

The Four Horsemen

Game Master's Comments: Our heroes arrive at Caer Nurel! I wanted the players to take the lead in deciding how to liberate the village. As a result, most of my efforts were spent on description and fleshing out locals in order to bring the village to life.

Reinhardt's Commentary: My role here was small. This really is one of Kamran's scenes and they did a great job. David actually handed me the reins of the following scene to start and get going while they worked this one.

5 Helane 719, Caer Nurel

Caer Nurel was situated in Nurelia, on the bank of the river Shem, in the heart of Kirsta Forrest. Seven hundred years ago the region had been settled as a part of the ancient kingdom of Serelind, and later as a part of Kaldor until the time of Fierth the Usurper when the political strife in the kingdom combined with the press of barbarians in the forrest, led to the regions being abandoned. That was over three centuries past, and the forrest had long since reasserted itself, swallowing the ruins of forgotten settlements in its leafy embrace. The ancestral home of Clan Tane, the clan that unified Kaldor and founded its first monarchal dynasty, was to be found somewhere in these woods, but few traces of it, or the ancient abbey believed to be the final resting place of Claudia Tane - the St. Claudia venerated by the Order of St. Claudia, Our Lady of Paladins - remained. Now, centuries later, the only civilized habitation in the forrest - in all of Nurelia - was Caer Nurel, which consisted of the keep itself and a largish village of same name inhabited by some fifty households. The only other civilized inhabitants were the men in the logging and charcoaling camps that dotted the river bank.

Beyond Kirsta, where the dark, forbidding Kanir Forrest followed the river into the foothills of the Sorkin Mountains - to the very edges of the kingdom - there was no civilization at all. The wild and pristine region was little known to Kaldor, and while the entire region comprising the new Barony of Nurelia had a reputation for being plagued by wolves and bandits, Kanir was home to the uncivilized Taelda tribes. A region of dense Sorkin spruce and mossy oaks, criss-crossed by rushing streams and rocky outcroppings, it was thick with rare herbs and teeming with game. The Taelda who bore strangers no malice, were known to render assistance on rare occasion, and traded with civilized men when the opportunity presented itself, but it was customary to avoid their known hunting grounds and tread lightly with their traditions. How they would respond to expand settlement in Kirsta Forrest, let alone into Kanir, was uncertain.

These facts were well-known the four horsemen who rode slowly up the muddy red clay ribbon of the river road, their cloaks wrapped tightly about them to protect them from the dawn chill and the thick drops of water that fell from the canopy of trees above. It had rained heavily the night before, and the morning air was brisk, filled with the rush of the swollen river and the song of morning birds. The thick fog that hugged the surface of the river and the floor of the river's deep alluvial valley, was beginning to rise in the face of the morning sun. The men had set out from their base camp in the woods an hour before, and now, as they rounded a bend in the river the river keep and its village on the bank, came into view.

The keep, a square, four-story fortification with a stair rising to the entrance on the second floor, was situated on a small island in the middle of the river, twenty yards from shore, the current dangerously swift in the channel between. There was no dock, but a river boat, perhaps twenty feet in length, was pulled up onto the island. The lead rider, Sir Reinhardt, a somber looking man in somber clothes and a somber cloak, reigned in his massive red-tinged destrider, a Reyksyni plains horse 22 hands high, and

gestured for the men to stop, his hand coming up in a fist. From this vantage point the horsemen could survey the area without entering the clearing that comprised the village, its fields, and its pasture. The clearing, they knew before arriving, was close to two knights fees in size, over 3,000 acres, with a large, grassy common directly opposite the keep on the west side of the village. Another common bordered the eastern side of the village, and beyond that, the fields spread out, rising up the slope to the forrest beyond. There were small hamlets of a few houses to the north and south of the main village, and a copse of trees on the village's northeast side, separated it from a larger hamlet, perhaps ten households, that skirted the border of the fields.

