

Fireside Chat

Game Master's Notes: Up until now, I hadn't told anyone anything more than "the adventures of an unlanded knight and his companions." I have a firmly held belief that cliff-hangers, melodrama, and dropping bombs on the players makes for good games. A little intrigue doesn't hurt either. True, it all introduces a bit of purple-prose and pulpishness, but I ask - cannot fantasy gaming be pulpy? Aside from kicking off the main thrust of the game, I wanted to give Sir Reinhardt's player a chance to interact with his character's unrequited love.

Reinhardt's Commentary: This is one of my favorite scenes so far. I had to set the foundation of what drives Reinhardt, and this of course is his love and devotion to Elsbeth. However, he has to temper his desire, for Elsbeth is not his to have. David's design that Elsbeth has married another coupled with my choice to make Reinhardt a moralist put two chains on Reinhardt's desires. This created great tension in these scene. David also drops the fingertips of the main plot on Reinhardt here and I never saw the sheer scope he had in mind until this scene. I thought I was to remain a "house knight" to Elsbeth and play out my rivalry with Pallon, fighter wars, etc etc. Nope. I mean I guess Reinhardt still is, but in grander scale.

1 Helane 719, Caer Gardiren, The Countess's Chambers

Reinhardt and Faranir made their way up the stair to the landing outside the Countess's chamber, where two of his men - Yadd and Lonn - stood watch. The door itself was heavy, brass bound oak, with a clear red stain, and an ornate lion's head handle that glinted in the ample lamp light. A porcelain disk bearing the Countess's personal seal, three horses forming a circular knot, was set into the door. The landing was plushly carpeted, and hung with rich tapestries bearing the heraldry of House Curo, intricately embroidered with Jarin knot-work.

"Is the Countess awake?" Reinhardt asked.

Yadd, the older of the two armsmen, nodded.

"Aye, Sir Reinhardt. She's here, not ten minutes I'd say."

"Stay until I call you in," Reinhardt said, looking back to Faranir. "I need to speak with her alone first."

The big man shrugged; Reinhardt turned and pushed the door open. "It's Reinhardt, milady. May I enter?"

"Don't be so formal," Elsbeth said, her voice a low chuckle. "I was about to send for you."

The Countess's chambers were a single massive room with a central pillar, which took up the entire sixth floor of the castle.

It was divided into four large rooms by thick curtains, which ran to the central pillar, serving as walls. The curtain between the chamber by the door - the Countess's sitting room - and the chamber beyond, her study, was drawn open. Aside from several high, thick candles lit on the massive oaken table which served as her desk, and a low peat fire in the great hearth to the desk's side, the room was lit in dancing shadows. There was something intimate, and foreboding, nagging at him as he crossed to her.

The Countess, herself, stood gazing into the fire, seemingly entranced by it, a chalice held in her

hand. Two of her pure bread Great Harbaalese lay at her feet, soaking up the warmth from the fire. She still wore her banquet gown, but her crown and great cape had been put away, leaving her alabaster shoulders bare in the firelight. She watched him approach in silence, surveying his face, and shrugged with a resigned, fatalistic air as his eyes fell upon the maps of Kaldor, several of her vassals feudal contracts, and a sheaf of official letters spread out on her desk. The top letter bore the seal of Earl Caldeth of Minarsas.

She turned back to the fire, "affairs of state."

"I'm sorry to interrupt..." Reinhardt began.

"I'm happy for the distraction," she said, waving him off. "The work, more than the wine, is giving me a headache."

"I needed to speak to you when Sir Pallon was not in earshot," Reinhardt said, causing Elsbeth to turn back to face him, her expression arch. "For reasons you will understand shortly."

"Perhaps you should begin at the beginning," she said, moving to her chair. "And perhaps I should sit."

"You may be slightly annoyed or angry with part of what I'm going to tell you, but please hear the opportunity that lies beyond."

Elsbeth eyed him wryly from her seat at the desk, her expression was enigmatic in the firelight. She made a curious sound in her throat and sipped her wine. "Pray, Sir Reinhardt. Do continue."

