

Festival Wager

Game Master's Commentary: Turn One introduces three player characters: Sir Reinhardt Maddox, Kamran Inthin, and Garoth of Olokand. Faranir of Tonot was created as a stand-by PC. The scene was intended to establish the characters and their motivations. I also hoped to do some foreshadowing. I suspected Sir Reinhardt's player, a long-time friend and great gamer, would be the anchor for the game, and would prove the most motivated. I was right. His decision to challenge Sir Pallon to a wager in this scene was a move I really appreciated. It allowed me to bring Faranir into greater focus later on, and brought one of Reinhardt's disadvantages to the fore of the story. I was also concerned the other players would drop out due to scheduling concerns. This too proved correct. As a result, while this turn introduces three player characters, the story really belongs to Sir Reinhardt.

Reinhardt's Commentary: When David asked me to do the game, I jumped at the chance. He is the most creative Game Master I have ever worked with and his plots are always multi-tiered and rich. We have worked together for years and now have a solid ability to play off each other. My approach for Reinhardt began as an honest and chivalrous knight. In this scene, he starts in proximity to Sir Pallon, Countess Curo's husband. Obviously, Reinhardt doesn't like him for he wanted to marry Elsbeth. I figured there would be competition between them, with Pallon taking advantage of the fact that Reinhardt would not over-step and put Elsbeth in a bad situation. I figured Dave had something up his sleeve for Faranir, and implemented a way to get him involved quickly.

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

Opening Broadside. Caer Gardiren and Gardirentown were ablaze with light. A festive air had descended on this, the night of the autumnal equinox, which was no surprise. Countess Curo, The Star of the North, had always loved the Festival of Delights, an ancient Helean holiday that had been subsumed by the Kaldoric Church and anointed the Banquet of St. Claudia, Our Lady of Paladins. The hedonistic revels and ribaldry of the Helean ceremonies were no longer practiced in Kaldor, but the great feast remained, and other customs had come into being. A special service in remembrance of Kaldor's preeminent Patron Saint would be said during the evening vespers, and then the banquet would begin. It was a night of overindulgence in food, quaffing of excessive spirits, music and dance, and the recitation of the Lionsbane Cycle. Gifts of food and delicacies ready to eat were to be sent to friends, and alms were to be given to the poor. As was the custom, one was to give generously to any who asked.

The servants had spent days scrubbing every inch of the castle, preparing the fortress for the Blessed Day. The castle was built on an man-made quay near the eastern bank of the River Shem, and was connected to the castletown by a stone bridge. This bridge, the inner bailey of the castle, and the Great Hall were lit with alchemist lamps, an astonishing extravagance, bathing their world in a rainbow of multi-hued flame. The gatehouse and the Great Hall had been hung with red and gold tapestries bearing the rampant lions of House Curo. In the village, streamers of red and gold had been strung between the buildings, and torches on high posts were being lit in the streets. Everyone, from the lowest scullery maid, to the Countess herself, had donned their finest raiments; the armsmen's arms and armor were polished; and scents and oils were used. Now, with everything prepared, and the last rays of the dying sun, the evening was proving to be perfect.

It was warm, and a gentle breeze rolled across the surface of the river, the stars were a clear spangle of diamonds on azure velvet - slowly turning to black - and Yael, Hâr's moon, waxing full, had begun to rise. Minstrel's songs floated in the air, and the halls were filled with laughter. The Countess's chambers, which occupied the top floor of the castle-keep's northeastern tower, were filled with a

cozy, intimate cheer. A blazing fire burned in the massive hearth, and the walls, formed by four plush curtains that met at a central pillar, had been pushed aside to make room for those attending her. Her ladies' maids, dressed in brocade and velvet, filled her room with laughter as they worked at the massive oaken table that usually served as the Countess's desk. They were finishing with the gifts the Countess intended for all who came to the castle's gates.

Even the Lady Urda, the Countess's childhood governess, and now the head of her lady's maids, seemed in high spirits. A trim, angular matron in her sixties with tightly-bound white hair and a severe countenance, she now smiled, warmly aglow with a drop too much mulled wine. Still, despite her uncharacteristic lightness of being, she fretted over the ribbons on the packages as the pages scooped them up with dangerous zeal, an arm load at a time. Her eyes flicked from the hourglass on the mantle, its sands on a constant march, to the curtains that led to the balcony of the great balcony, which overlooked the canal between the castle and the castletown, and the villages in the valley beyond. The Countess, before going to vespers, was to give audiences to a press of vassals who waited in the stair outside her chamber door, now a quarter glass past the appointed time.

