

# The Old Garden Bench

*Game Master's Comment: In this scene I'm starting to hint that there are bigger machinations in play across the Kingdom that will impact the game. I'm also trying to set up some important NPCs and give the player more potential directions to go in to develop his character and course. I think he's doing a pretty good job.*

*Reinhardt's Commentary: This was a big scene. We established several new characters. I really am starting to feel the pressure of the different forces in Reinhardt's life. The scope of responsibility is setting in. I think the plot-line of the relationship between Reinhardt and Elsbeth is integral and it was expanded upon here. Reinhardt is having a hard time between duty, propriety, and his feelings toward Elsbeth which he views as sinful temptation if taken past a point. The characters introduced also give much to the scene possibilities ahead. I think adding another solid female character to the story in Reinhardt's mother will be very interesting.*

## 14 Helane 719 - Blood Helane Eve

Reinhardt walked next to the fence that divided the fields from the East Common, watching the peasants work. There were no idle souls at Caer Nurel, nor any grumblers. Everyone worked with solemn determination, knowing their ability to weather the coming winter depended on it. It was a warm late-afternoon with clear blue skies, and aside from the activity of the harvest and coming slaughter, a strange stillness had settled on the Shem River Valley. It seemed river, wind, and bird had all fallen silent. He had spent a good deal of time in the past days reading a semi-literate manuscript on fief maintenance written by an obscure lord from the reign of Chelebin III, and now, watching Ian Fahy snap at Red Will to push the cart that carried him double-quick, sighed. He was a man of action, and the matter was well and truly out of his hands.

He contented himself with the fact that the village officers both knew their business and showed no hesitancy. Reaching the south end of the common, which was filled with snorting pigs and bleating sheep, he watched as the village girls began herding the first of the sheep into the fenced yard where Master Hevel's large home and smokehouse sat. Dooley had won his bet - the girls had rounded up the last of the lost pigs and brought them in earlier that morning. Now, with Blood Helane falling at dusk, the slaughter would begin. Traditionally there would be a festive meal - whole pigs and sheep slathered with oil and herbs and roasted on a spit - with strong ale, music, and dancing around bonfires. An ancient celebration of the harvest and its bounty, but this year the night would be a quiet one. The festivities would have to wait.

Dooley of Bendeth leaned on the gate next to Master Hevel, holding it open, as proud as a peacock as he watched the girls - who everyone now called "his girls" - work. He grinned at Reinhardt as he approached and dipped his head with a happy laugh: "Tis a fine sight to have a real Lord of the Realm about, your Excellency - It makes our little village seem grand beyond her own charms!"

Reinhardt, having spent the morning practicing his fencing with Kamran, had donned a two colored gambeson, royal blue on one side and light silver-gray on the other, each of the arms matching color of the opposite side. His tights were the same colors, each side matching the arms, and on his head he wore a royal blue hunter's-cap with a rakishly angular pointed brim and long pheasant plume that bobbed when he walked. Were it not for the scuffed long-boots he wore, and the functional broadsword that hung from his waist, he would have looked quite gay.

"She is a fine village," replied Reinhardt to Dooley. "When we get her back up and proper, she will be

the envy of Nobility – mark my words.” Reinhardt wanted the villagers to have pride again, and it seemed to be stirring once more.

It was then that he heard a loud whistle from the direction of the village square and looked over to see a procession of riders guiding their horses casually through the village and towards the common, a wagon drawn by a sturdy but plodding draft horse following in their wake. Faranir was in front, sitting astride the massive black and white splotched charger that always carried the giant weapon crafter's weight with such equanimity. He wore chain mail under a black tabard displaying House Curo's arms and wore a battle-sword at his hip. Three more men, similarly clad, rode just behind him. One of these was Sir Miles, the Sergeant-at-Arms of the Countess' cavalry companies; the other two were Yadd and Lonn, armsmen who had served in Countess Curo's personal guard under Reinhardt until two weeks ago, when he had been given Nurelia.

The rider who drew his attention immediately, however, was the woman astride the noble white stallion to Faranir's left. She was tall and lean, with good shoulders and an athletic build, and wore ecclesiastical white robes with the purple sash and mantle of the Order of the Shattered Spear. But on her arm she wore the red-gold armband that signified she was a member of the order of St. Claudia, and a battle-sword in a well-used scabbard was tied to her saddle. Her short, dark, curly hair was a sharp contrast to her fine-grained, fair skin. She sat straight-backed with the comfortable air of high-breeding, and as the group drew nearer, he could see it was written not only on her expression, but in her bones as well. She had an interesting face, and a good one - rich with expression - but her aristocratic features were too sharp-set for anyone to call her beautiful.

