

Death Ground

Gamemaster's Comment: There's a lot going on here. On the surface its an extension of the previous turn. We have the big battle, but on top of it, we have our first heady dose of the supernatural. I hadn't intended for it to be this over the top, but it went with the flow of the turn. It will shape the game in ways I hadn't anticipated. It also accelerates my timetable of revelations. We also have the player building a relationship with his squire, and me putting some symbolism in that may have some impact on character development. How this affects the main character and other's remains to be scene. The best laid plans...

Reinhardt's Commentary: When I first started out on this scene, my goal was to save the village from Black Rose's (David's) evil plan. I thought it was important to remember that Reinhardt is a "White Knight," and I wanted to give him some screen time in the role of a hero. I could not figure any better way to do this than to ride out alone, in full armor, and attack the beasts with a lance charge. That being said, there are some complicated issues undercurrent here. What I mean is, you can just flow with the action and skim the surface, but you will miss things going on between the lines. Here are a few examples: In the mental part of the scene, Reinhardt is forced to choose between his duty to the village and his duty to Elsbeth in a minor way. Reinhardt also has to make some very difficult command decisions. His orders to Fahey regarding the children was gut wrenching to ponder. I think it hit proper tension in the moment. I'm glad it was not called into question. The other difficult thing that scared me was ordering Sir Miles, Dame Sevra, and especially Faranir into harms way. These characters are vital to Reinhardt's success over the winter and spring. Faranir's smith-knowledge is irreplaceable. I have been using Garoth and Kamran as a crutch for these sorts of dangers before now.

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Reinhardt, Faranir behind him, carried a case of the apple brandy Elsbeth had sent into the churchyard, giving orders to the men lingering nearby to go in and bring out the rest, and made his way for the large bonfire that had been lit near the gate. It was now full dark and Yael was rising, a luminescent orb on a star spangled sky. The chill of late fall could be felt, despite the gabardine quilt and chain armor he had donned over his hunting clothes and a blustery wind had picked up, threatening to turn the night dirty and rob them of the Heaven's lights. There was something wicked riding in the air. It tickled the base of his neck. And from the looks he saw on the faces of those around him as he reached the fire and set his case down, he was not alone.

Most of the crowd around him was simple peasant men, few of whom had ever trained for war, let alone seen battle. They numbered some sixty men and boys, none with armor, perhaps half with spears. The rest had seized farming and logging implements - pitchforks, sickles, and axes. There were the recruits, of course. Anon Shaddog, Rhyll Caddat, and Erran Dannor. They, at least, were properly equipped as a man-at-arms should be, though they were still green. Aside from himself and Faranir, only Bvarlan, Sir Miles, and Dame Savra were professional warriors. All of them, he knew however, were seasoned and well-blooded. He had that much to count on. There was a crack of breaking timber and the heavy thudding of the beast's hooves at the tree line to the north of the village, then a series of inhuman roars that cut through the night. The men stirred uncomfortably, a frightened murmur rippled through them.

"Stand firm damn your eyes!" Sir Miles bellowed fiercely at the men, the iron in his voice, at least for the moment, shocking them into a semblance of resolve. "Every man and boy will do his duty!" Stepping between the recruits he approached Reinhardt, all military precision and terse language.

"Milord. The Nephallim stopped near the clearing on the road as you came out. They've started working into the tree line there. I counted three - no sign of the fourth or the woman. All the spears have been passed out. All of the men have something that will work as a weapon. She," he said, jerking his head at Dame Savra. "Has divided the men into four groups of fifteen or so. The last group is weak. Half are boys. We await your orders."

Reinhardt wasted no time. He gathered Dame Savra, Sir Miles, Dooley, Ian Fahy and Faranir close to him. "Here are my orders, and we must act with all haste. Sir Miles, you will take all the men with spears and form a line across the road approaching the church," Reinhardt pointed. "There between the northernmost cottage and that larger house. There have each man set his spear to receive a cavalry charge. Leave one gap only in the center to allow a horse, but not one of the beasts is to be allowed to pass. Place your recruits in the center to hold the hot part of that line when the beasts charge." Sir Miles nodded and turned, barking orders at his spearmen, who were already beginning to move from the churchyard towards their position. Reinhardt looked over to Faranir, who had donned his armor as Reinhardt spoke to Sir Miles and was now testing the heft of the massive long-hafted warhammer he preferred: "Faranir, take the group of the men with the boys and get each of them a bucket. Empty the apple brandy into the buckets. Get half of them up on each roof, the Cottage and the House. When the beasts are held by the spear line, rain the brandy down upon them. Then try to ignite the brandy by throwing torches or any other device you can manage. Be careful not to rain the brandy upon the spear line."