Garoth of Olokand. Garoth of Olokand, a dark haired, rakish armsman, stood to one side of the great balcony's entrance, watching the antics of the ladies in waiting with a bemused eye. One of them, a particularly fey looking creature he had not set eyes on before, had brought him a steaming goblet of mulled wine, and now cast demure glances his way, scandalizing her fellow gentle-born maids. They're girlish laughter filled the room with a gay spirit. Only the Great Harbaalese, two of the Countess's prized hunting hounds, laying lazily by the great hearth where Sir Pallon and Sir Reinhardt stood, talking with his fellow armsman Faranir, were too proud to be affected by them. Every few moments Sir Eldan, Gardiren's hob-kneed old Chamberlain, would poke his head through the door, the buzz of the vassals on the stairwell louder than he, only to be shooed away by the Lady Urda, his scowl deepening with every repetition.

Shortly before sunset a battle-scarred warrior wearing serviceable mail and a broadsword under brown robes and a heavy oilskin cloak, his grizzled face obscured by the hood of his cloak, had arrived and demanded an audience with the Countess. Garoth did not know the warrior's name, but he had seen him many times before, and he knew the Countess's orders: Day or night, rain or shine, armed or unarmed, the man was to be admitted. The man had frequently visited the Countess's father, the leonine Hemisen Curo, and in his day, the instructions had been the same. In the past the man had spoken only to the Countess or her father, proceeding in deathly silence through the castle halls, only a word or two uttered to convey his intent. But this night he had stopped, pulled back his hood, revealing a deep scar running through a ruined eye, and told Garoth, in a rough, quiet voice: "No one comes near the curtain, son. No one."

Ordinarily the Countess received the man alone, in her chambers, everyone including her armsmen sent out. Tonight that wasn't possible, and she had elected to see him on the balcony. They had been there almost an hour, speaking in hushed voices, though Garoth could make out a bit here or a piece there. Now, however, Countess Curo's pure soprano became clear, her tone dubious: "Surely, as revealing as this report is, you do not expect me to accept that you rushed from Geda in the East, at such a pace, marching into Gardiren on a night where you must, without a doubt, be seen, to tell me about tunnels under Tashal, in the West."

"No, your Grace" the man said, his scratchy voice somber. "I had hoped to arrive earlier in the day, and I do not wish to bring you ill tidings on such a joyous day. Perhaps the matter can wait until you have risen on the morrow."

"I am Countess, Bvarlan," Countess Curo said, her voice firm, but bereft of pique. "Not an addle-

brained lady's maid with her heart in the clouds and her eyes besotted with squires. If the matter merits my attention, I will hear it now." Garoth looked casually around the room, making sure no one took an undue interest in the Countess's unexpected conference. Sir Reinhardt most frequently placed Garoth and Faranir at the Countess's side because they lived by her father's maxim: "men with secrets best remain as silent as the grave."

"The matter," the man, Bvarlan, said. "Concerns your bailiff in Nurelia...."

Suddenly Sir Eldan poked his head through the door and, having been rebuffed for the last time by the Lady Urda, remarked in the loud tone of an old man who had reached his limit: "No, Lady Urda, I will not hold my horse. The cake eaters are getting restless. If I haven't had instructions by the next opening of this portal I will send Her Shepherdess her entire damnable flock!" The lady's maids fell momentarily silent, one of the Great Harbaalese raised its noble head, its pointed ears flicking dubiously towards Sir Eldan, and the Lady Urda turned to Garoth, her face pale with shock, and pointed to the hourglass on the mantle. Her voice was almost a hiss: "If we wait any longer the vespers will be delayed, as will the banquet. Her Grace needs to give her audiences now - tell her." Sir Eldan harrumphed in triumph, a glint of satisfaction beneath his bushy white brows, and slammed the door.

Garoth couldn't keep from smiling at the old woman. Though he respected the dowager's loyalty to the Countess, she had a tendency to make the most humorous faces when shocked, or indignant, or whatever emotion the scandal du jour would require gentlefolk to display. She reminded him of a domesticated turkey that had just learnt it was to be the main course at a feast. Picturing the beloved old woman suddenly darting her head here and there whilst flapping her arms like a bird completed the picture, and Garoth looked away from her for a moment, ostensibly to check the curtain behind him.

When he had stilled his face, Garoth turned back and told the Lady Urda, with the utmost respect in his voice: "It is not my place to dictate the Countess's schedule to her, milady. Nor is it anyone else's, save perhaps her husband. I have been ordered not to disturb this particular audience short of the keep falling down around us." Garoth gave the old spinster his most rakish smile. "But perhaps I should interrupt her. The delay in eating would certainly set all her subjects' stomachs to rumbling," he continued, adding a wink for good measure. "And this simultaneous quaking would topple these stout walls around our ears - and no one would be to blame for this calamity but me."