The other two riders were obscured by those in front, but Reinhardt could tell they rode jaunty palfreys and wore ladies gowns, one deep green the other blazing scarlet, each with matching veils and metal circlets. As they reached the common, Faranir began to nudge his horse into the sheep and pigs, followed by the Priestess on the white stallion. The other's reigned in their horses and the wagon stopped, but just as the flocks began to part for the two advancing riders, the lady in the deep green brought her palfrey to a quick-legged, high-stepping canter and circled from behind Faranir to his right, plunging into the flocks and eliciting alarmed bleating and snorts, and prompting a scurrying of the girls tending them to keep them from scattering. Reinhardt's eyes widened as he recognized the rider. It was the Lady Candace Ethasial, his mother.

“Maxwell.” Reinhardt called, but there was no response. “Max!” he shouted. Presently a boy came running round a nearby hay stack.

“Here, Excellency,” replied the lad. He was a sprightly nine, and had sandy blonde hair. His eyes were a light hazel, and his complexion was fair. He was dressed in a make-shift tunic that Mareth had thrown together from bits and pieces she was able to scrounge. It matched Reinhardt's colors the best it could under the circumstances. As Mareth had commented, “It will have to do until we can get some right-proper material for such things.” Max also wore a hat, which now sported a long white goose feather that had not been there five minutes before. Max was Mareth's youngest boy – Reinhardt's new page.

Max ran up and stood up strait, trying not to gawk at the procession of newcomers, and reported for duty. Mareth's older boy was ready to apprentice, and as part of her reward, Reinhardt had agreed to apprentice him to Faranir when the smith arrived – if Faranir found the boy had the talent; he was sure Faranir would need one soon. He also took on her younger son as a page, and this meant he might rise to have a station in Reinhardt's household someday. These rewards were not only for Mareth's aid, but also her husband's final sacrifice in attempting to protect the Glebe from Kural's men. Reinhardt still wanted to give something to Mareth herself, but had yet to decide on the gift.

"Run to the Inn and inform Master Donnel that two Noble ladies and a Knight have arrived, and he is to prepare his best rooms for them at my expense. Then run and inform Master Kamran the same news, but that he is to come to me." The boy took off at a run, then stopped in mid-stride, turned and gave an awkward bow before shooting off again. Reinhardt didn't bother informing Garoth that Faranir had arrived; the woodsman certainly already knew. Reinhardt had been given no warning of this large party approaching Caer Nurel, an event that would not have passed the eye of Garoth or his two new disciples. Garoth had sent no warning, for he identified who it was and determined no threat in arms or diplomacy. Had it been the Sheriff or Brigands, it would have been a different matter to be sure. This is what Reinhardt reasoned.

As Maxwell ran off, Reinhardt turned toward his approaching mother. She was nearly upon him in the interim. He reached up and grabbed her horse's bit to steady the animal, then swung around to take his mother's hand. "Mother," he said with admiration, kissing her hand. He drew himself up and his eyes rose up to her. Then, he helped her down from the palfrey.

She stood there a foot away looking at him with an appraising eye. A petite, well-knit woman, she gave a youthful impression despite her forty-seven years. Were it not for the faint wrinkles at the edges of her eyes, and a mature considered expression on her face, she would have shown little age at all. "Look at my fine boy," she said with quiet pride, smoothing the gambeson's material on his chest with her palms. "You are a strapping man – and the very picture of high station."

"God has double blessed me today," said Reinhardt, "for the harvest goes well and now you are here. Welcome to Nurelia." He smiled in fond admiration of her.

"I am glad you are not angry," she said, turning to look back at the others, who had given up on penetrating the sea of sheep and pigs that had filled back in between them. "When I received your letter I insisted Dame Sophia let me accompany her emissary. I knew I could not wait."

"It does me good that you are here," said Reinhardt. Dooley had come up and taken the reins of the horse. "I do hope you have accepted my proposal to reside here with me? But, we can discuss it later in private, let us greet my guests." Reinhardt linked arms with his mother and led her along the edge of the common, skirting the herds. They walked slowly so they could speak privately before reaching the others. Reinhardt took the moment to ask a question for the immanent introduction. "Who?" was all he had to say, before his mother explained who the Priestess and woman dressed in Scarlet were.

