origins were not well-known and these folk desperately needed some encouragement and cheer. The energetic tune soon had the room clapping and stomping time to the beat. As each verse started, Kamran caught the eyes of those in the position mentioned, and tried to get them singing.

'The Miller, the Miller, who grinds the grain!' 'The cottar, the cottar, labors in the fields!' 'The Reeve, the Reeve, the wise, wise Reeve!'

There was a noticeable lack of enthusiasm at this point. As Red Will snapped his head around trying glare at everyone at once, Kamran made a deliberate motion with his head towards Fahy. Suddenly, the room was louder than it had been during any of the previous verses. Red Will leaned back in his stool, convinced the sentiment was for him.

'The Reeve, the Reeve, three cheers for the Reeve!'

As the song ended with these words, a resounding cheer echoed through the inn. As Red Will basked in the adulation he thought was for him, Kamran glanced at Fahy, who responded with a wry smile and a wink. This man could well be the leader around which the village rallies, thought Kamran, but there was no more time for thought as he quickly started an instrumental jig on his mandolin. Soon the crowd was once again clapping and stomping; some were trying to dance in the limited space.

A few songs later, Red Will, feeling for his purse and not finding it, rose and made his way to the door,

presumably to retrieve it, gesturing for another round for he and the guildsmen at his table. After the door closed behind the Reeve, Kamran played out the end of the verse and stopped. The villagers awkwardly stopped clapping and stomping after the music ended, well aware that there were two more verses that had been cut short.

Kamran gave a broad wink and began 'The Idiot Reeve', a song about an incompetent Reeve who was outsmarted at every turn by the villagers he thought he controlled. Soon everyone was singing, and the loudest participation was heard during the nonsense sounds of the chorus - sounds which were intended to be the Reeve's sputtering reaction when he learned that once again he had been outsmarted:

DOOM! Walla-walla-walla- DOOM! Walla-walla-walla- DOOM-DOOM!!!

The last chords were fading when Red Will opened the door and strode back to his stool. The tone immediately became much more subdued. "Well, what's this, then?" snapped Red Will as he snatched up the fresh mug of ale that Donall placed before him.

Kamran swept his cap off his head as he bowed deeply to the Reeve once again. "Well now, I was playing 'The Idiot Reeve' for the villagers, that they might remember how bad it is when the most important man in the village is not up to the task." Kamran looked dramatically at Fahy once again, giving him a wink with the eye out of Red Will's sight. Fahy, understanding, nodded slightly and returned the wink. The crowd quickly picked up the dual layer of meaning. "But now that you're back, I'll play another song."

Kamran picked out the opening chords of 'The Reeve Who Saved The Fief'. Red Will sat back and basked in the villagers' heartfelt emotion that he thought was directed at himself. As the song came to an end, Kamran picked up his mug of Haninale. "A toast, a toast!" he cried, rising to his feet.

As the room came to its feet also, Kamran continued: "To Red Will the Reeve, for all that he has done for the village, may he find a true and just reward. To the Reeve!"

"TO THE REEVE!!!" The room boomed, the cheer intermixed with whistles and cat-calls. Red Will drank with the villagers, still pleased and unaware of the double meaning that permeated the gathering.

The rest of the evening was nothing special; Kamran avoided any more double meanings and gave his best performance as a Harper to further raise the villagers' spirits. As the last song wound down, well over an hour later, he addressed the crowd: "The night grows late, my fingers and voice are weary, and you must rest before your labors tomorrow. But do not fear", here he lowered his voice and gave great meaning to the following words, "I shall remain as long as is necessary."

When the last of the peasants had left Kamran turned to the table where the village's remaining guildsmen and Ian Fahy remained seated, and set his mandolin gently next to the empty chair Donall had set out for him. The innkeep, having put out a large plate of bread, butter, and cheese before removing his apron and taking his own seat, gestured to the horselike of Haninale behind the bar and said: "Help yourself and sit with us a spell."