Reinhardt looked at Dame Savra. "You and Dooley here are to take the last two groups of men and place them to the sides of the cottage and large house respectively - behind the hedgerows. When the beasts have been ignited, you are to sweep in with the infantry around and attack them from the rear. You must ensure they do not escape before they are ignited" She gave him a determined look and a nod. "Send a couple of young men with the crossbows to keep eyes on our friends in the keep, and harass them should they attempt to join the fight or flee." He turned to Fahy. "Get the women and the children into the church, and lock the door."

"Where will you be, Sir Reinhardt?" Asked Faranir.

"I will be leading the pigs to the slaughter. Now move! We have but minutes." Now everything was astir and the men, given orders, seemed to have more resolve. Would it hold when the fight began? Sir Miles and the main group ran up the road to their position at a brisk pace to form their line. Dame Savra, with the help of Dooley got the farmers moving into their positions behind the larger structures. Reinhardt paused and stopped Fahy, who touched his knuckle to his forehead.

"Fahy," said Reinhardt with a deadly serious tone. "If we should all fall in battle, it is up to you to ensure the women and children to not fall in the hands of the Blood Witch." Reinhardt looked down for a moment and let the words sink in. Then, he stood up strait, and again looked Fahy in the eye. "I know you understand." Fahy's expression dropped. The unthinkable was left unsaid between them. "Bvarlan and my mother have some plan they are concocting, give them every freedom to do as they must." Fahy nodded. "And have everyone pray to God the unthinkable need not be done."

"Yes, Milord."

Reinhardt then turned and walked to where Maxwell stood holding Keystone by the reigns. The page had brought Reinhardt's battle lance, which leaned against the wall nearby. He watched as his orders were carried out. The spear line was forming - ragged, but Sir Miles was goading them and organizing them as best he could. Dame Savra's men had reached the scene, and she was positioning them, running back and forth to ensure all was ready. And Faranir's men were almost to the site he'd picked

for the battle, a stream of boys sent for buckets closing the gaps behind them. Bvarlan was still nowhere to be seen.

A moment later, Reinhardt, now mounted upon Keystone, took his lance from Maxwell. The page spoke as he handed off the lance.

"Are you going to fight the monsters?" asked the boy.

"Yes Maxwell, I am going to ride out and meet them." The lad seemed to consider this.

"I don't want you to go out there, I don't want you to die - we all love you." said Maxwell quietly. Reinhardt was touched that the boy was so sincere. Reinhardt was hit by the fact that Maxwell must have been in his home the night his father left to go defend Mother Sarah and met his death. The boy did not wish to relive the loss of another male role model.

"Men like your father and I," started Reinhardt. "We do what we must so that those that we love can remain safe from the evils of the world. Good men must stand against evil when it comes, or nothing will be there to stop it when it does. Put your trust in God Max, and that good will overcome. It is not courage that makes a great man, but love." He gave the boy a smirk. But it did not last long, the cracking of timbers and stomping of hooves could be heard again. "Go tell Bvarlan it is time!"

Reinhardt then reared Keystone who leaped forward into a gallop. They flew forward toward the line. The improvised hole ended up being Sir Miles himself, who expertly stepped out of the line as Reinhardt approached and let him pass. Beyond the line, Reinhardt reigned in and whirled. Then he stood up in his stirrups, resting his lance in the saddle notch. Reinhardt could feel the beasts behind him in the tree line and knew the battle approached with each passing second, he had but a short time to settle the men for the impending battle.

"Men of Caer Nurel!" Reinhardt cried. "A grim task is before us. It is with great sadness that I call you to arms." He paused for a breath. "In yonder church huddles everything that we love, our children, our mothers, our sweethearts, and our wives. Tonight we stand together in defense of them, shoulder to shoulder, with our fathers and brothers. Tonight, there is no station, there is no rank, for we are all, each one of us, men of God standing together against an evil. Trust in the Lord our God, trust in each other, and hold your ground!" Reinhardt then reared Keystone and they shot together up the road toward the tree line where the beasts seemed to be.