Garoth watched the color rush back into Lady Urda's face, not out of rising humor, but in anger. He was perhaps reaching above his station, but the Old Bird made it hard not to. He quickly added: "But I see there are some grains in yonder timekeeper, which speaks of the coming vespers and feast, not due for another..." His eyes looked pointedly at the hourglass Lady Urda had pointed at. "Half-glass."

Lady Urda's eyes narrowed dubiously, and she seemed about to spit out "fie," but Garoth had a sudden inspiration, knowing how to deflect her from her current course: "And while we speak of the feast, one of the serving wenches told me there was some trouble in the kitchen, with a cousin to one of these noble hounds," he said, gesturing to the dogs lying near the knights by the hearth. One of them gave him a baneful look. "Something to do with chaos in the kitchen and a roast boar being ruined."

"The boar? Ruined?" Lady Urda all but shrieked. "When did you hear this, you low-born rascal?"

"Just before I came up with the Countess's visitor," he said. "An hour past. Not more. I'm sure it wasn't more than a course ruined. The cooks will have begun some delightful improvisation by now."

"A course?" Lady Urda gave Garoth a suspicious look, clearly not believing him, but a small part of her in a panic that everything might not be proceeding according to plan. After a moment of excruciating indecision she turned to the Countess's lady's maids, her voice softening: "Finish the packages my dears, and make sure the pages don't drop them, the careless oafs. You'd never know the little beasts were gentle-born." Then Lady Urda turned back to Garoth, her voice stern: "She only has until this glass runs out - this very glass!"

"Of course, milady. The moment she is finished I will inform her of the masses that wait outside her door."

Lady Urda grasped her skirts, pivoted on her heel, said something curt to Sir Pallon and Sir Reinhardt a few feet away, and marched from the room, jostling Sir Eldan and shoving her way through the assembled vassals, crying out for them to make way as she stormed her way to the kitchens. Garoth resumed his post by the curtain, one ear turned to the other side.

Sir Reinhardt Maddox. Sir Reinhardt and Countess Curo's husband, Sir Pallon, stood by the blazing hearth, sipping mulled wine and murmuring niceties as Faranir, one of Reinhardt's senior armsmen, examined his commander's sword in the firelight. The Countess's favorite Harbaalese hounds were resting at their feet. Pallon wore a fine suit of crimson clothes, richly embroidered with gold and rubies, intended to match his wife's gown for the evening, while Reinhardt wore a simple suit of dark court clothes under the crimson and gold tabard and cape the Countess had sent him earlier in the day. He had yet to thank her for his banquet gift, but she had begun her conference on the balcony before he had arrived. When Garoth had told him who the conference was with, he had decided to wait. Besides, at this moment, it was his sword that concerned him.

Reinhardt and Pallon had been practicing their blade work earlier in the day, crossing scabbarded swords, when the impact of a parry had felt wrong. An expert swordsman, he had instinctively known something was amiss, and upon removing the scabbard, Reinhardt had discovered a hairline crack running the length of the blade. Master Ellis, Gardiren's bonded weapon smith, had told him the task of reforging was hopeless. Ellis had given him a replacement blade - one he said was among the better blades in the arsenal - but the weapon didn't feel right in his hand. The balance, perceptible to the trained swordsman, was off.

Faranir ran deft, thick fingers over the blade as he scrutinized it, his brow furrowed, lips cast in a slight frown. He shook his head with a sigh: "I could reforge it for you, Sir Reinhardt, but it would na' be as strong as it 'twas, and it would take longer than forging a new blade. The blade is iron pressed between two thin sheets of steel. The steel is resilient and sharp, but the iron is brittle. If the steel is cracked," he shook his head, reseathing the blade. "Then the iron is shattered or - at least - broken as well. Truth be told, it's not a very good way to forge swords.

"Oh?" Sir Pallon asked, arching an eyebrow, his tone churlish. "Are not all swords made such? And is not Master Ellis a fine sword smith?"

"Sadly, Sir Pallon," Faranir said pointedly. "All swords are made such." And no he ain't, remained loudly unspoken.

"Then what," Sir Pallon asked, quaffing his wine as he turned to look at Sir Eldan as the crotchety old Chamberlain made his ultimatum to Lady Urda, "are you getting at?"

Faranir grimaced at Sir Reinhardt while Sir Pallon was turned away and passed his commander the sundered blade. He plastered a dumb expression on his face: "Just musing I suppose, Sir Pallon."

"Musing?" Sir Pallon said turning back to the big armsman with a dubious look. "Leave musing to your betters!" He shooed Faranir away with an annoyed motion of his hand, turning his attention fully to Reinhardt. "Well, Sir Reinhardt. It would appear Master Ellis has provided you with a fine blade. The detailing of the hilt is marvelous."