Drawing off a pint and returning to take his seat, Kamran found all eyes upon him. Ian Fahy broke the silence. "You wanted to speak to us as a group?" "Aye," Kamran said, removing his cap and, with it, the jovial and slightly, foolish Harper persona that accompanied it, "for though I am truly a Harper in good standing with the guild, and therefore a tradesman such as yourselves, a man may wear more

than one hat. I have sworn my life and my honor in service to Countess Curo, and she will not see her loyal subjects suffer at the hands of the likes of Kural and his men," here Kamran spat on the floor. "Master Donall has told you the tale of how his brother Master Jered was foully murdered on Festival night with his information 'for the Countess's ears only' dying with him. This is not the case."

There was a surprised silence, the men waited for him to continue.

"Master Jered did indeed live long enough to tell his tale." Kamran's heart was heavy with the burden of keeping Jered's continued life from his brother, but he had concluded that Donall's actions would be more conducive to overthrowing the bailiff if he continued to believe for now that his brother was dead, and also that Kural would be more complacent if he learned that Jered had died with his tale untold. Perhaps the good man would forgive Kamran once he learned of the deception and its reasons, perhaps not. No matter, he thought, deliberately brushing the thought aside. It was the best course of action. The ability to make a hard decision for the right reasons rather than take the easy way had saved him more than once during his time in the Army's of the Oselmarch and Chelmarch. "And as a result, I am here - with others - to end this abomination and restore the rightful way of things."

The Salter, Hevel of Whayryn, a trim, tallish man with a thoughtful looking face, stringy shoulder length sandy hair, a mustache and several days stubble exchanged glances with his fellows, and asked: "Are you one of her Grace's knights, sir?"

Kamran did his best to conceal his anger at the answer he had to give. "Nay, friend, I am no knight," - Not yet, he thought - "However, knight or no, I am an armsman sworn to the Countess, and I will defeat Kural - or die trying!"

He had been unable to control the intensity of his feelings, and then men shifted in their seats, the mood uneasy. "We meant no offense, good Armsmen," Donall said quietly, "neither to you or those you have come with."

"No matter," Kamran said, making a curt, dismissive motion with his hand. He turned towards the former Reeve. "Ian, you are a brave man."

"Not brave," Ian said. "Just desperate."

Kamran snorted - he had seen the steel in the man before. Desperation just wasn't in it. "I know at least some of the atrocities that have been happened here. Any man present tonight with eyes and a brain can see that you are no coward, not one who would give in to bullies for temporary peace." Kamran lowered his voice and leaned in towards Fahy, so that the others had to lean in to catch his words. "You can be the pillar of strength around which the village rallies. You can lead them out of their fear, back to the life that they once had, and may have again."

Fahy's expression was skeptical, but the other men seemed to agree with Kamran's assessment. There was a murmur of assent from the guildsmen. "Women and girls against armed men," Fahy protested. "Men blooded in battle? Of us here, who aside from the good Harper has seen a fight?"

"You, Ian," Donall said. "You fought against Tharda's legions in the Chelen Gap when Sir Vaern mustered to ride with Earl Curo in answer to the King's call. And all them men who came back said you fought bravely and well. Even Sir Vaern said so when he appointed you Reeve after your father died."

Ian sighed, "How many of you want to see any of their wives or daughters blood on the ground? Because with no weapons - there will be more of us dead than them, victory or no."

"Better that than see worse done to them," said the Miller, a short, roundish man of forty with a pleasant round face, whose name was Harrold of Getha, and who, as the first guildsman to settle at Caer Nurel twenty years ago, served as the informal head of the local guildsman. The cause of Ian's crippled legs and fate of his daughter, gang-raped in front of him as a lesson in obedience to the Bailiff, and held as a hostage and slave in the keep ever since, remained unspoken, but hung heavily in the air. "It's their choice to make, Ian, and they would follow you to the last in this, no matter how much folly you think it would involve. Would you not see them free of this madness. All of them - what of Emily?"

