

Letters at Dawn

Game Master's Comment: If I were running a table-top game I would have skipped this scene and handled it with "okay, you write your letters," but in this format it made sense to flesh it out. It also gives us a glimpse of the relationship between Sir Reinhardt and the two characters whose backgrounds are the most interwoven with his. It also allows us to bring his relationship with his parents into the narrative.

Reinhardt's Comments: This scene really cemented the fact of Reinhardt's faith for me. Writing the letters out was my choice and I thin they add much to the whole atmosphere, driving home the medeval setting. Moreover, it was great fun authoring them from Reinhardt's point of view and language. David's work with the NPC's helped me later decide these men were like brothers to Reinhardt.

2 Helane 719, Caer Gardiren, Reinhardt's Chamber

Reinhardt had returned to Caer Gardiren as the sun crested the peaks of the Sorkin Mountains in the East, bathing the fortress and castletown in its ephemeral morning light. He had hoped to gain a few moments from Dame Sophia before she returned to her Chapter House near Yeged, but the preceding night's events combined with her rigorous personal schedule had rendered that impossible. The Knight Commander of St. Claudia, Our Lady of Paladins, had led a predawn service in the castle's chapel and departed with her retinue before dawn, while Reinhardt was still at the Dragon's Rest.

Leaving Bvarlan to report the assassination attempt to the Earla, Reinhardt had made his way to his chamber in the main keep. It was a small, relatively spartan room, containing a bed, a chest and a wardrobe that contained his personal belongings, and a narrow writing desk with a chair next to a window overlooking the Caer Gardiren's inner bailey. He cast open the shutters of the window and called out for a page. After some delay, and a second call, a morning-tired, surly looking page had shuffled in a listened with growing pique to his instructions.

Once the lad was sent on his way Reinhardt had settled at the writing table and removed a thin sheaf of parchments, a pot of writing ink, and a quill from the desk drawer. Sharpening his quill, Reinhardt dipped into the inks, the quick scratching of quill on parchment filling his thoughts. He began to pen three letters, only looking up long enough to acknowledge the entry of the page, who bore with him a pot of piping hot burrow-root-tea and a platter with a small round of sharp cheese, a large loaf of bread, a mound of sweet meets, and cold eggs fried in honey. He sent the boy running for Garoth and Faranir and returned to his writing.

The first letter was addressed to his mother, the Lady Candace Ethasial, the sister of Sir Wevran Ethasial, the Baron of Setrew, and one of Earla Curo's vassals. Though, Reinhardt considered, his uncle was little trusted by the Earla, and had been upbraided more than once for sidestepping his duties, both by Elsbeth and her father before her. His own interactions with his uncle had always been polite, but distant, limited as much by Elsbeth's reserve towards her vassal in Setrew, as much as Reinhardt's opinion of Wevran's son, Sir Romlach. His cousin, one of the more dangerous knights on the tourney list, was a consummate brute, and maintained running feuds with several knights; Sir Haldare, the Constable of Caer Elend, the Royal Castle in Tashal, and Sir Pallon Bernan, Elsbeth's husband, among them. And under Romlach, Setrew's peasants faced a harsh master - though not mad, as Kural obviously was.

Still, Reinhardt's mother and her younger sister, Lady Verahl, who had been killed in a tragic accident

in Tashal the previous year, had been cut from a different cloth. Lady Candace had entered a small cloister of the Balm of the Order of Joy near Yeged when she was sixteen, shortly after Reinhardt's birth, and though she had never taken orders herself, was influential within in the Church. A handsome noblewoman of forty-four, she had her fingers on the pulse of Kaldor's power-elite, and was considered one of the Church's more effective voices in the halls of power; Reinhardt needed her counsel, and more, felt he owed her something. When he had been a young man with no one to turn to the Lady Candace, in league with Dame Sophia, had been responsible for seeing him squired and, ultimately, knighted....