But a moment later, Reinhardt was alone with his thoughts as he pulled on Keystone's reigns and turned the charger off the road and pranced it sideways, looking at the tree line ahead. Keystone was tired from his long run, but Reinhardt knew the horse's pedigree and spirit. The steed would do his job and do it well. Reinhardt thought of his mother and his friends behind him, but his thoughts quickly turned to Elsbeth. What sort of danger was she in? What did she know of this evil infecting the kingdom? Why had she sent him up here? Would he ever see her again? And Pallon that dog, he hit her. He let the anger of seeing Pallon strike her in his mind's eye fuel him. He clinched his teeth and darkened for the skirmish ahead. He could see the beasts in the moonlight, there in the tree line, a mere seventy feet away. They came forth from the trees in a group, roaring and stamping their hooves.

Sensing the moment Reinhardt charged, spurring Keystone to give him all possible speed. Reinhardt set his tactic, to head straight for the one in the middle and then at the last possible moment set his lance across like a tournament joust charge and shift Keystone to pass on the flank of the beat farthest to his right and strike. The distance closed at a frightening pace and he felt the swing of the middle beast's club narrowly miss him as he switched his lance and pointed it into the center of the

Nephal on the right. The killing tip stuck home, striking the solar plexus and driving through, a full three feet of splintered wood protruding from its back.

Reinhardt felt the shock of the blow all the way from wrist to shoulder and let the lance fall, ducking as Keystone broke through the gap between the creatures and vaulted a fallen log into the trees beyond them. A branch broke on his helm and a narrow limb slapped him sharply across the face. In the trees the stallion had landed from his mighty leap and decelerated violently, weaving between the trees. Reinhardt felt his shoulder slam into a tree as the horse made a sharp turn to avoid the trunk. Though he was regarded as one of the finest horsemen in Kaldor, it was all Reinhardt could do to stay in the saddle. A lesser horseman would have broken his neck. He let Keystone slow to a quick trot – on open ground a cavalry charge could be death to a horse with hooves shattered on rocks or legs broken in gopher holes; here in the woods such speed was much more dangerous. Reinhardt pulled the reins to bring Keystone back towards the Nephallim and unsheathed his sword.

“Your best once more, Keystone” Reinhardt breathed heavily as he nudged the snorting stallion forward towards the Nephallim, knowing in his gut the screams of the beast he’d struck were the screams of death. “Two left,” he whispered in encouragement. The village’s chances looked that much better now. He could see two Nephallim that remained scanning trees to find him, their roars angry, their eyes glowing and horrible red in the dark. “Once more, Keystone,” Reinhardt repeated, driving his spurs home as they broke the tree line. “That’s all I ask.”

Keystone leapt forward and bolted past the two Nephallim, who turned to follow, their hooves thundering so close behind that Reinhardt knew better than to waste the time to look back. It was only as they reached the edge of the North Hamlet and he saw Sir Mile’s line of spearmen part for his steed to pass that Keystone opened a gap before their pursuers. He wheeled Keystone to a stop and watched the line close as the beasts, not bothering to slow, smashed right through the line, ignoring the spears that scored their flesh, trampling the center three men under foot. The line was shattered.

The night broke into a din of terrified screams and the sound of battle as the light dimmed and the wind kicked up. One of the beasts came to a halt amongst the men and, swinging its club in a wide arc, swept two men off their feet in a bone crushing blow that could mean nothing short of instant death. The remaining spearmen ringed the beast, jabbing tentatively at it to test its reach and determination, and another man died in the process. The second beast, halting past the line, looked right and left until its murderous glowing red eyes fell on Reinhardt. It snorted and stamped. Sir Miles, one of those trampled in the initial impact, came jerkily to his feet, shaking his head like a dog coming out of water. It was obvious neither beast was close enough to the house or cottage for Faranir’s men and boys to do their work. Sir Miles’ roared at the spearmen: “Drive him damn you! Drive him!”

The peasants could never handle more than one of them, it was clear now. He had to keep this one busy, until he figured out how to be rid of it. “Faranir!” cried Reinhardt and bolted with Keystone toward the large house where Faranir had taken up position on the roof with half his troop. The Nephal was right on top of him, rampaging and swinging his club. Reinhardt saw Faranir and several boys come scrambling over this side of the house. Then an great shout of voices was heard; it was Dame Savra leading the infantry to Sir Mile’s aid. Reinhardt zigged and zagged with Keystone as the earth near them exploded with each swing of the beasts sapling. A gate and picket fence were the first victim, and then a chicken coup exploded sending fowl squawking and scattering in a cloud of feathers. “The porch Faranir! He will slow at the porch!”