"The girl in Scarlet," she said quietly as they walked. "Is Anna – Anna Triel – my lady's maid. She comes from a good Tashal merchant family. The father is a goldsmith, very prominent in the Gem Cutter's Guild. I believe he has a seat on the Mangai Council. The mother is very righteous and wants her to be a priestess. Anna's a clever enough girl, but not very well grounded – she has no notion that idealism must be tempered with pragmatism. I agreed to take her on so she could experience the life in cloister before she made a rash decision she might regret later."

"As for the dashing lady on the fine white stallion," she continued, her tone now the confidential tone of a woman discussing the high matters of court. "She is Dame Savra of the Orders of the Shattered Spear and St. Claudia. She is Dame Sophia's heir apparent in Our Lady of Paladins and has been sent as Dame Sophia's personal emissary to you," her voice took on greater emphasis. "I believe her presence bodes very well, and should be taken as a high honor."

Reinhardt nodded in agreement: "Truly."

"Incidentally," she added, almost as though voicing an afterthought. "She is a scion of House Cerl."

Realization set in. If the woman's position did not explain her great bearing, this last piece of

information more than made up for it. Lenore Cerl, King Mingath's mother, had been Torastra's Queen. As they approached the now stalled procession at the border of the East Common near the main village, Faranir took the reigns of Dame Savra's horse. The woman dismounted with the fluid grace of a true horseman and turned to face them. She was, Reinhardt realized as they came within speaking distance, almost as tall as he himself. Her eyes took a simple, unobtrusive inventory of the Realm's newest magnate. Her expression was pleasant, but expectant.

"Dame Savra," Lady Candace said formally. "I give you Sir Reinhardt Maddox. Baron of Nurelia," and then, with happy emphasis: "My son."

"My Lord Baron Maddox," Dame Savra said with a courtly nod and a polite smile. It was clear she and Lady Candace knew one another. "I come with warm greetings and messages from Dame Sophia. It is my honor to meet you and to give you the joy of your title and domain."

Reinhardt nodded gracefully in return: "The honor is mine, for your reputation precedes you Dame Savra. Your fine liege honors me by sending you for this errand. It is my hope that God will smile upon our negotiations and bless our humble Barony with a strong presence of the holy orders." He sized her up, and saw the staunch discipline and non-nonsense-iron will in her eyes. He had hoped to have the Kural issue dealt with before the church arrived. Dame Savra was certain to press him for full details regarding the burning of the church and murder of the Glebe. While Reinhardt was content to wait until spring to dispose of Kural, he felt she probably would not be. Moreover, if Kural was taken alive, uncomfortable questions might be asked. Their eyes locked for a moment - was it competition or respect that held them studying one another? Reinhardt wasn't sure. He had a strange sense from this priestess, but he could not quite place it. Sir Miles, dismounting, ended these thoughts.

"Sir Reinhardt," Sir Miles said in the staccato cadence that was characteristic of the man. "I am pleased to see you well." The two men clasped hands firmly. Never one to mince words, Sir Miles added: "I have dispatches from Gardiren."

Reinhardt brightened at the mention of messages from Gardiren; a slight smirk curled on his face. A personal message from Elsbeth would make this day complete. However, he realized it was probably nothing more than information and orders pertaining to the issues at hand. Nevertheless, she would have penned them. "That is well Sir Miles," said Reinhardt. He looked back and saw his mother had a curious expression as she looked at him. Had he been that obvious? He wondered what his mother knew and didn't know about his relationship with the Countess. Moreover, what her opinion of it would be.

The other riders dismounted and Reinhardt caught sight of Dooley, the reigns of Lady Candace's horse in hand, standing nearby with a group of young boys. Catching Reinhardt's eye Dooley motioned for the boys to take the group's horses. As the boys were gathering up the reigns, Maxwell returned at a full, breathy run, his hat clasped in his hand, and said: "Master Donall says....," the boy stopped in mid sentence and bowed with an impromptu 'milord' before resuming. "Master Donall says he'll lay out his finest refreshments for our honored guests," he made an attempt at a conspiratorial-look that made no sense. "And then ready their rooms with all due haste. Oh! And Kamran is coming," which Reinhardt could plainly see.

"Very well," said Reinhardt. He nodded to Max, who then bowed again.

"Refreshments would be an excellent idea," Lady Candace suggested, slipping seamlessly into the role of hostess rather than guest. "We ladies can retire to the inn and relax while any pressing details are tended to." She turned to her lady's maid and said: "Come Anna, lets leave the men to their

duties. Will you join us Dame Savra?"