The village was unusual in that the mode of construction was not wattle and daub with thatched roofs, as one found throughout much of settled Kaldor. The houses followed a design common to Jara in the far north, called Orbaal by the Ivinians who had conquered it some forty years before, being built with double-skinned dry-stone walls, which were insulated with moss and roofed with turf. They would be warm and dry in winter, but even from this distance it was clear several of the houses in the central village, perhaps twenty-five in number, needed to be reroofed, and as the men surveyed the scene, a general state of neglect became evident. The fief's road and walkways were rutted and filled with muddy-puddles, garden fences were in need of repair, and the black, skeletal remains of a trio of fishing skiffs, fired some months past, were sunken into the shore.

It appeared most of the village tradesmen lived in comfortable houses outside the village proper, while the tabernacle, a stone building whose arched, wooden roof had been fired and was now open to the elements, sat to the north, the hermitage and glebe residing within its fence. The mill was just beyond the tabernacle on the far end of the clearing, on the riverbank next to the northernmost hamlet. The Peaceful Boar, Master Jared's Inn, a cozy looking building of two stories, sat between the south end of the village and the southern hamlet at the clearings edge where the riders sat, its shutters closed, a thin stream of smoke coming from its stone chimney.

The village was stirring, but aside from a few shepherds with their flocks - mostly adolescent girls from the looks of it - and a half dozen farmer's making their way to the fields, there was no one in sight. The roar of the rushing river drowned out all but the closest bird cries, leaving them isolated from the scene before them. Bvarlan, scarred and grim, sat motionless on his elegant black Khanset horse. Next to him, Garoth sat astride his painted Reksyni, sharp eyes taking in all they saw. Here, away from Gardiren and in the midst of a great forrest, the huntsman was in his element. Kamran's white palfrey snorted impatiently and pranced sideways until Kamran, dressed in the burgundy wools his mother had passed to him through Bvarlan, was even with Reinhardt in the road.

"An auspicious morning to begin our task of relieving that traitor Kural of the burden of his life and restoring Nurelia to its proper loyalty to our Earla, Sir Reinhardt," said Kamran.

Sir Reinhardt sat silently upon his charger focused upon the village before him, surveying the scene it would seem to familiarize his mind with the features. He looked over at his man Kamran who had spoken, then back to the vista. "It is indeed Kamran, it is indeed."

"Go I now to the village to ascertain whose loyalty lies with the bailiff and whose remains true to the Earla. Yon Peaceful Boar will be my first stop; there shall I spread the story that poor Master Jered died on Festival night, murdered but a few hours before he was to have an audience with the Earla, his untold tale 'for the Earla's ears only' dying with him."

"Keep your head on and your cover tight, trained you may be, but if they catch you I will have a much harder chore in this without you." Reinhardt then felt his statement was a bit too harsh. He added, "Be careful Kamran." It was a statement made with great sincerity. "Bvarlan will meet you at the

prearranged location, and remember we need the to ferret out all the snakes here. We cannot kill Kural until we know all of those in league with him."

Kamran shifted slightly, settling the familiar weight of his mandolin in its soft leather travel case more comfortably across his shoulder, then checked the short sword he was wearing. The mandolin was normally more favored among village folk than the harp or lute, and he wished to appear as a commoner, so his broadsword was back at the camp. He made sure the Harper's guild badge was easily seen on the front of his tunic, and with a flourish put a bright yellow cap with a ridiculously long feather at a jaunty angle on his head. With a wink at his companions, he set off at a trot for the village.

As he came into the village proper Kamran broke into song, choosing the traditional minstrel's ballad - *Come Hither and Hear, Good Alewives!* - about wandering across the land bringing news and entertaining. Several shutters were pushed open part way in the south hamlet as he passed through, and one old man, sitting in his open door, whittling, looked up, his expression guarded, but curious. "Good morning, neighbor!" he called as he passed, gauging the villagers reaction to him, and their overall demeanor. "Kamran here! Teller of tales and singer of songs par excellence...come to the inn tonight and judge for yourself!"

He could feel many eyes upon him, but no villagers ventured out to investigate. One goodwife, standing in her doorway, her hands and apron covered with flour, withdrew into the shadows of her home. No children, usually the first to investigate newcomers, especially minstrels, came a' running. *Cautious*. Kamran, thought. *Unusually so. Not that you can blame them, with most of the menfolk across the river and through the trees, and the bailiff having fallen power-mad off his rocker.* Coming to the inn Kamran dismounted the white palfrey and gently patted its neck. "Hold here a moment, Cloud." He removed the cap, tucked it respectfully under his arm, and entered the Peaceful Boar.