2 Helane 719

Lady Candace, he began formally, then lightening the tone he added, "Mother: It is my privilege to announce to you officially that through the blessing of God and the grace of the Earla Curo, I have been named the Baron of Nurelia under my most magnificent liege, the Earla Curo of Caer Gardiren. I shall be journeying soon to Caer Nural where I shall take up my residence. I hope this news meets you well and in good health. I want to thank you again for your assistance many years ago in seeing me squired, I believe your profit wisdom was well invested and God has seen just to reward it.

This blessing does not come without toll. Much work will be necessary to make the barony viable as the current bailiff has unfortunately done more harm than good to the area. Furthermore, the current political climate of the kingdom is upset by the illness of the king. I shall be laboring in the near future to set things at Caer Nural to right. Through the blessings of God I shall see it done. While my arm is strong with the sword and my heart true to the lord's word, my mind is not yet tuned to the proper administration duties that will now be mine. I would that you could make the task easier and beseech your wisdom and guidance in the days ahead.

I wish for you to come to Nurelia when I send for you properly. While I offer you to join my house and assist me as the Lady Steward of the barony, I realize your position in the church may not warrant such a change. Therefore, as it is my most humble desire for you to come hither, I shall make it possible for you to do so. I shall be writing to Dame Sophia, offering her a double knight's fee to establish a chapter house of the Order of St. Claudia at Caer Nurel. Furthermore, I shall be offering her an additional knight's fee to your order to establish a manor and orphanage. It is my hope that you will find a place that suits your heart and calling amongst any of these arrangements.

If your heart is to stay in your current station, then Gods will be done. I beseech you, no matter your course, to assist me in the following matters: Any words of encouragement and wisdom you may send will be both welcome and appreciated. I ask that you encourage Dame Sophia to accept my proposal to bring a strong church presence to Nurelia. Furthermore, I am in need of peasants for the area. While I will be enticing Dame Sophia to present further peasants, I propose that you advise me on possible arrangements with my uncle, your brother Sir Wevran Ethasial, the Baron of Setrew, in peasants, livestock, or other goods you may deem appropriate in establishing a new barony. In particular, I will have a need of fine-horse flesh to establish a military stable in meeting my military requirements under the charter of my grant. I will be in need of trusted people to fill my household stations.

In closing, I tell you in confidence that there is currently evil at Caer Nurel that I shall be meeting and wiping from the earth for the glory of God. With the land cleansed, I shall be starting anew. Any aid that you may know of that might assist me in the most noble and holy errand of establishing this barony I implore you to render. Please send any correspondence to me initially by way of Caer Gardiren.

I remain most affectionately your son,

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

He paused for a moment, sipping the bitter tea, and then put his pen to paper again, feeling the root's stimulating effects almost immediately, this time addressing the letter to his father, Sir Barnabas Maddox, a vassal of Baron Uthris Pierstel of Tonot in the North. Tonot was the closest keep to Caer Nurel, and Baron Tonot, the closest noble. Reinhardt's relationship with his father had always been inhibited, not the least because of the open enmity of his father's wife, the Lady Dura, and his half-brother Gadod. In fact, his fourteen years at Whyaryn Manor had been miserable, and he had not had any contact with his paternal family since his father packed him off to Abriel Abbey to be a priest - a farthing proving too much to squire an inconvenient bastard, let alone the actual cost. Only his younger half-sister Gala, whom he last remembered as being a fey blond-haired, green-eyed eight had shown him any kindness. She would be a grown woman now. Married, he wondered. A mother...?

2 Helane 719

Sir Barnabas Maddox, Father,

It is my privilege to announce to you officially, through the blessing of God and the grace of the Earla Curo, I have been named the Baron of Nurelia under my most magnificent liege, Earla Elsbeth Curo of Gardiren and Pendeth, Sheriff of Osselshire, and bearer of the Great Seal of House Tane. I shall soon journey to Caer Nural where I shall take up residence and begin my tenure. I hope this news meets you well and in good health.

It is my desire to re-establish relations and good will between us. I believe there is a opportunity to benefit House Maddox. As I see it, Whyaryn Manor is in a position to provide assistance to the Barony of Nurelia. In a few years, the Barony will be in a position to repay any assistance double or triple, plus the added good relations that can be mutually beneficial in the future. To be frank, Father, I am in need of any peasants, yeomen, or fine-horse flesh you could possibly assent to supply. In return for any gifts or allowances, I will offer any funds I can spare and barter with that I can in the present, and with promises of more in future: allowances you deem fit to finance over an extended period would be met with generous terms. I shall await word of your decision and desires for return compensation.