Reinhardt was willing to take Faranir's word at face value when it came to smithing. He had seen the man work miracles with weapons and armor others would have resigned to the scrap bin. The idea of Faranir producing an innovation intrigued him. He watched the big armsman's squared back as he stalked back to his station opposite Garoth at the curtain. The men were not so far away, and he heard Faranir's final remark as it was spat out under his breath. "Hilt work! Bloody jousting champion... wouldn't know the sharp end of a sword if he sat on it."

"What a clever idea, Sir Pallon," Reinhardt said, attempting to cover for his armsman's insolence. You yourself said to leave musing to one's betters. Its a fine example of how you can grant your own boons in lieu of those our liege will be granting in a few grains' time. What if their was a better way to make a sword? Would that not be a worthy innovation, bringing honor to our Countess's domain? Think of the prestige and trade agreements!

"If the smith thinks he's up to the challenge of presenting us with a superior brand, then let us task him with the feat. If he succeeds, then you rise in the Countess's estimation, having sanctioned a superior weapon of war; and if he fails, then you may laugh it off as a generous gesture made on this Blessed Day." Sir Reinhardt, feeling the hook was baited, moved in for the kill. "I, for one, believe he can do it. I would be willing to wager a pound."

When Reinhardt had first begun his soliloquy, Pallon, never one to respond well to being goaded, began to redden. But when the wager of a pound had been mentioned, his eyes almost bulged out of their sockets. He was a well-to-do knight, having received a triple knight's fee on his wedding day, but he was also a notoriously venal and spiteful man, who knew Reinhardt, a bachelor knight living on support and stipend, didn't have much financial bottom. Recomposing himself, his eyes became shrewd. "Two pound, Sir Reinhardt, or is that too rich for your blood?"

Reinhardt flared his nostrils and narrowed his eyes, measuring Pallon's shrewdness. A pound was as much money as a peasant would see in a year; and even for him, a knight bachelor with a monthly stipend of two pound, it was no trifling sum. He decided Pallon wanted one of two things to happen: for Reinhardt to back down and be embarrassed because he was not willing to risk the greater sum, or for Reinhardt to be foolish enough to back a down-on-his-luck tradesman against a known master weapon smith. Reinhardt knew he would never back down. It would wipe out his paltry savings if he lost, but honor demanded he keep the course. He said: "Two pound. You want to ruin me indeed, Sir Pallon. Nevertheless, I stand by my man and my faith in him. I accept your wager. Two pound it shall be. I believe our liege would be interested in the outcome of our contest. She could sit in judgment, deciding whether he had achieved success."

"I believe," Pallon said. "We should place the matter before King Mingath himself; allowing the matter to be judged at the Royal Tourney at Tashal. Certainly until Nulus, eight months time, is enough time to forge a sword. Your man will present His Majesty with his brand, and I," Sir Pallon stroked the pommel of his own sword, ironically not forged by Master Ellis, but by the acclaimed grandmaster of Kaldor's weapon smith's guild, Raynes of Lynn. "Shall commission a blade in competition. His Majesty has always been enamoured of good steel. I'm sure there would be much interest in such a contest at the Tourney. All the Lords of the Realm will be in attendance. The King might go so far as to present a Royal Prize to the winner. I am sure my wife could be induced to persuade her Uncle to oblige our little wager."

Reinhardt studied Pallon for a moment. Did he question Elsbeth's impartiality? And why the King? He knew full well Elsbeth did not allow the knight's bachelor who served in Gardiren to participate in tourneys. Why would she make an exception now? Or did Pallon know she would veto the competition, letting him out of the contest? In the end, it mattered not. "I believe eight months to be quite generous, but a brand for the King is more than just a sword. I must ask Faranir be given the proper supplies, forge-time, and access to all the tools he may request for preparing his entry."

"Your man already has the run of the castle forge," Pallon said with a disinterested wave of his chalice, a dash of steaming wine sloshing out, "and all the ore he can use, does he not? And I happen to know he owns his own tools - the finest of implements that are his and his alone. If he needs more implements he can borrow then from the castle forge, and I will tell Master Ellis he must give precedence to your man, only the needs of war being paramount. Surely you don't doubt my chivalry, Sir Reinhardt. Are these not perfectly acceptable terms?"

Reinhardt nodded graciously. "You are correct, of course, Sir Pallon. I was merely stating the rules of our game. Moreover I know not a tong from a coal in smithing. We shall make do, of course." He would have much preferred a contest of sword or lance with Pallon, but it could not be done outside of a tourney, and that door was closed to him. Any other venue and it would bring disgrace upon him, and more importantly, Elsbeth. Pallon was a competent knight - a jousting champion - though Reinhardt was certain he was better, and despite his visceral dislike for the man, he had little doubt Pallon would fight to defend Elsbeth, and his own honor, if need be. It was that thought which allowed Reinhardt to endure him. He was also sure the feelings were mutual. Pallon endured him because he had Elsbeth's favor. He would never impugn Pallon's honor. That would be a stain upon Elsbeth's honor, and that was something Reinhardt would never allow to come to pass. But Sir Pallon was free to send the stain the other way.