Inside it appeared to be a modest, well appointed inn like many others he had seen. The common room had dark oak floors and wainscotting, while the upper half of the wall was whitewashed plaster. There were three large round tables in the main area of the room, benches on the side walls, and thick, faded green curtains over the windows. The end of the room was a polished, dark oak bar, with stairs to one side, and a doorway to the kitchens, or the innkeep's rooms, behind. To the right was a large stone hearth with a massive stuffed boar's head above it.

The room was warm and dry, and smelled of peat smoke, from the fire. A young, rail-thin man who bore a striking resemblance to Master Jered stood poking at the peat with an iron. He looked up as the door opened, and seeing a stranger, smiled. "I don't have anything hot for breakfast, good traveller," he said, setting the iron aside and moving behind the bar. "But if you can wait a few moments, something will be prepared." Kamran walked up to the young man behind the bar. "Journeyman Harper Kamran here, good Innkeep. Teller of tales and singer of songs. But I'm afraid I bear unpleasant news as well. Are any of Master Jered's family here? I would speak with them."

"I'm Jared's brother, Donall," the young man said, his expression becoming haunted, as though facing a horror he had expected, but dared not admit would come to pass. He was astonishingly pale. "He's dead, isn't he? Jared. He's dead."

"Aye," Kamran answered with a somber nod of his head, setting his cap carefully on the bar. "On Festival night, of all nights. Came he to Gardirentown and requested an audience with the Earla, as custom allows on that blessed day. A knight - I know not his name, but from what I heard, he was a grizzled, battle-scarred devil of a warrior - met with your brother and inquired as to what favor Master Jered sought. Jered replied that his story and request were for the Earla's ears only. An unusual reply to a knight, but within the Earla's custom, and the spirit of the day. The matter was brought to the

Earla, and she – being, as all men know, not only a fair and just liege, but also possessed of great wisdom...” Kamran watched intently for the brother’s reaction. The young man’s face was filled with grief and a hot, silent tear rolled down his cheek. “I told him not to go,” he said with a sob before wiping the tear quickly away.

Kamran acted as if he had taken no notice of it, “...agreed to the audience on the morrow. Now, here the story turns tragic. Later that very night, Jered was murdered at the Dragon’s Rest Inn. Some of the Earla’s men were there, and there was a battle with casualties on both sides, but at the conclusion, Master Jered lay dead, his tale untold – and if the rumors are true, his life taken by none other than the Wolf!”

“The Wolf?” the young man cried. Stories of the Wolf, some terrifying and fantastical, and some true, were known throughout Kaldor’s countryside. He was something of a bogey-man in the kingdom, a result of his leaving his sign at every kill, and of his having split more than one gentles’ lifeblood in the dust for money, and some said, revenge. “What would the Wolf have to do with our troubles here?!”

“Aye, ‘tis strange,” Kamran agreed. “I know of no reason why an assassin as elusive and feared as the wolf would be hired to murder an innkeeper, yet that is the rumor. As I was headed to Nurelia anyway, I was given the information that I tell you now.” Kamran bowed his head. “I wish I had better news for you. I am sorry.” He picked up his cap, but did not place it back upon his head. “Perhaps I may attend to more pleasant matters. The villagers could use some merriment and good cheer? It seems that the village is in a certain state of disrepair...”

“Aye,” Donall, scrutinizing Kamran cautiously. “There was a Kamran who traveled with the Master Harper Ryhnn...”

“It is I,” Kamran responded with a slight stage-bow. “The very man – In the flesh. I’ve not traveled with Master Ryhnn for quite a while, though.”

“Well, if you can bring some cheer and gather the villager’s here for a night, then you may have a room, but there will be few farthings from the peasants for your trouble,” he leaned forward, his voice dropping, but becoming angry. “For that bastard of a bailiff has driven the peasants to the brink of ruin, and aside from the few guildsmen who remain, and the new Reeve’s clan,” he snorted and spat on the floor beside his feet, “– a bloody fat sniveling yes man and his spineless crony brothers, if you ask me, which you didn’t, but I’ll tell you anyway, because it’s the plain truth – there isn’t more than a handful of farthings to spare in the entire village.”

