

Night Raid

Game Master's Comments: I wanted to restart the game with a bang: "Either you're SWAT or you're not!" I also wanted to see how the player would handle his first combat, and whether he would use any unconventional tactics, or use normative "damn the maneuvers: go straight at them" game-think. I even kicked the scene off with the action already under way. He didn't take the bait. Instead, he introduced yet another villager: Mareth. He wrote in the initial description and I took her from there. And my muse liked her, so she took on an unexpected life of her own. Also, Reinhardt becomes a moralist.

Reinhardt's Comments: I knew we were going to have combat in this scene, and I had not been through it. I have played too many games with David to know barreling through the door was not wise. I figured Reinhardt was more of a flanking type General, open to diversions, feints, and flank attacks. Moreover, I felt introducing another female character would heighten the roleplay possibilities - it worked. As for combat, I strove to make it as period and realistic as possible. Erin provided a moral situation for Reinhardt to deal with, it provided a nice subplot and forced Reinhardt to deal with his feelings for Elsbeth later.

8 Helane 719, Caer Nurel

The trio had come quickly, slicing through the village fields and New Hamlet to the central copse of trees that dominated the center of Caer Nurel's vast clearing. They made their way to the western edge of the copse and dropped low. It was a dirty and overcast night, with the first hint of the coming fall's chill, a sporadic drizzle, and the howl of wind in the fields and trees. A loose shutter slam-slam-slammed in the wind - an unheeded warning that newcomers approached. There was a faint smell of peat smoke. A dog whined and then settled back down. For a brief moment the clearing was bathed in the surreal light of the waxing moon as the clouds parted. Then, just as suddenly, there was inky darkness.

Reinhardt stilled himself and waited. Thirty feet beyond the trio was the back of one of Caer Nurel's stone skinned peasant cottages sitting on the Shem River Road, which ran from Tonot, some two leagues to the south, until it tapered off at that nebulous point where the KIRSTA forest became the Kanir in the foothills of the Sorkin Mountains, roughly three leagues to the north. Beyond the road was their destination - the village tabernacle with its graveyard and rectory. From Kamran's report, the rectory now housed Kural's village watchmen, and the men seldom came out, preferring to remain within, drinking and dicing throughout the night, then sleeping well into the late-morning or early afternoon.

It was now, that the euphoria of impending action had begun to set in, that Reinhardt again ran through the details of their plan for seizing control of the village and isolating Kural with the Master from the Miner's Guild - Orlan of Tashal - in the river keep. The three of them - Reinhardt, Bvarlan, and Kamran - had deliberated each detail numerous times, considering every possibility. A professional warrior, Reinhardt was certain they had done all that could be done, but even though he had hatched the plan himself, still it did not sit well with him. It was risky, relied too much on luck, but he saw little choice. With the harvest season upon them, and Kaldor's brief fall and long, harsh winter shortly behind, the matter had to be dealt with immediately. There was no time to wait for an ideal scenario.

Initially, he had wanted to take the guards when they rendezvoused with the boat from the keep, eliminating three of Kural's men and seizing the boat in one fail swoop, but a closer examination of

the landing grounds by Kamran in his guise of visiting Harper had led Bvarlan to object. Reinhardt had argued on, but the grizzled old warrior Elsbeth trusted so much, and he knew so little about, had been right. Such a move would have opened a door to potential disaster.

There was no cover at all at the landing ground – the West Common – and in crossing it they might be exposed to fire should the boatman have a crossbow, and worse, he might shove off before they could close and seize the boat. That was an unacceptable outcome. Kural must be trapped on the island in the keep. His mouth sat in a grim line. Had Garoth returned at the scheduled time he would have insisted on his plan. With Garoth's mastery of the bow in play, the boatman shoving off before they crossed the common would have been irrelevant. But the woodsman remained absent. Perhaps, with the Kanir so thick and the terrain so rough, it had taken longer to find the miners he'd set out after. Perhaps he'd been forced to go all the way to the mine itself. It was too soon to tell, and there was no time to go after him. Reinhardt touched a knuckle to forehead and heart and said a silent prayer. Instead they would take the guards in the rectory tonight, and hope the boatman assumed they were in a drunk and come to rouse them in the morning. It seemed likely. They had agreed on a decisive gamble. If the guards in the rectory and the boatman could be taken without alerting the Keep, then Reinhardt was still considering whether to simply starve Kural out, or attempt to enter the keep dressed as Kural's own guards returning. It was a moot point if this assault failed.