"To our wager, Sir Reinhardt," Pallon said, raising his chalice of mulled wine.

Reinhardt began to raise his own chalice in response, but never had a chance to reply. The Lady Urda, her face pinched, her eyes severe, her back militarily erect, cut curtly into the two knight's toast, barely breaking stride to say: "Perhaps one of you gentlemen, taking your repose by the fire with the hounds, could be induced to remind Her Ladyship of her duties," then to Reinhardt as she resumed her stride. "Since your Garoth seems to believe he, and not Sir Eldan, is Chamberlain."

Pallon chuckled and drank deeply from his chalice, watching Lady Urda yank the door to the stair open and shove past Sir Eldan, her voice raised in shrill pique as she made her way down the stairs, and through the crowd, beyond. "The old bird is in fine form tonight, eh, Sir Reinhardt?"

Sir Reinhardt drank from his own chalice, his own eyes looking toward the curtain to the great balcony, catching a glimpse of Elsbeth on the other side when the breeze caused the curtain to flutter. He nodded in agreement. "Fine form, indeed, Sir Pallon." He looked down for a moment. The thought of Pallon lying with Elsbeth was a vice on his heart. He pushed the thought away and slammed the door to his heart shut with a stoic sigh. "I am sure the Countess does not need the counsel of gentlemen in terms of her duties. It would take a far braver man than I to breach that curtain when she has left orders not to be disturbed."

"A wise foreign policy," Pallon said with another chuckle, waving his empty chalice at a nearby page for a refill. "A wise foreign policy, indeed."

Kamran Inthin. Kamran stood with his father, Sir Verdis, on the landing outside Countess Curo's chambers, which dominated the sixth, and final, floor of the northwest tower of the castle keep. His

father held his fief directly from the Countess, and performed his yearly service here, in Caer Gardiren. Sir Verdis, a bluff, stoutly built man in his middle fifties, with a shock of steel-gray hair and a thick, drooping mustache, remained a canny and powerful warrior, even if he was fighting for his life against a warlike paunch.

Verdis turned to Kamran and flicked an imperceptible piece of lint from his son's shoulder. He spoke in a low voice, hoping to keep his words private in spite of the throng of the Countess's vassals on the stairs immediately behind them, who were hoping for an audience as well. "Its a fine suit of clothes you've bought boy, and yer' clean and neat. That will help. The Countess's a fastidious sort, and finicky like a cat." Verdis looked at Sir Eldan, who, with his back to the door on the landing, was a mere foot away, and gave the wizened Chamberlain a pointed, yellow toothed leer.

Sir Eldan, for his part, looked anything but amused, and cleared his throat in protest, raising a bushy eyebrow as Sir Verdis forged on, speaking to his son, and ignored him.

"So observe the forms and make a good show of yourself. I made a point of getting this audience tonight. This night, of all nights, she's inclined to grant a favor or two. So don't do anything to piss her off," Sir Verdis nudged Kamran in the ribs with a wink. "You know how women can be."

Sir Eldan pursed his lips, regarding Sir Verdis coolly. His aged eyes, under thick, drooping brows, faintly acknowledged Kamran. He turned, opening the door yet again, and poked his head through. Women's laughter flooded into the torchlight stairwell, along with the scent of mulled wine, heavy with cinnamon and cloves. Sir Eldan's voice was like iron: "No Lady Urda, I will not hold my horse. The cake eaters are getting restless. If I haven't instructions by the next opening of this portal I will send Her Shepherdess her entire damnable flock!"

Kamran gazed levelly at Sir Eldan's back. As the son of a knight, Kamran was considered gentle - if only barely - but his wife and children, were he to ever have a wife and children, would be common. In the old buffoon's eyes, he was sure, that made Kamran barely worth a glance. A corner of Kamran's mouth turned up in an admixture of smirk and sneer. He thought differently - Kamran had spent four years earning the rank of journeyman harper, entertaining the common folk. He had spent five years as a soldier in the armies of Kaldor, riding with, and depending on, commoners for his life when fighting the merciless Chelni and Paegelin barbarians, or skirmishing with the Thardic cohorts. They in turn had depended on him. He had an understanding of, and respect for, commoners that few gentles could, or would, understand.