The porch to the house was around the far side from where Reinhardt and Keystone were playing their deadly game of tag. It would require masterful feat of horsemanship unarmored to pull off what Reinhardt was about to try and poor Keystone was about done as it was, the knightly horse was

running on the adrenaline of self preservation now. Reinhardt took a wide arc as he rounded the house; another length of fence and a water trough paid the price under the Nephel's club - shattering into wood splinters. Now with the covered porch of the large house ahead, Reinhardt brought the Nephel in as close as he dared and headed in. Faranir and the boys were perched on the roof, buckets and torches ready.

It started as Reinhardt had imagined it. He slid to Keystone's side - riding side saddle as the great horse thundered under the covered porch. But gravity had its way, and Reinhardt's armor was just too much to overcome. The saddle belt snapped and Reinhardt went crashing through the rail and rolled; his sword clattering nearby. Keystone, kept running out the opposite side of the porch and out into the road. The Nephel hunched its head in pursuit of Reinhardt and Keystone and plowed into the porch cover in an explosion of timbers and splinters. It had the desired effect of slowing the thing below Faranir and his troop, unfortunately Reinhardt himself was now laying but a few yards away and on foot. As the Nephel bellowed and freed itself from the porch wreckage, Reinhardt scrambled for his sword and pulled himself up before the beast - determined to hold it there long enough for Faranir to strike. He only hoped that Dame Savra and Sir Miles had improvised something to down the other one. Finally, the Nephel was able to stand again and bring its eyes upon Reinhardt. It roared its displeasure, raising both arms up in anger to bring a solid crushing blow down upon him. Reinhardt lunged in attack, pushing his sword into the beast's lower chest. A blow that would have ended a man, but this was no man. The last things Reinhardt remembered before waking over a minute later was the impact of the beast, the smell of apple-brandy in the air, a sensation of flying, and Faranir screaming his name.

He dreamed of Elsbeth the night she had given him the Barony. The way she looked as the firelight illuminated her skin - the flash in her eyes and the redness of her lips. Reinhardt smelled the apple brandy she had poured for him. He took a sip, but it tasted like blood. Then the world spun and the picture of Elsbeth blurred into grayness. The blood he tasted was his own, from his nose and mouth. Then he could hear the beast screaming in fury and smell burning flesh. There was a horrible crash above him and he felt the ground shudder as a massive hoof stamped next to him. His eyes opened and there, above him, was the beast, its head and shoulders afire. It swung its club insanely, and Reinhardt barely managed to roll out of the way of another hoof as the beast thrashed this way and that in agonized rage. Scrambling backward and coming to his feet he caught sight of the house, the stonework above the door smashed and part of turf roof, itself afire from tipped brandy and a dropped torch, partially caved in from the beast's club. A boy lay unconscious where he had fallen from the roof, blood trickling from his mouth, while others used their cloaks to try to extinguish the flames above.

Reinhardt was still dazed, but managed to stagger to his sword, almost falling as he picked it up. He stood, holding a fence post for stability, and scanned the scene of the battle. Faranir, who had dropped from the roof, stepped behind the flaming Nephel and brought his massive warhammer down on the creature's knee joint in a overhead arc with every bit of strength his giant frame could muster. There was a grotesque bone-cracking snap and the Nephel, staggering sideways, its now broken leg unable to support its weight, fell into the house with such force that the rest of the face around the door caved inward and the ground shook as the porch shattered with the impact. A man from Faranir's group, ax in hand, came around the corner to help with the beast, but was caught in the chest by a flailing hoof and flung backward into the shadows. Faranir, who had danced out of the way of the falling beast, now stood beside its head in the rubble. He swung his hammer into the back of its head with a savagery Reinhardt had never seen in the man, crying out in fury while delivering the blow. The creature stopped thrashing, stunned by the blow, which was followed by another and another and another until the creature was dead. A dozen blows in all. Faranir dropped to one knee, spattered with blood and heaving for breath, supporting himself with the hammer's haft.

Turning, Reinhardt could see the tide of the battle with the other creature had turned, the combination of Sir Mile's spearmen and Dame Savra's reserves having proved too much for it. They had not been able to drive it within range of the other half of Faranir's brandy-bucket brigade, but the creature was now woozy from many wounds, and its club was lost. It swayed like a drunkard, its lunges and swings lethargic. Even now, as Reinhardt watched, wondering where Bvarlan was, the creature collapsed and the men rushed in, driving their spears into it repeatedly.