He realized he had been crouched there long enough to rouse his comrades' careful attention and, coming up into a run, gave the sharp command for them to move. The trio crossed the road, passed between two widely spaced cottages and vegetable gardens, and all but jumped the graveyard's low fence. Hearts pounding, sporadic rain on their faces, the three moved between the tombstones and along the Tabernacle's north wall, feeling the broken stained glass from the sanctuary's high windows under their boots. They came even with the front of the tabernacle and Reinhardt, still in the lead, put his hand up for Bvarlan and Kamran to stop. Pressed against the wall he looked around the corner at the rectory, some thirty feet across a muddy turf yard.

It was constructed in the same manner as most of Caer Nurel's peasant houses. Its walls were double skinned with stone and, probably, filled with turf or tight-packed dirt. No less than two feet thick, maybe three, they would make the house cozy and make entry through a wall – an easy task with the wattle and daub structures that were the Kaldoric norm – impossible. The roof was thatch, also insulated with turf, and there was no chimney. Rather, the smoke would filter through the thatch, which would kill pests. The door was set a foot into the wall, iron-bound oak and thick, and the windows were tightly shuttered. Yet there was light underneath the door and between the cracks of the shutters, and for a moment he thought he heard laughter from within between the howling of the wind. An owl hooted from its perch above them.

The three men made their way quickly and quietly to the dark side of the cottage. Reinhardt gave Kamran a nod, and the Harper stepped out of the shadows and motioned with his arm, making a fist, then sank back down next to Reinhardt. There they waited but a moment before another figure emerged from the shadows of the burnt church and made their way to join them. As the figure approached it became clear it was a woman in her thirties. In what light there was from a shuttered window above them, they could tell she had blond hair, and a better than plain look about her. She had a square chin and pointed nose, but her eyes were her best feature. They were light hazel, and were wide with life and mischief.

"Milord, this is Mareth," whispered Kamran. "Widow of the late blacksmith." She curtsied to Reinhardt and bowed her head before looking back up at him with a quizzical expression, as if judging for herself whether he was worth her risk. Reinhardt could see the determination for revenge in her eyes and acknowledged her bow with a nod of his head. Then Reinhardt stilled himself. He hated the idea

using the woman as bait, and of all the many risks on this venture it was the worst, but again time was against them. "When you are ready then, good woman," said Reinhardt.

Mareth took a slow breath through her nose and exhaled sharply. Adjusting her cloak, she stepped around the corner of the rectory. There was no hesitation about her. She seemed consumed with purpose. The three men rose with her and followed. Again Reinhardt wished Garoth were here. He would have preferred to place the archer in such a way that he could cover the woman, and the entry to the rectory, ensuring none escaped. When Mareth reached the door Reinhardt and Bvarlan took up positions on either side, Bvarlan crossing to the hinged side, while Kamran remained beside Reinhardt. All of the men pressed close against the wall, being careful to remain where they could not be seen from within. Mareth raised her hand to rap on the door and looked over at Reinhardt, a small challenge in her eyes. Kamran had insisted she was not only more than willing to play her part, but that he had to convince her to leave her cleaver at home. Reinhardt stiffened his lip with firm resolve and nodded.

Mareth's hand rapped impatiently on the door. There was no turning back now. Her job was to get the ruffians to unbar the door, and possibly lure one of them out into the yard. If one came, Bvarlan would take him while Kamran and Reinhardt would rush the door. If two came out in the yard, then Reinhardt would rush the door alone. The ruffians could not be allowed to barricade themselves in the cottage – no matter what. The men's weapons rasped from their sheaths, then there was a hacking cough and a voice from within: "Who the bloody hell is that?!"

"Tis I, Mereth!" She answered, her voice filled with vibrantly yearning temptation that would have fooled all present had they not seen the look in her eyes just a moment before. "Did you not offer to warm the woman you widowed on cold winter nights?"