The priestess murmured a genteel affirmation and looked to Reinhardt. "I shall see you later then, Milord."

Reinhardt noted her last sentence was not a question. He swung his eyes back to Dame Sevrá's own and gave her an affirmative nod. "Escort them to the Inn, Maxwell," he said his eyes still on the priestess. Then he smiled and turned his head away, to not make her uncomfortable. There was just something about her that he couldn't place.

Reinhardt watched as the three women, led by Maxwell, began to make their way for the inn. Lady Candace turned back and asked: "Will you men join us for supper at midday then, my son?"

"Yes," replied Reinhardt, "it would be my honor."

"At midday then," she said. With that, the women departed, passing Kamran who doffed his hat and bowed low, making a courtly greeting as the women passed. Dame Savra, stopped at her horse and unlashed her battle-sword, which she carried easily by the scabbard in her left hand. She had a long, easy stride, Reinhardt noted. She was abreast with the other women within a few paces, as though she had never stopped.

"It's a good village," Sir Miles said as Kamran reached them, surveying it the village and keep with a slow, considered eye. "Despite what your predecessor has done to it." He looked matter-of-factly at Reinhardt: "I take he's holed up in the keep with some men?"

"Aye," affirmed Reinhardt. "Kural, a Guild Master, and the Master's two mercenaries are believed to be inside, with at least one of the village girls and Kural's doxy."

"It's no matter," Sir Miles said.

"Sir Miles, this is Sir Verdis's son, Kamran." As the two men exchanged greetings, Faranir stepped forward.

"Milord," said Faranir. The big man gestured back at the wagon, but there was something in his expression that told Reinhardt he had something other than the wagon to discuss. "I have a letter of account from Bardo and several purchase notes from merchants for you to look at. And," he added. "I'd like to see the wagon unloaded so the teamster can make for Tonot in time for dark."

"I can take your man over to Mareth's with these other men," Kamran put in. He looked at Faranir: "Faranir, right?" The big man nodded and Kamran introduced himself. They shook hands and Kamran turned back to Reinhardt: "She can settle them in at Ethne's since Ethne is busy with chores, and show Faranir the forge."

"That would be fine Kamran. I am sure there is room in the Blacksmith's forge to store any of the smithing supplies. Arrange with Fahy if any of the food-stuff is amongst the shipment." He looked at Faranir. "We can meet later and discuss what has arrived and what we can expect later."

"It would be nice to get the dust off," Faranir said, that same look of something important still on his face. "I can bring you your papers after everything is squared away."

"Yes," said Reinhardt. "When you have unloaded and squared away Yarrd, Lonn, and yourself report to me at the Glebe. I am sure Garoth will be about presently, and you can see him help you when he shows." He looked at Lonn and Yarrd. "When you two are settled, one of you report to the inn and the

other get some rest; I want you to ensure the security of the ladies while they are here. I am sure Dame Sevrá is capable, but it allows her to relax if one of you remains nearby." Then his tone became slightly more serious. "They don't go anywhere alone." Finally he revealed the motives of his precaution, "The Wolf is still out there, somewhere." Reinhardt then turned to Sir Miles: "Let us remove ourselves to the Glebe, where we can sit and discuss business."

## The Rectory...

In the rectory, Reinhardt sat at the large oak table in the main room digesting Elsbeth's letter as Sir Miles stood, looking out one of the open windows at the river, hands clasped behind his back. An empty mug sat on the sill before him. Having removed his thirst, Sir Miles had withdrawn to his own thoughts, creating a sense of privacy in the room, despite his presence. He had listened to Reinhardt's thoughts on building the troop of horse intently and now pondered the matter in depth. Reinhardt, ignoring his own mug of Sorkin Spruce Beer, read through Elsbeth's letter a second time. It seemed off, and he found himself trying to read between the lines:

11 Helane 719

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

*I was pleased to learn you have secured the village at Caer Nurel and that efforts are underway to bring in the harvest and prepare for winter. I trust the keep shall be in your hands shortly. I will depart in train for Pendeth via Naniom Bridge and the River Way in a fortnight where I shall winter. The Crown has sent that you are to be presented at Court at the first convenience. I have returned that the first convenience will be after the coming year's first bloom. Use this coming season well to settle all outstanding affairs. I shall depart in time to reach you on the glorious first of spring no matter how much snow or mud bars my way.*

*Your liege,*

*Elsbeth Curo, Countess of Neph, Sheriff of Osselshire, Keeper of the Great Seal of the House of Tane.*

It was dashed off with enough of her imperative high-handedness to look like nothing more. But, Elsbeth was a very social woman, and very hands-on when it came to her looking after her holdings. Her political travels were extensive. She normally crisscrossed the kingdom with her entourage in train, moving from fortress to fortress in order to hold court and issue decrees wherever she happened to be. She seldom spent more than a few months per year at Gardiren.