“A handful of farthings won’t go very far for a Harper,” Kamran mused out loud to cover his train of thought. Kural and his cronies were certainly traitors, but were the Reeve’s clan merely spineless toadies or had they actually participated in the villagers’ violation? And where did the guildsmen stand? “Still, I am here, and perhaps the bailiff, his men, or the guildsmen would enjoy songs and tales. What have to eat and drink?”

“I’ve got the pottage heatin’ – rich with fowl – and there’s bread, cheese, and Haninale, if you’d like. Won’t have a proper meal ready till after midday. Normal rates. Lord knows I need the business. The loggers and charcoalers’ men only come once in a blue moon anymore. They don’t want any trouble and have been steering well clear for months. This was a fine and prosperous village before that Bailiff was set upon us. You said the one of the Earla’s knights spoke with my dearly departed brother – “he said ‘dearly departed’ bowing his head and touching his knuckle to his forehead, then heart – in a sub-conscious display of reverence. “Is not someone coming? I don’t mean to be disrespectful, but

does no one in Gardiren care what happens here?"

Kamran's mind raced. The party needed a reliable ally in the village, and who better than the brother who thought Jered had been murdered on orders of the bailiff? The man seemed steady, not prone to picking up a club or spear and making a vain attack on Kural. The threat of betrayal was slim to none, and Donall could point out who was to be trusted and who wasn't. A decision was upon him.

Kamran leaned over the bar and lowered his voice. "Take heart, friend Donall. The Earla takes care of her loyal subjects. I am here – and others – to see the bailiff overthrown and the village restored to its rightful prosperity. We must bide our time and strike at the proper moment. You must control your rightful anger until the time is right. I shall speak to you privately tonight, after all customers have gone. No one must know that I am more than Journeyman Harper Kamran, with the story I told you earlier."

Donall's eyes narrowed, becoming flinty with suspicion, then he nodded, seeming to have come to a decision himself. His voice was low and serious: "Aye, good sir. I understand you well enough. There's one or two you should meet..." He stopped in mid-sentence, looking past Kamran's shoulder, his hand coming up an inch from the counter in discreet warning. Kamran straightened as he heard the oak door open behind him, and the voices of two men, jovial enough, as they entered the inn.

"Haninale and cheese then, Innkeep." He laid two farthings on the polished bar. "I'll be off to let the villagers know of the fine evening of merriment that awaits them!" He set the feathered cap back on his head, turned around, and feigned surprise at seeing the two men. "Forgive me, you startled me..."

The two men fell silent for a moment, surprised to see a stranger in the village. Their eyes took Kamran in. His fine burgundy wools, matching cocked and pheasant plumed hat, and mandolin were bound to tell them more than most would care to know. Their appraisal gave Kamran time to examine them in return. They were a mismatched pair, he decided. A big man and a small man, and the big man was the epitome of the word big. He was almost as broad as the doorway and had been forced to duck under the lintel when he stepped in. Tall, broad, and thick of trunk and limb, he was, despite too much fine food and drink remaining on his person, powerfully built. His was in no hurry, his motions were slow and deliberate. His head was topped by a short-cut mop of unruly black hair and his florid, sun-abused face was hard-set, with small, squinty, suspicious dark eyes. He was dressed like a prosperous villein, with fine stitched wool clothes of beige and russet wool, and well made leather accoutrements.

The small man seemed even smaller than he really was standing next to his companion. Perhaps five and a half feet tall and slender of build, he had a ruddy complexion and fair hair. His garb was sturdy, that of a peasant, and otherwise unremarkable. His eyes and his motions were quick. He smiled with delight when his eyes fell on Kamran's mandolin and tapped the big man on the forearm with the back of his slender hand. "Do ya' see now Red Will, we've got a fine specimen of a Harper visitin' Caer Nure! Isn't that grand?"

He crossed the room to Kamran and clasped him by both shoulders, appraising what he clearly considered an ostentatious figure before letting go with one hand and half turning back to his companion, who had broken into a scowl. "Isn't that grand? I said, Red Will, isn't that..."