Ian's jaw had set and his eyes were hot with fury at the mention of his daughter's name, knowing the Miller was pushing all the right buttons and hating him for it, but he seemed, otherwise, to be exercising great control. "I'd rather see her free in heaven than suffer another day through this madness."

"Good," Kamran said conclusively before turning to the Miller. He admired the man's ability to argue, if not his ruthlessness in doing it. "Kural has left you mostly alone, for the valuable service you provide in supplying both his household and the village with flour."

"Yes," Harrold answered, tersely, perhaps sensing some criticism in Kamran's words. "But there won't be much grain this year, and the people can't afford the grinding fees. I've looked the other way over personal grindstones," he paused, looking at his fellows for support, and seeing a nod from the Salter, continued. "And I've done some grinding for free for those who can't afford it, but if the harvest isn't brought in the surplus I take as my fee and sell in Tonot will be lost."

"And I if the slaughter doesn't go ahead," said Hevel of Whyaryn. "I'll not be able to smoke and salt, or to make spiced sausages for the winter fairs - and the village needs its share of my profits to replenish seed and supplies."

"We'll be ruined," Donall interjected. "All of us. Even the Boar will have to be shut down."

"Mangai," Ian said angrily. "You speak to me about my daughter and the plight of the villagers, and then you talk money."

Hevel's answer was sharp: "The villages share of that money is what pays for the seedstock and feed. Without it they starve - and so do we. And we Mangai have suffered along with you. Master Olin - the Blacksmith -," he added in an aside to Kamran, "Was killed trying to save Mother Sara. And Roderick the Cooper, my brother-in-law, helping his family escape. And now Donall's brother, Master Jared. Idealism aside, we have to eat, Mangai and peasant alike. And to eat we have to fight."

Ian was quiet a moment, then nodded in apology, putting a sympathetic hand on Donall's shoulder, the inkeep having started to shake at his brother's name. "You're right, Hevel. And I'm sorry Donall. And you Harrold. We're in this together."

Kamran faced the Woodcrafter, Master Thondl, a shrewd looking man with a broad, strong featured face with thick, drooping black mustaches. "The King's timber has been illegally logged on the far side of the river."

The Woodcrafter fished into his vest pocket - his suit of clothes indicated comfortable prosperity - for a straight pipe and regarded Kamran, his expression as wooden as his product, his eyes cool, as he produced a leather sausage of pipe-weed and stuffed it into his pipe. This finished he rose and moved to the fire, where he removed a glowing cinder with the tongs and lit his pipe. He turned to Kamran

and said in a matter of fact voice, "I've had little choice."

"And plenty of profit," the Miller accused, bringing nods from the other men at the table.

"What of it?" Thondl snapped. It was clear to Kamran that Master Thondl was well aware he was not liked by his peers. Could he be trusted? What would he do if he felt his position - or profits - were threatened. "I cooperate and profit or refuse and risk the fate of my fellows. I am being prudent!"

"Fear not friend," Kamran said, wanting to ease the mood. "There is no honor in standing in front of a forest fire alone trying to beat it out, and there is no shame in taking cover in a stream to preserve your life until you once again stand and fight the fire. You bear no responsibility for what has happened."

"That's right," Thondl said, looking at the skeptical faces around the table. "Hear him."

Kamran turned back to the men at the table, "And what think you of this Dooley of Bendeth, who dogs Red Will's side? I think that this man may be a valuable ally. He did indeed appear a toady when I first met him - when first meeting an unknown outsider, this may be the best role. But I noticed tonight that he was not continually mimicking Red Will's words; and has he not protected the girls who watch the flocks with him from the Bailiff's men?"

"Dooley's one of the finest herdsman you'll ever meet," Hevel said. "And he's managed to see the girls who help him with the flocks aren't abused. And everything else aside, his efforts may be what gets this village through. He's been with those flocks night and day - and done his best to keep track of the pigs."

"Dooley's harmless," Donall said. "He's good people, Red Will aside."