Like most Great Nobles, Elsbeth and her entourage stayed in each of her holdings as long as the hospitality held out, and through some intimate sixth sense of her vassals' larders, always knew the precise time to depart. In this way she saw and was seen. And yet, here she was traveling directly to Pendeth, which she held as a part of her own domain, ostensibly remaining throughout the coming winter season.

And had they not just returned from Pendeth, traditionally the last stop on her summer circuit, just a short month before? Normally, following the harvest, she would move to Baron Londel's household at Caer Yeged and then to Baron Ethasiel's at Setrew. Come midwinter she would move to her large townhouse in Tashal and attend the King's Court until the coming of spring, when she would return to Gardiren.

Reinhardt had finished reading, but the words were still swimming around in his head. "What are you scheming, Beth?" he thought to himself. Reinhardt considered Pendeth to be the least of her concerns

right now, and the fact that she had just returned from there made this move mysterious to him. With possible trouble brewing, he would have thought Setrew would be the place she would want to rule with an iron fist if trouble came; his uncle Baron Wevran Ethasial and his cousin, Baron Ethasial's son, Sir Ramlach, had a reputation of harsh handedness, rather along the lines of Kural, but had never broken any laws, nor recently defied their liege as far as Reinhardt knew. They were opposites of Reinhardt be sure, their greed and lust for power were noted traits.

"Why Pendeth?" He continued to rack his brain. Perhaps she was shoring up a political alliance with Earl Caldeth of Minarsas. Militarily this was a sound move. If she could secure his alliance, they would control the entire northern front of the kingdom, from Minarsas to Setrew, with no great risk of being outflanked. It was also well known that Earl Caldeth had a gift for management and probably retained one of the kingdoms larger war chests. Reinhardt frowned. Perhaps he was looking too far into the future, getting lost in the politics. Maybe there was a problem at Yeged and she was politely giving Baron Londel time to fix it? Whatever reason she had for going to Pendeth, he was certain something was afoot more than a simple change of routine.

He stopped. No - maybe that was the answer. Elsbeth could be a target if the King died. She had a claim to the throne, though he was not sure how she ranked against the other potential candidates. Maybe, she was changing her routine to make a possible assassination plot more difficult. The thought of someone striking at her with his sword no longer barring the way suddenly sickened him. And Pallon would be off ignoring her as usual: "If she was killed and Pallon was not there..." he did not allow himself to finish the sinful thought. He had tensed and his locked his jaw. He relaxed and let out an audible breath.

Sir Miles, sensing Reinhardt had finished, turned and, stroking his drooping gray mustache, said: "I would like to look at the ground for the barracks and stables as soon as I can, Sir Reinhardt. It would help me settle the matter more firmly in my mind. As for men: there's no point in recruiting any more men until the barracks and stables are up, and we have the arms and horses for them to drill with. Late Savor at the earliest, I should think."

Reinhardt looked up at Miles from his seat at the table. "Place the stable and grounds where you feel they would best suit our needs, and consider a location for a barracks to be built after; we will probably have horses before we have all the men. Do you see any major obstacles to our mission?"

"Nay," Sir Miles said confidently. "If I can have Sir Verdis' son as my second: then with the two armsmen our lady has sent, and your four village recruits, should they prove suitable, we can train up a core of eight to build the rest of the troop around. Once the barracks is up and the arms are acquired we can recruit the rest. And skills aside I would advise against gentles," Sir Miles added emphatically. "A broadsheet in any proper castle town on market day will bring us enough swords to fill our empty bunks. Some who can already ride, no doubt. Gentles can be hard to manage, and some will come with dreams of a fief and then leave us with an empty bunk when they are disabused of the notion. I submit, Sir Reinhardt," - he was passionate now - "The common man is the man is just the thing."

"I agree," said Reinhardt. "I wish to limit the Nobles in service to the officers only."