It was in that moment, as Reinhardt found his strength and began to head for the church that the stars and moon became cloaked by the clouds above and the village plunged into inky darkness. The night was suddenly filled with the horrified screams of the women and children in the church and a woman's cruel laughter came to him, riding on the wind. As he watched he could make out skeletal forms shambling in the light of the bonfire in the churchyard and crawling on the church itself.

He was about to call out to the men to regroup when the faint lantern light within the church suddenly magnified, its rays shining with such intensity that the remaining stained glass and latticework in the windows and the doors exploded outward and the rest of the roof was blown off as the ray, pure and potent, shot upward and penetrated the clouds above, driving them back as quickly as they had rolled in. The creatures in the churchyard who were caught in the light disintegrated before it and Reinhardt could now see what the shapes on and around the church were. The dead had crawled out from their graves to slay the living, and the fourth Nephel, having flanked Reinhardt's forces by crossing to the village through the fields, was with them. The holy display sent a shiver of hope up Reinhardt's spine, and his mouth dropped in a moment of awe. What or who was Bvarlan really? The one-eyed warrior appeared in the church's doorway, dressed in white robes under a turquoise over-mantle with an apron of crimson, turquoise and gold around his waist and a gold breastplate inlaid with jewels upon his chest. On his head he wore a white covering with a gold band on his forehead, and in his hand he held a two-handed battle sword. He waded into the dead and, in that same moment, the men sent to watch the keep sounded their alarm.

His sense of victory over the three Nephallim began to wane and Reinhardt sensed the momentum shifting against him once more. As he heard the Black Rose's cackle, he felt for the first time a subtle doubt forming in the back of his mind and the fear that accompanied it that he may fail in protecting these people or fulfilling his duty to Elsbeth by allowing Kural to escape. With Faranir close behind him, Reinhardt came upon the crowd of militia gathering near Sir Miles and Dame Savra; both of them were trying to form the mob into some semblance of order. Their task was not easy as the men now stood bewildered and confused, feeling the emotions over the battle, the spectacle of light, the screams from the church, and the swarming undead. Reinhardt began to mentally chastise himself for sending Garoth and all of his hardened warriors with Kamran, leaving the village so ill defended. But then he remembered something Hemisen Curo, Elsbeth's father, once said when tutoring his daughter on being a leader: "When you make a decision, ensure it is best that you can make with the facts you have at the time. You will then never have to second guess your actions."

Reinhardt shoved his doubts about sending the soldiers to raid the slaver caravans aside, but now another more difficult choice faced him. Though he wished to face Kural and this dark merchant himself, he realized his leadership was needed here to ensure the villagers morale held as long as possible. Once again he more barked orders. "Faranir, take Erran Danner here, rally your troop and lead them to aid the guards of the keep. Don't let them escape." He then pushed through to the front of the mob where a shabby rank was forming. A quick glance showed the men were in vastly varied states of courage, from near breaking to solid resolve. The sound of groans from the wounded and the sight of fallen comrades nearby pushed each man toward one end of his courage or the other.

"Reinhardt!" shouted Dame Savra. "We must find her, we must kill her!" He nodded. But there was no

time to form a plan for this task. Bvarlan needed aid – and he needed it now.

“Find her,” he called back and Dame Savra's eyes filled with resolve. Reinhardt understood from his dealings with the Order of St. Claudia that Dame Savra's oaths and duty demanded she face such an evil and destroy it. If it was humanly possible, she would find the Blood Witch and engage her. He just hoped if Dame Savra did find this succubus that he would be there in time to back Dame Savra up. For now, the immediate need was to come to Bvarlan's aid. Reinhardt swept out before the men near the battered Sir Miles. “Men of Caer Nurel,” he called over the din. “Protect our innocents in the church. This is our death ground! Here we must fight!”

Then, Reinhardt whirled his battle sword overhead and took a deep breath. “Charge!” He sprinted before the group as they surged toward the church, where Bvarlan alone, battled the undead and the last Nephallim. It was too large a distance for such a rag-tag army to keep any ranks, and it was as a mob that they reached their undead foes, crashing into them in a chaotic and individual melee.