The smirk faded quickly as Sir Eldan turned back from the door to face them, replaced with a level gaze that told the Chamberlain he knew what Sir Eldan thought of him - and that he neither agreed with it, nor was cowed by it. Their eyes locked for a second, then Kamran pointedly turned his back on Sir Eldan and faced his father, who he had not seen in almost a decade. He was pleased Sir Verdis retained his strength and fighting prowess. "It is good to see you again father, and I look forward to seeing Sir Wels wed on the morrow. It is a fitting time," he added, with a gesture to the festival decorations around them.

"Aye, boy," Verdis said, clearly thinking of something other than what he spoke. "'Tis a fine time for the joys of young love, and your brother is as besotted as they come - may it last. Pura is from the right people, with fief's near our own. She's Castlen blood, which is the next nearest thing to being an Eldensa. Its good for Wels; its good for the family; its good for the fief."

"I see you have more on your mind than my brother's impending nuptial. What manner of favor do you think the Countess might grant tonight?"

"You've made a good name for yourself with your commanders," Sir Verdis said, quietly. "I've asked. You as good a soldier as they make, but rank and file soldiering is for common men. You should have a position with one of the Great Houses, or be an armsman in a well appointed fief. Don't be fooled by her looks. Elsbeth Curo is a potentate's potentate, and the apple of her uncle Mingath's eye. She's made and broken lords without so much as batting those lovely lashes of hers. Impress her and you'll find doors opening before you."

"I will make you proud of me, father," Kamran said, squaring his back and straightening his shoulders. In the silence of his own thoughts he added, I will be a knight - somehow, someday - I will be a knight.

"I'm sure you will, son," Sir Verdis said, slapping Kamran on the shoulder. "Now..."

The massive oaken door to the Countess's chambers was cast open yet again, and a tall, narrow, white haired noblewoman with an agitated, hawk-like face stormed through, shoving Sir Eldan up against the wall of the landing, jostling Sir Eldan and Kamran as she forced her way between the two men. "Her Grace is 'not to be disturbed' Sir Eldan," she huffed over her shoulder as she continued shoving her way down the stairs, her shrill voice commanding: "Out of my way!"

Sir Eldan, flushing crimson, readjusted his embroidered surcoat with a determined tug. He looked pointedly at Kamran, his expression indicating he had come to a fateful decision, and stepped into the threshold of the door. He shook his fist and yelled: "By hook or by crook, Misheperdess! By hook or by crook!"

"Now young master," Sir Eldan declared as he looked back over his shoulder at Kamran. "We're going in. What's your bloody name?"

"Kamran, good Sir Knight." Again Kamran kept his voice level, though his guts were knotted like a fisherman's net as he followed the Chamberlain as the old man stormed through the doorway. You'll fail again, his inner voice chided him. Just as your brother was the one worthy to be a knight. Just as you couldn't attain the rank of Master Harper, Just as... No. He shut the voice out, as a householder might shut and latch the door of their dwelling. He was good enough. He had made a good name with his commanders; his father had said so. This was his chance. He would not fail. Not this time.

As he crossed the threshold of the Countess's chambers Kamran heard his father whisper, as though to himself. "Go with God, dear boy. Go with God." **Garoth of Olokand.** Faranir, who had returned to his post, opposite Garoth at the curtain leading to the Great Balcony, and the Countess beyond, turned to his fellow armsman - his friend of many a year - with uncharacteristic passion. "Nobles," he said, his words intended for Garoth alone. "With all their prating, you'd think there was a mix-up at birth."

The voices on the far side of the curtain fell suddenly silent; Countess Curo's feminine sigh signaling a break in the conference with the man, Bvarlan. The Countess's voice, burdened with resignation, floated through the curtain. "Is the castle under siege, Garoth?"

Garoth knew whatever this knight said - was he a knight? - troubled her. It was plain in her voice, and being very fond of his liege, he felt a duty to lift her spirits, even if only for a moment.

"Aye, milady," he answered. "'Twould seem your guests have engaged in a nefarious plot to unravel the nerves of your humble servants. I am but a simple huntsman naive in the ways of court and keep, but from what I gather they seem to be employing exaggerated sighs and long looks towards closed curtains in combination with repeated questions about when your ladyship shall receive them as their

chief weapons. The servants are putting up a strong defense with misdirection and professed ignorance, but it will not last for much longer. The situation looks grim."

Garoth could almost hear her lips begin to part in a smile. "But fear not, my Countess, for though it may cost the lives of many, no quarter shall be given," he said with steel in his voice. "I estimate another quarter of a candle mark before they lay siege to this very doorway." When he continued it was with a humorous tone. "It is not my place to say, but I must admit I am somewhat attached to the land of the living and hope you may be able to put a stop to this war before I am counted among its casualties." He pictured her cocking her head to one side, as she was wont to do, while phrasing a clever reply to his report.