Efficiently, and truthfully, Reinhardt gave an account of his bet with Sir Pallon and the revelations of Faranir's drawings. "It was my belief that, if the wrong rumor fell upon the wrong ears, it could put your Grace in an uncomfortable position; or, at least, rob you of an opportunity. Thus, I am here. If what Faranir says his innovation can do is accurate, it is my opinion, he should be given the acre of river-front land for his new forge, the cost of labor assigned to him, and the eleven pound needed for the enterprise. I ask you to examine his designs and ideas for yourself, and to consider this: if the enterprise fails, you will have gained another working forge and I will make good the lost difference between the value of the forge and your investment in whatever manner you deem fit."

Elsbeth set her goblet on the table. "I presume you have him close at hand."

"He is on the landing."

"Then show him in."

Reinhardt went to the door and returned with Faranir, who set his parchments down on an empty corner of the Countess's desk. He had apparently re-arranged them, having considered his presentation, and Reinhardt watched as the his armsman handed her each parchment in turn, standing just behind her, pointing at the drawings as he explained each in detail, focusing on essentials while avoiding the details that would interest the craftsman alone. Elsbeth's questions were business-like, and her questions frequently included a request for a summary of technical details, which were likely, Reinhardt realized, to satisfy her that Faranir understood the intricacies of the matter, even if she, or Reinhardt, did not.

When some time had passed, and the Great Harbaalese by the fire had dozed off, Faranir's interview came to an end. "I'm intrigued, Faranir - and you will have an answer before the sun rises, but before

"I give it, I must speak to Sir Reinhardt alone; your commander and I have unfinished business to discuss."

Reinhardt gave his guardsman a few quick nods in recognition of his fine performance and to heed the Countess's dictum.

Elsbeth inclined her head almost imperceptibly as Faranir bowed, gathering his drawings, and withdrew.

When the big man was gone, she turned her attention back to Reinhardt. Her voice was flat when she spoke. "Its no secret - to anyone in the realm - that my marriage is a union of convenience. It would be unusual were it not. Nor is it a secret," she added. "Among my vassals, that my husband spends the lion's share of his days at his manor, and not at Gardiren. And I have always turned a blind eye to the tension between the two of you. To some degree I understand it. And even were that not the case: men are men; men do as men do. I am not, however, inclined to underwrite this rivalry with an acre of river-front land, the cost of labor, and eleven pounds."

"Permission to speak candidly in your Grace's presence?" asked Reinhardt coyly. Stepping around from the side of the table on which Faranir had made his presentation, so it was no longer between him and the Countess.

"Stop it," she replied. "There is no need for formality between us when we are alone." She teased him with her eyes. "You know that."

"I know you see the importance of the possibility in Faranir's proposal, Beth. You also know I would have been out of line not to bring this to you. I asked you for the money because this makes more sense now, and its importance supersedes some immature bet."

Elsbeth's eyes were dead serious; her tone bore a shocking finality. "I'm sorry Reinhardt, but I won't give you a farthing."

Reinhardt did not press the argument; he simply bowed his head, holding it down for a second. When the moment of his submission has passed, he looked at her again. "Then I request your blessing to seek funding for this from outside sources."

She didn't answer, she didn't say a word, just stared at him, her face neutral and giving nothing away. After a long moment her eyes softened. "I had intended to send for you," she finally said.

Reinhardt was feeling a bit frustrated, but her tone broke through it all and the sincerity of her voice reminded him of the summer days they spent together riding and laughing. He exhaled, releasing his tension. "What is it that you need of me?" He would do anything for her; she knew that. Yet, she had the strength of character never to take advantage, either.

She pointed to a blown glass decanter and silver goblet sitting on her desk next to a fine-glazed wine jug, and then gestured to a nearby chair. "Its apple-brandy - Thardic - your favorite. Pour yourself a cup, and sit."