Reinhardt heard muffled voices within – and a woman's laughter. He was sure of it. Another woman inside, this was not expected; they would have to improvise. God's will, he thought. But the voice on the other side of the door had already responded: "An' you said..."

The tension rose – was the man too suspicious to open the door? Had she chosen the wrong approach? Mareth, thinking quickly, cut the man off: "Is not a woman allowed to change her mind? Besides, I've had no food since yesterday and you've a larder stocked like a laird. Open the door and feast your eyes on your prize, love – 'twould be a shame to have put on me best for naught. " For two heartbeats it seemed she had failed – then bolt slammed back and the door opened a crack. "So you've finally come round...." The man who opened the door said, his voice trailing off as he saw, and Reinhardt now saw in the narrow beam of amber light, that Mareth had opened her dress and cloak. She wore nothing underneath.

"Tis far too cold and dark," Mareth said with a genuine shiver, wild droplets of cold rain on the broad swath of her exposed skin. "For a woman to be out." The door fell open, presumably as wide as the man's mouth. There was another burst of riotous drunken laughter from within and a woman's voice, wine-sodden and abusive said: "Let her in to play or send her away Wharton – 'tis cold as a witch's tit!" In that instant Bvarlan lunged around the corner of the doorway and seized the gaping man's collar in a vice-like grip. Mereth ducked to the side as Bvarlan yanked the man savagely out and hurled him face-down into the mud. The grizzled warrior dropped onto the man's back, a twenty-inch long-knife flashing wickedly in the light; Reinhardt and Kamran rushed the door.

The main room of the cottage was a large-long room with a darkened-doorless opening on the far wall. In most peasant cottages this second room would be the byre. The main room was well lit, a round black pot bubbled on a bar above a low peat fire in the hearth, and a lantern sat on a sturdy oak table that sat halfway between the front door and the back room. There was a cup-board and

second table against the wall with the hearth, and a stand-alone cabinet, chest, and loom against the wall opposite. A coarse looking, red-bearded man in a soiled shirt and leather jerkin sat in one of the chairs at the table, a plump woman with milky skin and short curly dark hair in her middle twenties sitting astride him, her green velvet skirt hiked up around her waist. Her bodice was open, her hand was in the man's hair, and she'd had her ample bosom pushed into the man's face when Reinhardt cleared the door. Despite her roundness, she was nonetheless pretty. In mid chew, she held a large sausage with a generous bite taken out of it in her free hand.

The woman screeched as the man flung her bodily out of his lap and came to his feet, flipping the heavy table towards the onrushing men, flagons, food, and lantern flying to the ground along with it. Reinhardt was forced to dodge sideways as the lantern shattered on the floor at his feet, busting into a smoking, oily blaze in the center of the room. He heard Kamran roar – a mixture of pain and anger – splattered with hot oil and flying glass, and saw red-beard, drunkenness seemingly gone in a flash, backing warily towards the opening behind him, a sword in one hand, a dagger in the other.

It had been some time since Reinhardt had faced deadly combat. His body was accelerating its energy and increasing his fortitude for the task. His training caused him to instinctively close with his opponent to make it harder for the man to turn and run for the back room, which could make the task of finishing him difficult. He could tell this mercenary had seen battle, for he was not jittery as a recruit would be. This paired with his alcohol consumption posed a definite danger. Moreover, the surprise was gone, though it seemed to have claimed the other mercenary.

Without his shield, Reinhardt would have preferred to take a high guard stance with his sword, but the close quarters of the cottage and low roof posed too much interference. He took a lower guarded stance, pointing his sword slightly behind him, with his hands near his left hip. He figured the exposed stance would invite an assault from his opponent; he was right. The red-haired ruffian struck with a furious strength; his goal to pin Reinhardt's sword and deliver the killing blow with the dagger. Reinhardt parried the sword with easy skill and sidestepped the blow from the dagger. This seemed to irritate the ruffian, who had hoped for an easy kill, but also served educate him. Reinhardt was no ill-trained guardsman.

Reinhardt tested the man's patience, his footwork superb, and waited for the opening he knew would come, watching the man's eyes. Then, the moment came. Kamran cast off his burning cloak and moved to circle the opposite side of the table, causing the ruffian to shift his focus. Reinhardt struck, batting the man's guard aside and running the man through with a lunge so powerful that the two men stood nose to nose. He caught the man's wrist, pinning his dagger down by his side. There was a moment's resistance, then the man's furious eyes went blank and he fell smoothly backward from Reinhardt's blade.