"I shall not sell your life so cheaply," Countess Curo said with a chuckle. "And I shall not send you to your doom in the face of ravenous revellers stampeding on their way to larderous destruction. Nay, we shall heal the sick, feed the hungry, and forestall fortune's failures. Open the curtain, noble guardians; matters feudal and royal must not impede murderous merriment."

"By hook or by crook, Mishepherdess!" Sir Eldan boomed. "By hook or by crook!"

"Your Grace," the man Bvarlan said. "Allow me a moment to withdraw."

"Just step into the shadows, Bvarlan," she answered lightly. Garoth could all but see her shooing the grizzled warrior with a wave of her hand. "There, by the side of the door. Skirts and shadows shall be your shield, this night."

Sir Eldan strode towards the curtain with a decided air of satisfaction, a well-dressed gentle in his middle twenties a step behind him.

Kamran Inthin. Kamran swept the room with his eyes as he followed the Chamberlain into the Countess's chambers, knowing his father had chosen to remain firmly planted on the landing, watching from outside the door. Several lady's maids were bustling about, loading pages down with cheery looking packages. Two knights stood drinking by the fireplace with a pair of Great Harbaalese hounds. From his exquisite garb, Kamran deduced the dark haired one was Sir Pallon, the Countess's husband. The other, a taller, sandy haired man, he could not place - and then there were two armsmen by a curtain that seemed to lead to a balcony. One was an absolute giant of a man; the other obviously used to being outdoors.

"Young Master Kamran, son of your loyal vassal Sir Verdis!" announced Sir Eldan in a voice that gave no hint of his recent agitation. Then he added: "Hero of the Osselmarch!" The old Chamberlain jabbed Kamran in the ribs with a bony elbow and gave him a devilish wink with a bobbing, bushy eyebrow, stepping aside the two armsmen parted the curtain before them. "Fortune favors the bold, lad."

Sir Reinhardt Maddox. Reinhardt turned to watch as Sir Eldan announced the first of the Countess's audiences for the evening, and his men parted the curtain, revealing Elsbeth on the Great Balcony. His breath caught. She was radiant.

"I have little patience for the pretensions of court," Sir Pallon said, accepting a refilled chalice from a rapidly retreating page. "Especially when it is wasted on petty vassals and lack-lustre gentles. If you will excuse me Sir Reinhardt, I shall retire to a moment's fresh air before vespers."

Reinhardt nodded, watching Pallon make his exit. And acknowledged bastards, I'd wager again, he thought to himself.

Garoth of Olokand. As the two armsmen parted the curtains, Faranir shot Garoth a sidelong look so

expressive that Garoth could almost hear the big man exclaim, *'is he bloody drunk?!*'

Garoth pretended to consider the unvoiced question, finally giving a slight nod of affirmation. If he would bet a farthing he would bet a pound that Young Master Kamran's father was hoping to garner some favor for his son, and hence, the reason for the Chamberlain's exclamation 'Hero of the Osselmarch!' Trying to keep the humor Sir Eldan's outburst had aroused, Garoth turned his attention to "Young Master" Kamran, sizing him up: He had an edge to him. No doubt he knew how to handle himself. It was apparent in the way he carried himself. This was not some noble's son who had been trained with weaponry and left to test himself at Tourney. This was a blooded warrior. He was a fighting man, and the Countess could do to have a dozen more like him on hand.

Well, Garoth thought, if this Kamran doesn't make a complete ass out of himself she'll more than likely grant him a favor. She's been in a very good mood of late. Passing the time as the formalities were dealt with, Garoth began trying to figure out what the favor might be. He knew how complicated 'gentlefolk' liked to make such simple matters. Garoth translated the conversation into one that might be heard among commoners: *"'ello dearie, my son 'ere is too old to be 'olden on to his mum's skirts no more and I wuz hopin' ya' might let 'im stay 'ere as I can't right bring meself to toss 'is arse out in th' cold. 'E aint too much of a wanker an' ees pretty good wit' a spear, meanin' e' knows not to sit on the pointy end. So watcha' say - 'elp an ol' war 'ero out?"*

Kamran Inthin. Kamran came to his best military attention as the armsmen drew the curtains apart, revealing a fine figure of a woman seated on a Melderyni throne, illuminated in torchlight. Countess Curo was a woman of remarkable poise - the kind of poise only the greatest nobles possess, and could seldom hide. Her eyes were clear-gray, intelligent, and burning with intensity. To one side, Sir Eldan made a frantic gesture with one hand, urging him to approach, and Kamran could feel her assessing him, expertly, as he moved forward and knelt in the balcony's threshold.