Reinhardt and Sir Miles headed together toward the last of the Nephallim. Reinhardt beheaded one undead that crossed their path with his sword and Sir Miles shattered another with a blow from his war axe. A third undead fell victim to the sweeping club of the Nephallim as it turned to meet its attackers. The sweeping blow sent both knights ducking to the ground before sending yet a fourth undead flying across the yard. Not waiting for the ugly beast to regain the initiative, Reinhardt leapt in close and sunk his battle sword into the beast's thigh. But it moved fast despite its size, and caught Reinhardt with a glancing blow from its elbow. Its sure power staggering him backwards, once again departed from his sword which still protruded from the beast's leg near the hilt. It swung its club up and over to smash Reinhardt, then Sir Miles attacked, his war-axe striking the Nephallim's calf over and over. The beast roared in pain and turned, striking Sir Miles a grievous backhanded blow that shattered his shield and sent him flying onto the stairs of the church, where he hit his head and he collapsed. Those undead nearby hovered at the edge of the blinding light that spilled out of the sanctuary, unwilling to enter to finish him.

Reinhardt darted up and wrenched his sword free, dancing nimbly out of the way of a massive fist before lunging in to strike again. The beast was upon him, but it turned as Rhyll Caddat drove a spear into its back. The fighting around them was furious, the living grappling with the dead in a desperate struggle. A struggle the men seemed to be losing. The crush of bodies was upon him and he could feel a dozen skeletal hands beginning to grasp him in their deathly embrace, intent on dragging him back to the ground. He could hear the Black Rose's voice, inimical, speaking in a language he could not understand, all around him on the wind. He smashed the head of one of the undead with the pommel of his sword to no effect over and over. Then Anon Shaddog was next to him, screaming, his hand on Reinhardt's shoulder, the bullish little man pulling him free with a hurculean yank of his squat, powerfully thick frame: “Into the light, milord! They won't go there - into the light!”

Pulled bodily into the pool of light spilling forth from the Church doorway, Reinhardt found himself standing over Rhyll Caddat's broken, bloodied body. Other men had taken up the cry “into the light,” and most had fought, or were fighting, their way free of their unliving foes. The last of the Nephallim had bounded out of the churchyard and was now charging full on across the fields, heading for the woods. In the combination of holy light flooding out from the church and the natural brightness of the moon and stars Reinhardt could see the river-boat was about to touch on the island by the keep – whose door was open – and two large men who could only be Faranir and Erran Dannon jumping onto the bank. A few feet away in the grass, on his knees with his head bowed, Bvarlan knelt, his battle sword blade up in his hands, his lips moving in prayer spoken in the same tongue being spoken by the Black Rose.

The light spilling forth from the church was growing more intense – so much so the men were forced

to shield their eyes to avoid being blinded, many throwing themselves to the ground in fear, crying out, a palpable sense that Heaven's Gates had been cast wide upon them. And with the increasing light Bvarlan's voice grew louder until it was a booming like thunder and the voice of the Black Rose was drowned out and fell silent. In that unreal moment, when the forces of darkness crumbled and the light reached its glorious crescendo, Reinhardt felt himself losing his grasp on the world around him, as though his soul was tugging itself free from his body. He was certain he heard a Heavenly choir had burst forth in a song of victory from within the church, and then, as Bvarlan's prayer again became a whisper and the light began to recede, the sound of doves cooing.

He saw he was in a great chamber gilt with gold and inlaid with gemstones - rubies and sapphires - and before him was a high curtain of crimson and gold, golden lions rampant on the crimson, crimson eagles upon the gold. Before the curtain Bvarlan knelt, weeping in prayer, his sword cast aside on the chamber's floor, and beside him stood the ministering angel of the Outer Sanctum, scooping powdered incense with its hand and pouring it onto burning coals on a golden altar. He saw the creature as being a tall woman in the finest white silk robes, with flaming red hair and noble white wings sweeping towards the ceiling. He perceived her as being perfect in purity and complete in beautiful grandeur, though he sensed deep within that he was dreaming - caught within a vision - and that his mind's eye was grappling with something unbound by physicality or separateness. The angel turned to him and cast unburnt incense in his face.

Reinhardt was thrust violently back into the waking world, finding himself on his back with Mareth and his mother above him, helping him to his feet. He was dazed and unsteady. He felt numb and weak. He heard his mother sending for Anon Shaddog's wife Merriel - the village healer and midwife - as they led him past Bvarlan, still kneeling deep in prayer, his sword cast onto the ground beside him. The dead had fallen where they had been standing, and the men were helping their wounded to the bonfire. He was led to the Rectory, stripped of his armor and pressed into the bed with firm hands. In the lamplight he could see his mother and Mereth hovering nearby as Merriel tended to him, her handsome face concerned and cast in concentration. He could not speak. He knew - who had told him? - that the keep had fallen. That it was now in Faranir's hands. He knew that he was needed and something pressing was happening. He tried to rise, but firm hands again pressed him into the bed. Then all was dark and he fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

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