As Reinhardt turned to face the terrified woman cowering by the hearth, clutching her bodice closed with desperate hands, Kamran pulled her cloak from the one chair that remained standing and began to beat the flames in the middle of the room in an attempt to extinguish them. Bvarlan dragged the second man's corpse inside by the ankles as Mareth, who had followed the men in, closed the door behind him, answering Reinhardt's unspoken question as she did so: "Tis Erin – the Miller's wife."

Reinhardt pointed his bloody sword at Erin for effect. "Speak woman, why are you here in adulterous frivolity while your husband sits alone and cold in his home?" The woman's eyes widened and she nearly went cross-eyed as she looked at the blood-dripping tip of the broadsword mere inches from her face. She began to shake, and Reinhardt could sense she was about to break from shock and strain. Nevertheless, he was annoyed at her for cavorting with this filth. He hoped she was here for food, to see what she could abscond with when the ruffians were done with her – to his mind, it was

better to starve than shame oneself thus. On the other hand, he thought, he was a righteous man of good fortune, and not in the dire straits the villagers were suffering – though, the Mangai were faring better than most, and the woman looked as though she could afford to miss a meal. Reinhardt lowered his sword, but raised his chin, again for intimidating spectacle, annoyance in his eyes.

“Who... who...” Erin repeated, stumbling over her words. She looked to Mareth in terrified confusion.

“This is one of the Countess's Knights,” said Mareth. She made no effort to conceal her fiery contempt for the shaken woman. “And you’d best answer him – giving your husband horns being a canon offence an’ all.” She spat on Red-Beard’s corpse, when she spoke again there was a twist of the knife: “And Harold having bought your manumission no less. Half of Clan Danhur weren’t enough to scratch your itch – you had to whore with this scum?”

“Tis none of your concern who I —,” Erin said to Mareth, her voice defiant despite the violent quaver that filled it.

Reinhardt had turned to look at Kamran's condition as Mareth spoke, but finding the Harper with more soot than singe, and the fire out, he turned his attention back to Erin. His voice was impatient. “Well woman?”

“I... I...” Erin shrank against the wall and began to sob. Defiance to another commoner and defiance to a noble, the personal representative of the Countess being two completely different animals. “I beg your pardon milord.”

Reinhardt, unmoved, turned back to the woman. “Your fate will lay with the hand of your husband,” he lectured. “But know this: despite its condition, this is still the rectory to the House of God and your sin in this place sickens me.” He paused, letting the words sink in. “Your association with Kural's filth leaves me no choice.” He turned to face his people and began giving a series of orders: “Bind and gag her until this operation is concluded,” he said to Bvarlan, who nodded wordlessly and moved to obey. “I will take no chance in her giving warning to any of Kural's men. I will deal with her later.” Next he spoke to Mareth, reaching down to pick up a rag with which to clean his blade. “Look to our blackened Harper here and see if you can tend him.” Wiping his blade, he then sheathed it. Then, Reinhardt looked back at Mareth who had crossed to where Kamran stood a few feet away. He reached over and touched her shoulder, grabbing her attention. “You did a very great service for your King, and your Countess this day. Moreover, I pray your husband's sacrifice and your own deeds shall be rewarded by God.” He nodded to reinforce the truth of his words. “I wish you to know that your risk and your love's life lost have not been in vain. When this business is done, I will be in a position to reward you further, but for now please look to our mutual friend here.” Reinhardt saw in her expression that he had won the woman's loyalty. She nodded and curtsied again, a mist in her eyes.

Reinhardt looked over at Kamran and nodded, then moved to dark opening in the back of the cottage, where he expected to find the window with the best view of the river and keep. In the room's dim light, he found it had been Mother Sara's bedroom, containing a large bed with a chest at the foot and an oak bookshelf with some ten bound books and an impressive array of liturgical scrolls. Few village glebes and still fewer nobles had such a library at their disposal. He turned his attention to the room's single window and, unfastening the amber paned glass, pushed the shutters open. The rain had stopped for the moment, and the light of the moon again flooded the valley, turning the river into a broad silver ribbon in the night. A light burned on the second and third stories of the keep. The ground floor and first story were dark. A moment later he realized Bvarlan was at his side. The two warriors instinctively spoke in hushed tones.