He raised an eyebrow; she must want something difficult this time, to soften him up with his favorite libation. Once Reinhardt was seated Elsbeth spoke. "I've been treble unfair to you since father died; even before that, really. I've wanted you at hand, even though it hurts us both. A knight of your caliber is destined for great things; and keeping you here has held you back from them. It's selfish. No, not a word," she said, raising her hand, seeing Reinhardt was about to speak. She passed him a roll of parchment, wrapped in scarlet ribbon, and sealed with her personal seal: a great-horned stag

leaping over a blooming rose. "We have much to discuss, and precious few hours to do it in."

Thoughts of the mysterious, the scarred, one-eyed, visitor suddenly crept out of the shadows in Reinhardt's mind. Were these written orders from her? She usually trusted him with verbal orders. Was he to travel beyond her domain this time? Reinhardt broke the seal and read: The document was a feudal contract. It proclaimed the establishment of the Barony of Nurelia, which was to run from the border of Tonot, following the eastern bank of the Shem river to the river's source in the Sorkin mountains, some thirty miles beyond. Other demarcation points, allowing expansion inland from the river, were also defined.

Reinhardt knew some of the history involved. Hemisen Curo had been granted the right to ennoeff the entire length of the river by the King twenty years ago, though he had never done so. A river keep with an adjoining village, Nurel, perhaps five miles into the forest, had been established.

A narrow road running from Tonot to Nurel and a few leagues beyond, provided the regions sole though-fare. The soil in the region was rich, but the steep alluvial river valley, on which the manor rested, was difficult to plow. The manor's income came from herding sheep and pigs, and from furs and hides taken from the woods. It was known for the sturdy black wool its flocks produced, and for the salted and smoked pork it produced in remarkable quantity. The settlement's success with livestock aside, the real economy of the region was the result of the assart earned from the logging and charcoaling camps that dotted the banks of the river.

And because Caer Nurel was held by a bailiff, as opposed to a feudal tenant, the vast majority of the profits, which would normally go to the tenant, flowed directly into Gardiren's coffers. The bailiff was sure to do well indeed from their third, but for Countess Curo enoeffing the region would mean loss of all assart. The regions would show increased profit through settlement, but that would take five years - or perhaps ten. Hemisen Curo had avoided enoeffing the region and parceling it out for this very reason - and Elsbeth had followed her father's policy.

At first glance, the only exceptional thing about the contract was that it existed at all. The feudal conditions were fairly standard. The baron was to pay standard tributes, settle an area capable of providing twenty knights - and maintain a company of heavy horse. The knights, as was custom, would be required to provide a small unit of men themselves: a man at arms, a squire, a page, a yeoman, and a servant. These obligations were waived for a period of five years, with the exception of the company of horse, which was waived for a period of one year. Presumably, the Baron would pay for this this from the income at Caer Nurel, and the assart fees, which would now flow to him, rather than Gardiren.

It was elegantly written, and bore the seals and signatures that made it official: Countess Curo, who was enoeffing the Baron; King Mingath, who "approved of the matter"; and Dame Sophia, whose signature bore witness for the Kaldoric Church. He re-read the name on the parchment: *Sir Reinhardt Maddox, Knight of the Holy Oak, Baron of Nurelia*.

Reinhardt looked up from the page at her with a clearly astonished look on his face. "I don't know what to say." He turned his head slightly to the side, giving her a look of slight distrust, but he knew better than to question her decision; it was plainly at the bottom of the page. "I don't know what to say," he repeated.

"Barons are not allowed a loss of words," Elsbeth said with a chuckle. "It isn't seemly in the Mighty of the Realm, but I won't ask you to thank me. I'm giving you a difficult task, and I can only give you nominal support in accomplishing it. Affairs of state are becoming tense. My uncle's illness has grown

worse. He's taken to his bed more than not, and he still refuses to appoint an heir. Mingath's been sick for years, but this time I doubt he'll see the Royal Tourney this year. The tenants-in-chief are watching each other like jealous hawks - you'd think the succession council was already in session. Caldeth has already created a stir. He's begun repairing his fortresses, and I know he's been hoarding silver. He'll give the council a chance to run its course, but he won't support a weak candidate for the throne..."