If Whyaryn Manor finds itself in no position to assist the Barony of Nurelia, then Gods will be done. It is still my intention to hold some sort of festivity and will send invitation to Lady Dura, my half-brother Gadod, my half-sister Gala, and yourself to attend. Please send word of the current situation of the aforementioned, I hope this letter finds them all in good health and god's grace. My sense is that Sir Gadod will ably follow in your father's footsteps at Whyaryn Manor, but I am interested in the situation of Gala. If providence has shown that she has not been betrothed, then perhaps you would be open to sending her to Caer Nural to assist her half-brother in setting up his house as I am yet unmarried?

There shall be many young knights here as I begin to assign fees and manors, many of which shall be unmarried knights. Perhaps a proper match might be made? I leave it to your wisdom. If she has been blessed with marriage and possibly children, then I pray you inform her of my good will and send word of such events in your correspondence. I welcome approved correspondence from any of them. If bad tidings have befallen any of our relations then please inform me as well and accept my most humble contrition due to blind ignorance.

Please send any correspondence to me initially by way of Caer Gardiren as things will be disorganized in the short term at Caer Nural. My men in Caer Gardiren shall see it safely into my hands.

I remain your son,

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

Looking up as Garoth and Faranir entered, Reinhardt gestured to the platter of food and bid them sit while he began his letter to Dame Sophia. He had a bald, unsentimental, and business-like proposal in mind, but he had no time to mince words, and no doubt she expected it. Elsbeth was the sort of woman who liked to know the answers to her questions before they were asked, and it would be uncharacteristic of her to make a suggestion she had not sounded out in advance. And he knew well that Dame Sophia, in matters of war and business, was as direct as any man....

2 Helane 719

Dame Sophia, Knight Commander of the Order of St. Claudia, Our Lady of Paladins, d Ordained of the Order of the Shattered Spear, Blessed Mother of Warriors, and Lord of Bilmoren,

It is my privilege to announce to you officially, through the blessing of God and the grace of the Earla Curo, your niece, I have been named the Baron of Nurelia under my most magnificent liege. I shall be journeying soon to Caer Nurel where I shall take up residence. I hope this news meets you well and in good health. I want to thank you again for your assistance many years ago in seeing me squired, I believe your wisdom was well invested and God has seen just to reward it.

I will not mince words with you, but get to the business of my letter. Nurelia is in a dismal condition and I will need outside assistance working it into a proper state. I have chosen primarily to turn to the Church, through you, for such assistance, as I believe God is to be looked to first in any time of need. That being said, I have certain proposals for you to consider and present to the church as you deem appropriate:

As Baron of Nurelia, I offer the Order of St. Claudia a double knights fee with direct river access to establish a Charter House along the river road between Caer Nurel and Tonot. Further, I offer an additional knights fee for the establishment of a manor and orphanage at an adjacent location to the Order of the Balm of Joy, whose Mother Superior and Abbess you are on good terms with. Further, I offer a lot in the town near Caer Nurel to establish a proper church or cathedral, plus appropriate land for a cemetery.

In return, I ask that the Church provide peasants to work the three knights fees I offer, a regular patrol of the river road once the Charter House is established, appropriate staff to manage and care-take the Charter House, Orphanage, and Nurel's church, as well as fifteen additional peasant families for the Baronial fiefs to be delivered within six months of acceptance along with twenty young yeomen men ready to start families for additional labor and military service upon the bargain's acceptance. The Charter House is to be completed within eighteen months with ground broken within six months, the orphanage is to be completed within three years.