“Four inside,” the man said, his voice low and gravelly. “If you're thinking what I think you are. Two

can fight for sure. Best to assume – likely or no – that the other two can as well. More than enough to hold the place against three times our number.”

“Aye,” Reinhardt said quietly before taking an audible breath, slowly letting it out. He changed the subject for the moment. “When we are done, I have to govern these people. Those like this woman with low morals will be difficult for me. I am not Elsbeth or her Father. I hope she realizes that.” He looked at Bvarlan, who nodded his understanding, but offered no comment. “Part of me wishes to flog her in the street, but another part of me pities her circumstances here. My first interactions with these people have to be down the right path if we are to pull off the Countess's miracle by spring.”

“Best to leave the matter to her husband,” Bvarlan agreed. “If the Miller wants a Canon Court, then it can be arranged – and then it’s on his head what they do. Wanting to avoid exercising heavy hand in the coming days, Lord’s privilege or no, is in the right of it. A flogging is always a damned-unhappy business – especially a woman.”

Reinhardt looked back at the Keep.

“If storming the citadel is what you intend,” Bvarlan said, his voice predatory in the dark. He seemed, in that moment, more like a clever gray fox, or a wolf, than a man. “We’d best be on the island to catch him when he comes out. We can’t figure on their leaving the door unlocked when he comes, though it wouldn’t surprise me, or for one of us being able to pass for him. We’d have to rush the door when he came out. And they’ll only be expecting one to return after he ferries the men back and forth. There’s been mist on the river and in the village in the mornings – and we haven’t seen anyone on the ramparts to look down much before noon. It might be our only shot.”

“If we had more men, then I would consider it,” Reinhardt said with a shake of his head. “But, if we fail and are taken or slain then these people's risk is for naught. Let us free the village and take the sure course. Then they can at least look after their survival for the coming winter. The keep will be Kural's cage, and we will have all the time we need to ensure he does not escape, and to determine how to root him out. Night and day for a fortnight will be a hard watch indeed for just four men to stand, once we take the boatman. They will tire and perhaps make a mistake...no let us proceed as planned.” “And the men on the far side,” Bvarlan asked. “Do you still want the horn as their signal?”

“No,” Reinhardt said. “We want to avoid alerting the keep until the last moment. When the boat guard comes to rouse his drunken friends, we must take him quickly. The three of us will then take the boat across the river. This should arouse little suspicion from a quick glance. The less any of the peasants on this side know the more likely the men on the far side are to maintain the surprise. They will know when the moment comes – they will have a man watching. On the other side we can help the men with their overseers if they have trouble, and then ferry them to their happy reunion.” Reinhardt crossed his arms and frowned. “Then comes the long wait. We may have an opportunity to wound or kill one or all at range if they come onto the rampart. Which reminds me – the absence of our woodsman has me concerned.”

Kamran was about to enter the bedroom when Reinhardt met him at the door. Kamran backed out as Reinhardt passed through the doorway to the main room, Bvarlan a step behind. “We proceed as planned,” said Reinhardt to answer Kamran's questioning look. Mareth was busy picking up the room and setting things to right. Reinhardt called to her, motioning to Erin who sat, wrists bound snugly behind knees and a gag in her mouth, next to the hearth. “Will either of you be missed tonight?”

“My boys are with Saliah – Hevel’s wife,” Mareth said, crossing to Erin. “An’ I told her I’d not come for them until morning. As for that one,” she said. “Harold usually gets piss drunk on his own shine an’

passes out within a few candle marks of sundown. I doubt he'll wake till well past cock's crow. 'Tis why he's the only one in the village who doesn't know his horns are like a mountain goat's. 'Twould do them both a wonder if he'd stop drowning in his cups and give her a proper beating – aint that right, Erin-Dear?" She bent down and patted Erin on the head condescendingly before looking back up at Reinhardt. "No, milord, she an' I'll wile the night away right here so you and your men can tend to business."

— *David Queenann* 2006/02/16 11:43

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