"I heard what you said Dooley of Bendeth," Red Will snapped. "And I'll tell you whether it's fine or not!"

"Aye, right you are Red Will," the little man quickly agreed. "Right you are. You aren't the Reeve for nothin'."

"An that's the Lord's truth!" Red Will declared, looming large in Kamran's field of vision as he crossed the room to where Kamran and Dooley stood. The big man looked Kamran over, squinting so critically one eye almost shut, and reached up with a ham-hock sized hand as though to touch the feather in Kamran's hat. "Well, he looks like a fine figure of a minstrel, Dooley of Bendeth," the man said with a begrudging grunt.

"That he does, Red Will," Dooley interjected. "He does at that..."

"And some songs would do this little Hamlet of ours good," Red Will continued.

"That they could, Red Will" Dooley interjected again. "That they could."

"But can he play, I ask? Can he play. A minstrel who can't play won't do us any good."

"That he won't, Red Will." Dooley shot out. "That he won't."

"...And there's plenty of them walking the woods from here down to Cherafir, and across to Aleath who sing and strum flat..."

"A right passel of them, Red Will. A right..."

"But this here young fellow seems like a right prosperous fellow..."

"And burgundy and pheasant feather's, Red Will!" Dooley said. "Did you see the feathers?"

"I saw them with my own two eyes, Dooley of Bendeth," Red Will said with a nod. "And feathers a burgundy means prosperity, and prosperity means skill. But don't be interrupting' me."

"Right you are, Red Will. Right..."

"But like I say: Can he play? That's what I want to know. Can he play?" The big man looked Kamran right in the eye, his expression fierce. A big finger prodded Kamran in the chest. "Are you any good?"

Kamran had been expecting some show of physical intimidation from the big man, so he was surreptitiously braced for the jabbing digit. Still he was surprised by the force behind it. Unbidden, the words of his Sergeant in the Army of the Chelmarch came to mind: "Size kills, lad. Size kills." With a sword, Kamran was confident he could defeat Red Will, but if it came to wrestling - well, that was most likely a short trip to a broken back.

"I have had some success, Reeve. Perchance you will visit the inn tonight with the other villagers and judge for yourself?" From Donall's description and the interchange between the two men, Kamran had concluded that Red Will was a bully and a bootlicker - obsequious to those with more power, brutish to those with less - and had determined to fall into the former category.

"I shall indeed young harper!" Red Will exclaimed, clapping Kamran on the shoulder with such power that Kamran had to brace himself to keep from being knocked to the floor. "I shall indeed. Some music would do this town wonders. And you'll sing lively!"

"Indeed." Kamran turned to Dooley, smiled, and made a quick flourish with his hat. "A farmer's life is one of good, honest work. I have songs of joy to make your heart soar, songs of grief to make the ladies cry, and songs of *ahem* simple pleasures that any man might enjoy..." A quick wink. "I hope to see you tonight, good Dooley of Bendeth - and many of your friends as well!"

The man had seemed genuinely glad to see a Harper, as most village folk commonly were. Hopefully getting him out of the shadow of a domineering reeve would rid him of the excessive fawning, though a steady diet of his repeating every statement twice would soon have Kamran considering the merits of tearing his own ears out and casting them in the river.

Dooley smiled broadly. "They'll be here after dusk Master Harper. They'll all be here."

"Come on, Dooley!" Red Will said. "Lets have our mornin' pint and be done with it. I want to call Dugal's beloved Rosie before we tend to the fields."

"Ah, a fine one, that Rosie is, Red Will. A fine one."

"Ripe and round," Red Will said with a sigh. "Just the way a man likes. Ripe and round."

Donall touched the board with Kamran's bread and cheese sitting next to the tankard of Haninale. "On your return, Master Harper?"

Kamran nodded and turned to the Dooley and the Reeve. "Till tonight, then." Kamran clapped Dooley on the shoulder and strode purposefully out the door. Once outside he turned towards the central village and riverfront common, to take stock of who was left and get a closer look at the keep that was Kural's lair.

— [David Queenann](#) 2006/02/16 09:46

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