The current church in Caer Nurel is small, the land will be provided for an upgrade when the church requests it. If the church accepts these terms, I am willing to offer to waive all rents and taxes upon the Church lands owed to the Barony for a term of ten years. If the church is able to provide additional peasant families to the Baronial fief in the number of twenty-five within two years, all taxes and rents owed from any of the aforementioned lands occupied by the church in the Barony of Nurelia, including levies by the Crown, shall be waived or paid by the Barony indefinitely. This latter clause will include any future lands granted to the Church by the Baron of Nurelia.

It is obvious, Dame Sophia, that I need men and peasants for the Barony to get on its feet. I make my initial offer to you the most generous one that I can make, as time is against me. You well know the

political situation in the Realm today. I do not need to lecture you on the importance of this region to Earla Curo. However, find solace in the fact that with your support the Barony of Nurelia will have a just and noble ruler who is both friend and benefactor to the Church. If I fail, another one, perhaps more greedy and less favorable to the Church might come to power in my stead.

As soon as the Barony is organized, I shall be seeking knights bachelor to become landed knights and govern the many fees and manors that must be established. The Barony will entertain candidates, starting next spring, from the Order of St. Claudia, male or female, who are knights, or have been squired and would make suitable candidates for vassalage. These would be candidates, deemed by the Order, better suited to or desiring to serve outside the Holy service, as was my case.

I look forward to correspondence and meeting with you or your appointed envoy to reach a final agreement on paper. Please send any correspondence to me initially by way of Caer Gardiren, as things will be disorganized in the short term at Caer Nurel. My men in Caer Gardiren shall see it safely into my hands.

I remain your friend and supporter,

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

Finishing his letter, he found his trusted armsmen had demolished his breakfast. Both men were watching him with intense curiosity, as though his sudden elevation had created a new being. He must have made quite show of facial expressions and mannerisms while writing these letters. He blotted and carefully rolled each in turn, and then tied each with ribbon and sealed them with wax. He pressed his personal signet, another gift from Elsbeth, given shortly after her assuming her own title, into the seals. He looked at the R and M in the design. He would have to have a new one, this served for now, but he needed a baronial seal for baronial correspondence. Perhaps he should commission one. He sighed, another small matter on a growing list. He looked back to his empty plate. "Thanks for leaving me a portion for the crows."

The men shifted uncomfortably. They had served long enough not to fear the insolence of their action, nevertheless they did have a sense of duty and propriety. Faranir began to rise to call for more food; Garoth moved his legs, which were propped up, blocking the exit. "It is no matter," replied Reinhardt waving his hand. "I will eat a little later. I have business with you two that needs addressed."

Reinhardt slid the scrolls into tubes and addressed them to their recipients. He looked at Faranir. "I want you to take these three letters and ensure they are sent out with the Earla's correspondence."

"Yes, Sir Reinhardt, I will see it done," said Faranir, taking the letters in big hands.

"Very well." Reinhardt stood up and closed the door to his room. The he turned and addressed his men. "I wanted to see you both; for we have much to discuss. I have some good news and some bad news for both of you. Let me start with the good news: I have been named the new Baron of Nurelia by the order of the Earla. I shall be moving to Caer Nural and you two gents are coming with me."

Faranir all but leapt to his feet and stepped across to Reinhardt. The big man shook Reinhardt's hand with uncommon vigor, his grip all but crushing the knight's hand. "I wish you the joy of it! Truly I do!" Then, suitably abashed, Faranir added: "Milord."

"You'll be a more smith than armsman, now," Reinhardt added.

It seemed impossible that the big man to be any happier than he already was, but he seemed to swell with joy.

Flexing his hand, Reinhardt moved back to his desk and sat down. "You better say goodbye to all your darlings Garoth," Reinhardt said.

Garoth, who had sat up at the news, smiled laconically. "I've been missing the woods, Sir Reinhardt. Time to get out of the castle."

"Now for the bad news," said Reinhardt. He took a breath and became more serious. "Nurelia is currently under a Bailiff named Kural who has betrayed the Earla and caused much harm there. His men have raped and killed the local priestess and slain a few other peasants, including the local blacksmith. He has mercenaries in his employ, has hired the Wolf as an assassin. He has also committed treason against the King by logging the Royal Forest and selling the lumber for his own profit. I do not need to tell you that the actions of her Bailiff can do much harm to the Earla's reputation, especially if she does not remove him in haste and administer quick justice."