"As to the horses," Sir Miles said, openly satisfied that they seemed to think alike on these matters. "We can start without them. Best the new ones learn to fight on their feet first, and we have enough horses to get them used to a saddle if nothing else. We can look for horses at Minarsas' mid-winter fair when the time comes. It's the best place for fine horseflesh in all of Kaldor save Geda. And by Navek the greenhorns will know not to sit on their swords and the professionals will be in a tolerably high trim. And the Geda Horse Fair isn't until Peonu."

Minarsas is only a league or so from Pendeth, perhaps her reasons for going there were personal after all. Perhaps she knew Reinhardt would be going to Minarsas to look for horses... Reinhardt chastised himself internally for such a childish fantasy. She was much too pragmatic to make such a move on some emotional impulse. Still, the thought was a welcome fantasy and lightened Reinhardt's heart.

Reinhardt broke from his thoughts, took a deep breath, and looked at Sir Miles; he had come to a decision. "Sir Miles, I am promoting you to the rank of Captain. You will double as Commander of my horse and Captain of my guard until a suitable replacement can be found to relieve you of one of the duties. You will see to the security of the Barony and building the troop. I will assign Kamran to assist you and be your second; he will report to you directly. You will oversee building the troop, building the stables and barracks facilities, security of the village, eventually the Keep, and any Nobles. This will include overseeing any policing of the village or hunting of criminals. The Beadle is a man named Arden, I will inform him of your post. You will also have authority to raise the remainder of your troops as you see fit, though I reserve right of approval. In compensation, you will receive room and board, maintenance of your arms and armor, two suits of clothes per year, a warhorse and hostler's costs, one set of barding, tack & harness, and a monthly stipend that will be laid out in writing at my soonest convenience."

"I should like that of all things, milord," Sir Miles said with quiet satisfaction, a Sergeant no more.

There was a knock at the door and Faranir, ducking in the doorway, advanced into the room, a sheaf of papers grasped in his left hand, an iron box suspended from a strap in his right. "Milord," he said to Reinhardt, then to Sir Miles: "Sir Miles."

Sir Miles nodded once at Faranir and said: "If it's all the same to you, Sir Reinhardt. I'd just as soon forego supper and have a look at the ground and your village men. I'm not much of a hand at the social graces and I'm anxious to see what I'm working with. I can have Verdis' boy show me the site and make the introductions."

"Very well Sir Miles, you may inform Kamran of his new assignment and put him to work as you see fit." Sir Miles put his knuckle to his forehead, and with that the knight stepped past Faranir and disappeared through the door.

When the door was closed Faranir placed the lockbox on the table along with the sheaf of papers and took a seat.

"I trust your journey was an easy one," started Reinhardt. "It is good to have you at hand again."

"It was quick enough," Faranir said, pushing the sheaf of papers to Reinhardt. Normally the big man was cheerier than this. "And the weather was good. We stayed over in Tonot so I could arrange the supplies for the village. I wanted to maintain the story that I was coming to replace the blacksmith for as long as possible so I didn't buy anything that didn't correspond to that in Gardiren. And the teamster's fees are less. We should be receiving the supplies for the village in two days. The firebrick should arrive from Gardiren in mid-Savor. I picked up a few other incidentals for my real trade in Tonot as well. I went over our discussed figure buy two pounds and a shilling."

Reinhardt looked over the parchments as Faranir explained each in turn. He had prepared a ruled sheet in his precise, neat hand that noted Reinhardt's credit balance with Bardo at the top. He had numbered each sheet, which corresponded to a number next to each figure on his own sheet. It was all very straightforward, and he had obtained good terms on each transaction. He looked at the iron-box: "This contains the remaining funds from Bardo's loan?"



"Not all," Faranir said. "It's 150 pounds in silver shilling coins. I spent 54 pound, 2 shilling, and three pennies," he tapped the balance sheet he had prepared. "The rest remains on account with him" - which was, according to the sheet, another 150 pounds and some change. Faranir passed Reinhardt the letter of account from Bardo. "As for terms, they were far better than I expected. That hawk faced sharpster is known to be a usurious hell-spawn, if you'll pardon my saying so. He gave me a flat rate of three pound interest a month insofar as the loan is repaid four times yearly at regular intervals over a period of two years. It's a far sight less than his usual fees. I couldn't account for it."

"I'm sure our Countess' letter of introduction might explain some of it," said Reinhardt. He looked at Faranir and gave a baffled shrug. "What all is in this wagon that came with you?"