There was a general assent at the table, including that of Ian Fahy, who had nodded at Kamran's words with the easy expression of a man agreeing with his own opinion, but there was something that had been unsaid - an undercurrent Kamran couldn't quite put his finger on. It was Thondl who gelled the suspicion in Kamran's mind. The man had hesitated in reacting, had waited to see how the other Mangai would answer, before saying: "The village knows what Dooley's done for the girls who work with him; they approve of him despite his connection to Red Will - and have you ever known the collective opinion of any village to be wrong?"

"Indeed," said Kamran, not wishing to press the issue so soon despite his curiosity - not sure if it should be pressed at all. "A village knows its own through and through. "Does the Bailiff come out from the Keep; does he follow a routine?"

The men exchanged glances, and then Thondl spoke: "He did, almost every day, until a fortnight ago. Then he stopped." Before Kamran could inquire why Donall provided the answer: "One of his mercenaries, Sagan..."

"A right bastard if you ever met one, Harper," interjected Hevel.

"The worst of them," agreed Donall, grimly, before continuing, "A fortnight ago Sagan went missing. He was the one who kept on whipping Mother Sarah at the Bailiff's orders, even after those other scum lost their stomach for it. Took a real savage delight in it. Laughed as watched the life go out of her."

"He went missing?" Kamran asked, trying to keep Donall's account to the question. "A fortnight ago?"

"Aye," Donall said. "And the Bailiff aint come out from the keep since. Its just him and that Master from the Miner's Guild - they sent a prospecting party upriver from what we could gather - holed up with the master's guards. And the guards are right jumpy - they don't like being moved out of the keep. Not one bit. Sagan was the toughest and most spiteful of the lot. The one who called the shots, save the Bailiff."

"Did Sagan desert his duty?" Kamran asked, more interested in the men's reactions to the question than their answer, and not surprised when, once again, meaningful glances were exchanged.

"It seemed that way at first," Hevel said, he seeming to be the one the moral authority had fallen to. "But the next day they found him dead about a mile from the village, at the bottom of a ravine about half way between the tree line and the ridge. His head had been smashed when it hit a rock."

"More like hit with a rock," Thondl said fiercely, which was followed by a warning look from Hevel, and an uncomfortable, stubborn silence on the part of all present.

Kamran, considering the implications, and knowing that once in place, such silence was not easily broken, reached out and poured the rare apple brandy Donall had put out into the crystal glass that sat in front of each of the men. "Its no matter he said," he said with a nonchalant air. "You said the guards are garrisoned in the village?"

"All but one," Donall said. "Two stay on this side of the river..."

"In the Rectory," Thondl interjected. "They stay in the rectory next to the Tabernacle."

"...and two on the other side," Donall finished. "One stays in the Keep with the bailiff and the Mining Master's two men..."

"What was the master's name?" Kamran asked.

"Orlan of Tashal," I heard, Thondl provided. "A lot of money, that one."

"...the last man," Donall finished with an annoyed look at Thondl. "stays with the Bailiff and brings the river boat across every fourth-day morn to exchange the men on the far side of the river with those in the village, and to give orders and get any supplies they have a need for."

Kamran smiled at this piece of news. It was the very thing he'd been sent to learn. "To our victory over the false Bailiff," Kamran said as he raised his own glass, watching intently for the men's reactions. "To Kural's downfall!"

There was a solemn affirmation of the toast as then men lifted their glasses and said 'hear! hear!' but Kamran couldn't help noticing that Thondl's eyes were studying him intently as he drained his glass and set it down with an emphatic clunk, wiping his lips with his sleeve.

"This is a sacred trust," Kamran said. "Our very lives, as well as the lives of all the villagers, depend on each man standing firm and doing his part. Go now. We will meet again soon."

Once the tradesmen had left, with Ian Fahy following as best he could on his crutches, Kamran left Donall to straighten up and retired to his room. Ten minutes later he slipped out the window, watching intently to see that he was not followed. He had much to report to Sir Reinhardt.

— [David Queenann](#) 2006/02/16 10:50

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