She paused, letting her words hang in the air. Reinhardt knew Elsbeth was possessed of a tomb-like discretion, and now she was being brutally frank. "I'm conducting some very sensitive negotiations. Giving you the support you need - deserve - could be construed as bad faith. It would be seen as aggressive. It's a delicate situation, but I need Nurelia, economically and strategically. If it comes to war, House Curo's survival may well rely on it. "I know the title gives you a year to put a company of horse together," she continued. "It's pure deception. The contents of the document will be court gossip before the week has ended, and the impression of urgency could raise alarm. You have until the first thaw. Not a day longer."

Reinhardt did not say anything for a moment, but stared at a side of Elsbeth he rarely had seen, taking in all she said. For all her strength, he still saw the soft and beautiful woman that she was. He gave her the look a man gives a woman so she knows he desires her. Then, before it made the moment awkward or uncomfortable, he spoke in earnest. "Why does the King refuse to name an heir? Why would he plunge his kingdom into civil war by not doing so?"

"An enigma," she said. "Something with no satisfactory answers; and what answers there are only lead to dark questions. It's not as though he doesn't have sons, legitimacy aside. All three hold powerful positions in government; all three have influence at court. Recognizing one of them would simplify the succession, if not absolutely guarantee it. There are rumors, but there are always rumors, and nothing concrete."

"It's not just men with heavy horse," said Reinhardt when it became apparent she would say no more, his mind turning to serious military thought. "That means armor for man and horse, not to mention the horses. They can't be riding nags either, but war-horses. Then there are the weapons and training, and all this by spring?"

"Circumstance dictates you perform a miracle," she said. "I've taken the liberty of writing you a letter of introduction to Bardo," she said, passing him another sheaf of paper bearing her seal. "It contains an estimate of your annual income from assart and the manor. It should be sufficient for you to draw whatever funds you'll need for the coming year." She gave him a wry look. "It amounts to something more than eleven pound."

It amounted to an estimated 361£ 138d if the document was to be believed. And 1,271 acres of river front land, which did not include the total area of Nurelia - an area that amounted to the single largest holding in Kaldor, exceeding 60,000 acres.

"You were being wicked to me earlier," said Reinhardt, rolling his eyes glibly. "'Not a farthing,' she says."

She gave him a tired smile. "I admit the cost of maintaining the horse will be high, something akin to 275£ per annum, but if you live modestly and manage your funds well, your privy purse will allow you settle the minimum area needed to meet your feudal obligations before the grace period expires. If Faranir can do what he claims, it will only serve to advance your cause. The real challenge will be men. You have no knights - and common soldiers I cannot spare. You will want Garoth and Faranir, of course. I would not deny them to you, and I would make a few recommendations."

Reinhardt nodded. "I would be happy to hear any recommendations you may have."

"Sir Verdis' son, Kamran, for one. He was never squired, but he has served as a cavalry scout and skirmisher in both the armies of the Chelmarch and the Osselmarch. His father has served me well, and Sir Verdis says his son's commanders spoke highly of him. He's gentle born and seems like a man who can handle himself. He's also ambitious - I can smell ambition - he wants more for himself."

"I was going to ask for him as soon as you mentioned I needed men," replied Reinhardt. "He will be a welcome addition to this enterprise."

"And Bvarlan," she said. "You'll need a man who can assess things. He has a good eye for value, especially in terms of land, and he can be relied upon - in any circumstances. He was indispensable to my father, and has been to me as well. He will have to travel from time to time, when I need him, but until you've put together a chamber you trust, his council will be inestimable."

"That is comforting," Reinhardt said in a thoughtful tone. "I need people with skills in those areas where I lack experience."

"As for manorial knights, they can wait until spring. Deal with the horse first. And start looking for peasants. We can find knights-bachelor with strong reputations, tough men with no other hope of a fief and the mettle to see the matter through. We can find them by the score. The real problem is peasants. Most knights would be happy to part with a second or third son, especially to see him advance himself, but peasants are worth their weight in gold. No one will part with them."