"Well," Faranir said. "In addition to the necessities ordered, I brought our personal chests and my tools - and some items Her Ladyship said I could take: mail hauberks, conical helms, kite shields, swords with scabbards, and spearheads for eight men. I also procured two crossbows with four score of bolts. It's not the best equipment, but with some oil and polish it's all serviceable. Also, she sent you a dozen cases of that Azeryani wine from the banquet, and one of Thardic Apple Brandy. I'll have them brought here with your chest this afternoon."

"You have done well Faranir," Reinhardt said. "I am greatly pleased." He let the words of praise have their moment. "Now, your real work is to begin. I want you to prospect a location for your new forge tomorrow. You need to break ground soon. I want you to serve as my Bonded Weaponsmith; you will no longer be a man-at-arms. You are still free to drill with arms as you desire, but will not be called upon to use them except in defense of our village and your forge."

The big man nodded his agreement, waiting to hear the rest. He had no doubt Sir Reinhardt's terms would be as generous as could be managed.

"Faranir, the very success of this Barony and the Countess may well rest on your ability to innovate in arms manufacturing. If you succeed..." He didn't finish. It would be postulating. Reinhardt took a calming breath. "You will have the blacksmith's facilities to work with in creating the pieces you need for your forge. I have already spoken to the Master Carpenter - a man named Thondl - and he is prepared to assist you with creating any designs you have. The Master Miller has agreed to lease you the rights to a water wheel. Which brings me to the local Mangai, they are expecting you to join their council. They will be electing a leader. They will want to know where Jarred is - I take it his health did not permit his accompanying you?"

"That's correct sir," Faranir said. "There was some infection and it was quite narrow for a week or so, but he seems to have pulled through. His wife is with him now. He should be fit to travel in a few weeks. I'll need to pick and break ground within a few days if we're to have the foundation set before the first freeze. That's the main thing. After that the walls can go up. Hopefully, it will be ready before the firebrick arrives."

"I want you to speak with Donnel, Master Jared's brother at the inn and inform him of Jared's condition," Reinhardt said. "You can introduce yourself and he will be able to introduce you to the other Mangai. They need to elect a new president and I suspect they will convene shortly to do so. I do not believe they will wait for Master Jared as other tradesmen will likely arrive in a month or so."

"Alright," Faranir said, clearly understanding the timing of the meeting. "Do you have a preferred candidate for the new Mangai president, Sir Reinhardt?"

"I think the Carpenter or one of the Inn Keepers would serve well, but hear them all out. I trust you to cast a wise vote. I do not wish to be seen as interfering in their council business; they are freemen for

a reason." Faranir nodded in understanding. "There's one more thing," Reinhardt said presenting a furrowed brow. "The local blacksmith died defending the village priestess from Kural's men, and his woman put her self at great risk in aiding me in securing this village. I have granted as one of her rewards to apprentice her oldest son to you. I realize that I should have asked you first, but I figured you could use an extra set of hands for the menial stuff. Moreover, the young man has been around smithing with his father all of his life. If you find he does not have the ability for your trade, I will see him apprenticed to the regular Blacksmith when he arrives. I have posted for a Master Blacksmith from Tashal and suspect many eyes have already seen it. When the new smith arrives you will have to share the forge - unless he plans to build anew - until yours is ready. He will take over the village and ostler's needs. The boy's name is Orin, like his father. He has been anticipating your arrival, and will be at your disposal."

Faranir pondered the information for a moment. "I'm willing to give the boy a chance. We can start him sweeping and cleaning and running errands. If he's bright and energetic and pays attention he might see some other small tasks by summer. It's a complex task to make a sword, milord. Only a real master can do every step himself and, then, he seldom does. It's too time consuming normally. We'll need a few journeymen at least once we're up and running - an apprentice at the outset can't hurt."

Reinhardt nodded in understanding. "I leave the matters of forge management and staff in your capable hands," he said.

Though the conversation had run its rational course and the men had fallen silent, Reinhardt could tell Faranir had something more on his mind; something that disturbed him. Reinhardt waited, letting the big smith find his own words in his own time. After a moment, Faranir, uncomfortable, said: "I take it Sir Miles did not tell you how things stand in Gardiren?"

"He mentioned nothing of Gardiren to me," replied Reinhard. "What goes?"