She was tall for a woman, he could tell that, though she sat, and pliantly slender, without angularity anywhere. Her carriage was erect and high-breasted, her legs long, her hands and feet slender, her head held high. She wore a snug gown of crimson velvet, richly embroidered with rubies and gold thread. A matching cloak, lined with white fur, was draped regally around her shoulders, spreading on the stones of the balcony around her like a crimson pool. Her skin was fine-grained alabaster, a stark contrast to her thick, lustrous raven mane, which cascaded from the circlet of white gold - the crown - she wore, and fell down her back.

"Rise, Kamran," the Countess murmured, a gentle smile crossing her full crimson lips. Her manner was focused, almost intimate. She gave the impression that the person to whom she spoke - in this case Kamran - was the only person in her world, despite the presence of a score of onlookers and eavesdroppers. It was bewitching. The ritual of the occasion only served to strengthen its impact, and her words, St. Claudia's blessing for strangers and travellers, were well chosen. "May your sojourn in my house be pleasant, may your platter this night be ever-full, may your banquet cup runneth over, and may your fortune be found."

Kamran could almost feel his father's tension as he watched his son from the open doorway to the castle stair. He bowed deeply as he knelt, nearly brushing the stones of the balcony with his forehead, then rose as bidden. "Forgive me," he said, deliberately putting a slight quiver in his voice. "I was told this audience was granted by Countess Curo - yet I stand in the presence of St. Claudia herself!"

Countess Curo arched an eyebrow, her piercing eyes hinting amusement, her slight smile broadening. "I see the son of Sir Verdis has a tongue of silver; to compare my modest mortal coil with one so many claim was a bride fit for God."

"Again I must ask your Grace's pardon," Kamran said, falling easily into the sing-song cadence of the storyteller. "I hope the error was understandable. The encampments of the Chelmarch and the Osselmarch are filled with tales of the Countess's wisdom and nobility, but strangely her enchanting beauty was overlooked. I know not how it could be, for 'twould be easier to swim the Mighty Kald during the heavy spring rains and then claim one had walked through the desert!"

"I am obligated to warn you," the Countess said. "I am susceptible to flattery. Your father told me you were a mighty warrior seeking a house for his sword to serve, not a poet seeking to lighten my halls, and stoke the fires of my self-esteem, with gentle platitudes. And yet, I find myself tempted on both counts. My current harper has a voice like a grindstone, and puns that fall like stones from the battlements. Alas, I have more need for men of war than men of music. Are you as talented with your blade as you are with your tongue?"

Kamran switched his persona from storyteller to soldier. "Yes, milady. I have had the honor of serving in his Majesty's armies. Four years in the Chelmarch, one year in the Osselmarch. I assure you the Crown has men of stout heart and good steel ready to stand against any who would do its lands or its people harm."

"And it was during this valorous service," the Countess said, clearly enjoying herself as she flicked a glance at Sir Eldan. "That your mighty feats of daring-do earned you the title 'Hero of the Osselmarch?'"

A small smile touched Kamran's face. "Nay, milady. I hope all will say Kamran, son of Verdis, served King Mingath honorably and well. 'Hero,' however, is a title I am not yet fit to claim."

"And what of those who do hold such titles?" The Countess prompted, her tone still light, but probative none the less. "We have a great many knights who have proven their valor in the Grand Melee, who have shown their mettle in Royal Tournaments. Many believe, instead of our armies, we should muster our lords from their lands. Should not the Chivalry of Kaldor, the heroes of lance and lane, be sent to deal our enemies in the marches, once and for all?"

"I think not, milady," Kamran said, speaking frankly, as a soldier would speak. "While the Chelni and Paegelin are both barbaric and cruel, they are not, as some wish to believe, stupid. They possess ferocity and cunning - as well as intelligence. And the Thardic Cohorts are as formidable an enemy as we may ever face. We may protest their unchivalrous methods of war, but we must also study them in order to effectively counter them." Suddenly, Kamran realized he might be criticizing the favored plan of one of the most powerful nobles in the kingdom. He could almost hear his father choking in the doorway. Still, the old Chamberlain's words rushed back at him - 'fortune favors the bold, lad.' The die was already cast; surely the Countess's penetrating gaze could discern between honest appraisal and ridicule. Surely... "Understand, your Grace, I do not presume to have more than a fraction of your knowledge. I simply speak the truth as I see it. I have seen too many good men - friends - die because someone said what they thought their commander wanted to hear, rather than his honest opinion, to do otherwise. I mean no disrespect."

Kamran bowed, trying to keep the sweat from running down his face and forming a puddle beneath him.

The Eala was silent for a moment, her expression no longer light, her manner deadly serious. "You will swear an oath; you will serve my House; you will go where I send you?"

Kamran straightened, gesturing as he spoke. "This head, this heart, this steel, is your's to command."

"Join your family for the feast," she answered. "But do not leave the castletown until you have

received my instructions - *you serve me now.*"

— [David Queenann](#) 2006/02/16 01:12

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