"What are my options then for gaining peasants?"

"Few," she said with a pensive little frown. "The Church's estates tend to large peasant families with surplus sons, but they would have to be induced to part with them." She pondered the matter for a moment. "Perhaps Dame Sophia. A grant of land for a chapter house would be a creditable enticement. The Order would supply its own peasants for its fief, and you could bargain for more - ten or fifteen young families, and a like number adult sons wanting to start households. Nothing compared to what you need, but enough to get a new fief started. Beyond that," she smiled wanly. "I will leave you to your own devices."

Reinhardt nodded and took a breath. "Now I will ask you for some things. I implore you to give me Sergeant Rivers. I need someone from your own horse that can train mine. I would ask for Sir Trent, your own cavalry commander, to pull this miracle off by spring, but I realize that is out of the question. So give me at least a chance at this and give me the second best option."

"I make no promises," she said. "But I will speak to Sir Trent about Miles."

Elsbeth fell silent, staring at her empty goblet. "My father's passion for sensual pleasure went well beyond his closet and his dinner table. He took an astonishing number of peasant girls to bed. Tall, short, fat, thin, pleasing to the eye, ugly to behold. He didn't seem to care. It boggles the mind. I have thirteen siblings I am aware of. None recognized, of course. Twelve were girls. Father was generous with them. He made a stipend for their mothers, and made sure those who have come of age married craftsmen or merchants. In one case the girl was apprenticed to a Courtesan. He purchased her contract when she came of age and helped her start her own house. There was one boy, however, four years younger than me. Father didn't raise a finger on his behalf. It wasn't spite. You know how he was: just cold blooded pragmatism. There would have been pressure from the clan to recognize him; to have a male heir. It would have made my succession problematic. I didn't even know he

existed until father was on his deathbed. Father asked me to do something for my brother - once I was firmly entrenched as Countess."

She looked up at Reinhardt. "When father's bailiff in Nurelia, Sir Vaern, died I appointed my half-brother, Kural, in his stead. It was done very quietly - you were visiting the Abbot at Abriel at the time. He seemed a good choice. Well, an acceptable choice. His mother married a Master in the Litigants Guild, and Kural had become a master in the guild as well. He had a head for numbers, and it was out of the way. He wouldn't have to deal with Court politics, or the knights of nearby manors. And it would make him insanely wealthy for a man of his rearing. It was a mistake: he's betrayed the interests of House Curo, and from what I understand, he has abused the peasants something fierce. I just learnt of it tonight."

"Just before he died, Father discovered there was an abandoned Azadmeran sapphire mine, its deposit still rich, in the upper Kanir," she looked pointedly at Reinhardt. This was the first he'd heard of such a mine. "As you know, all mineral mines save salt are droits of the Crown, and the king's share goes through the sheriff, not the local tenant." The fact that exploiting such a mine, what would prove to be the only mine in the Kingdom producing precious stones, behind the Crown's back would be High Treason didn't need to be voiced.

"But when the King dies without an heir," she continued, "all oaths to the crown are null and void. If the succession council fails and it comes to war, that mine becomes my war chest. I don't know how my brother learnt of the mine, but he's playing host to a master from the miner's guild, and has made an expedition with them to the upper Kanir. I have no doubt their next step will be to present their "discovery" to the Crown. In the current political climate - with so much uncertainty on the horizon - I cannot allow that to happen."

Reinhardt stopped moving and stared into Elsbeth's eyes with focus. "I need you to be absolutely clear on this: What do you want me to do with your half-brother? Kill him? Hold him in prison? Send him to you to deal with?"

"My father had a saying," Elsbeth answered. His tone was genteel, but her eyes were hard. "You know the one: "Men with secrets should remain as silent as the grave..."

Reinhardt knew what was left unsaid: *...and dead men tell no tales.*

— [David Queenann](#) 2006/02/16 02:32

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