"Her Grace asked to see me just before we departed," Faranir drew a folded piece of parchment from his tabard - it bore no seal - and slid it across the table to Reinhardt with deliberate care. "She asked me to give you this. And..." the big smith looked Reinhardt directly in the eye, his expression grave, and said: "I didn't want to be the one to tell you this, but Her Grace and Sir Pallon had a furious row after you left." The expression on Reinhardt's face departed, as Faranir continued. "It set the entire Castle on its heels. I don't know how many know the details, but he backhanded her something fierce - knocked her to the ground." Reinhardt sat motionless, taking in each word. He locked his jaw and his eyes narrowed very subtly. He did not want to show his feelings on the matter before Faranir. He fought to keep them in check. "She's ordered him to Nausch. I was the only one admitted to see her after it happened. I saw the bruise. I'm sorry to be the bearer of this news, I know how you..."

Faranir, feeling decency demanded it, stopped in mid sentence. They both knew what he had meant to say and didn't. He put his hand on Reinhardt's shoulder and murmured politely before departing, leaving Reinhardt alone with his thoughts. His fingers rested on the letter. The scent of her perfume met his nostrils. For several moments after Faranir left, Reinhardt simmered. His forefinger nervously tapped the letter and his eyes looked at it, and then stared strait ahead as his mind continuously replayed it's version of Pallon striking Elsbeth and her falling to the floor. The demon on his shoulder had a game of making the incident a little more dramatic, each time Reinhardt imagined the episode. In a matter of a minute, Reinhardt's pulse was up and his body tensing as if combat was imminent. He wanted to punch something, he wanted to punch Pallon. Reinhardt knew that the letter might send him over the edge, cause his emotions to break free. He also knew it was a gateway to other sinful thoughts. But his love for Elsbeth was stronger than his willpower. Finally, he resisted no longer and

tore open the parchment.

*Dearest Reinhardt,*

*The rumors surrounding your sudden elevation have already begun to whisper in the halls of power. Some of them are deliciously scandalous. If only they were true! Pallon was furious, of course. We had a most unpleasant interview. He actually had the temerity to demand -" here the word 'demand' was underlined. " - I reverse my decision in favor of someone 'more suitable,' which could have only meant Pallon himself or Sir Daynes. I was forced to remind him who was Master of Neph. He has retired to Nausch. I do not expect to see him until I return to Gardiren in the spring. I find no joy in the prospect. Do you remember the old garden bench?*

*I miss you terribly,*

*Elsbeth*

Her last words washed over him like a soothing breeze on a hot summer day. And how could he not remember, when the day before her wedding, now five years past, they had sat upon the stone bench opposite the wishing pool in Caer Gardiren's high-walled rose garden and shared their single doomed and burning kiss? Lips that burned like a brand; her dark perfume mingling with the scent of roses in full bloom; her eyes reflecting the passion in his breast. It remained with him even now. It was heretofore his most cherished memory, even more so than the day he was knighted, or the night he was made Baron of Nurelia. It was also his most painful memory, for it reminded him how close, yet how far true bliss was from his life. That his true love was the wife of another bore right into his soul. He would gladly give it all up, the Barony, the Knighthood, the fame and fortune, just to have her. He thought, "Why is God punishing me?"

Pallon, that devil. Reinhardt's chest tightened and a vice took grasp of his heart. Darkness overtook him, as his thoughts fell to his rival. "You would not have dared such a cowardly action were I there," Reinhardt quietly whispered at his rival. More dark thoughts crept in, but Reinhardt tried his best to brush them aside. Reinhardt wanted to whip Pallon like a dog, humiliate him; he wanted to kill him. "No!" He shouted. He slammed his fist down on the table. He hated Pallon for making him so angry. If he killed Pallon he would never have Elsbeth; he would be beheaded for his crime. If he had Pallon murdered, they would never be free of the rumors and his honor would be gone. Reinhardt looked up. There was only one way to be rid of him. There was only one way that he could kill Pallon in the eyes of God and Country, and retain his honor and Elsbeth's. If he met Pallon on the field of battle to settle a matter of God's law through arms, only then could God bless such a death. For God's law held that no Knight could be defeated in such a match if his cause be true to God's Will. He was no longer a household knight. Elsbeth's decree no longer applied to him. He would enter the tournament at Tashal, and he would bear Pallon's body to the ground with a jousting lance. Destroying Pallon's fame would be acceptable justice.

Reinhardt carefully folded the letter and smelled it one last time. He then put it in his tabard. It was hard for him to resist the urge to mount his horse and speed his way to Gardiren, to her side. But he had responsibilities here, and she was not in immediate danger. A cooler head must prevail for now. Pallon would wait; he was not going anywhere until the spring. Reinhardt had to shock the Kingdom, he had to pull off Elsbeth's miracle for her.

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