Both men's expressions turned grave.

"This is where we come in, boys. We have to go and remove him, including anyone in league with him. This means a dangerous situation. The new soldier, Kamran, will be joining our band, and Bvarlan the Earla's confidant. Those two, plus you Garoth and I will see to his removal." He looked over at Faranir. "You, Faranir, will be staying here to arrange for the supplies we will need and transportation for them. This will include a list of items I have prepared, our personal belongings, and all the supplies listed on your proposal sheets to the Earla. She has chosen not finance them, but I, as Baron of Nurelia will. If any ask about the requisitions, tell them the blacksmith at Caer Nural has died and you are going to replace him, this is the truth."

"Seems right enough," Faranir said. "Some of the forge materials might be a touch hard to pass off as a simple blacksmith's goods, but I can manage it."

Garoth, world-wise, raised an eyebrow: "Remove?"

"The list I have includes the supplies to get a company of heavy horse off the ground," Reinhardt said, letting Garoth's question lie, and handing the lists to Faranir. "Some supplies for making repairs to the village, and some foodstuff for man and beast as the village is currently behind in their crop tasks. The company of heavy horse has to be raised by spring. Much of the arms and armor will have to be made by your forge Faranir, so it is vital you are prepared to survey a location and break ground as soon as we secure Caer Nural. You will have the dead smith's facilities to work with as well and any journeymen or apprentices he has employed."

Faranir scanned the list of supplies and let out a low whistle. "Can you," Faranir stopped, not wanting to be impolite. "Can you manage all this?"

Reinhardt nodded.

"It'll take me a few days to get it all ordered," the big man said without further question. "Then I can follow on horse and leave the delivery to teamsters."

"Now, listen to these details." Reinhardt proceeded to inform them all he had learned directly from Bvarlan and Kamran. "You can speak with Jered before you depart Gardiren, Faranir. He should be able to inform you of the facilities and skilled men that will be available at Caer Nurel. Now go and get started, I will meet with you again later, after I have met with the moneylender. Try and get a workout of how much all of this will cost, what is available, and what we will have to find at other places, or make ourselves. I need to speak with Garoth alone for a moment."

Faranir took his queue, stood, and left quietly. Reinhardt looked back at Garoth. "This is not going to be easy and there is more that you need to know, but I am trying to keep the information on as few tongues as possible. I would have told Faranir, but since he is not coming with us, there is no need at this time. Let me be brief and to the point. If the King dies there will be civil war. The Earla will be swept up into it. Much of her natural resources are in Nurelia, we have to secure them for her. However, there is something else Garoth, a secret."

Reinhardt lowered his voice: "There as an old Adzmeran Sapphire mine somewhere in Nurelia that was discovered by the Earl before his death. By right this mine belongs to the King, but it has not been discovered 'officially.' If war comes, that mine will be the Earla's war chest. However, she thinks the Bailiff has discovered it and will either exploit it or inform the Crown of it to spite her. The Bailiff is rumored to be working with local mining guild members to open the mine." He bore down on Garoth. "It is vital that the knowledge of the mine does not leave Caer Nurel. The Earla has ordered the death of Bailiff and any in league with him that might know of its existence. If anything happens to me, it is important that you know our principle mission. When we go to Nurelia, I want you to scout out and find a campsite where we can remain hidden, yet be in striking range of the town. Then I want you to find the mine, and track any trails to see if they lead you to any locations the Bailiff's men or miners may have set up. Kamran will be going into town in disguise to find our information there. Bvarlan will be assisting him and acting as go between. Make sure you speak to Bvarlan, he has complete knowledge of everything and knows the lay of the land there. It will be important for you to learn the land as quickly as possible. I also want you to locate as many ambush sites as you can, we may have to ambush the mining party or the Bailiff and his men at different locations."

Garoth was silent, but something predatory had entered his manner. After a moment he scratched his chin and nodded. "Do you want the Bailiff taken alive?"

Reinhardt's grim expression was the only answer.

— *David Queenann* 2006/02/16 04:44

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