

As The Village Turns

Game Master's Comment: This turn is dedicated to settling Reinhardt in as lord, and establishing his relationship with the village officers and Mangai (guild council). My focus was developing the interaction between the denziens to bring Caer Nurel personality and life. "As the village turns, these are the days of our fief..."

Reinhardt's Commentary: My approach to this scene was setting a tone for Reinhardt's "reign" and deal with village issues that needed addressed. This kind of scene is delicate, for it is easy to get the story bogged down in details. However, some detail is necessary to make the village and its people live and breath. It was my choice to make the miller's wife a sub-plot and bring it to a close here (I hope). I think her situation is an excellent example of the aforementioned details.

9 Helane 719 - The Peaceful Boar

"Well, milord," Ian Fahy said to Reinhardt with a small smile. "I think we may be better off than many had hoped." The Reeve, seated on the sill-seat in the front window of the Peaceful Boar, took a sip of his whet before continuing. The small beer was quite week – neither Ardan the Beadle or Dooley of Bendeth, the Herdsman, had touched theirs. They, at the table at the window, and the Mangai, waiting at the table by the bar, were the common room's only inhabitants. Master Donnal had shoo'd the carousing villagers out into the yard and towards the last open keg before retiring into the kitchen. "The summer crop was over planted – not enough fields left fallow all told – but they tended them well."

"No surprise there," Ardan interjected. "Red Will thought every last pence from the crop would be his and his alone – and if he had to pick between a penny and his mother he'd choose the penny every time. Not that he likely did any of the work himself."

"Come now," Dooley said to Ardan with a mild tone of chastisement. "Let's let sleeping dogs lie. Red Will's brothers have always worked double-hard whether on their clan's crops or anyone else's. And they know planting and harvesting as well as most men. Sir Vaern never had any complaint with them – always said he wished he had six more."

"Dooley's right, milord," Fahy nodded in agreement. "They may be Dannor blood – and surly and stiff-necked as a result – but there's a strong and tireless back in each, and no reticence about work. It's them we have to thank for the bright side. They planted so much, and tended it so well, that we've a bumper crop on our hands."

"And are short on seed as a result," Ardan said, exasperated. He looked at Reinhardt. "Please forgive the interruption milord, but those knuckleheads used most of the extra seed stock – I have to count sacks to be precise, but we're short."

"We have the seed for the winter wheat," Fahy said with a mild shake of his head. It was obvious all of the men were unhappy with the state of things and that the Reeve was trying to make the best of it. "If we get the harvest in right quick then we will have – less the sheriff's farming, and your own – enough for winter, both man and beast."

Reinhardt sat calmly and carefully listening to his new villagers. He did not know the first thing about farming, or slaughtering, or any of the other major functions of a village. He did know how to put people of experience in the right position to leverage their expertise. He also knew how to make decisions that, at least in his own estimate, served multiple purposes. He said nothing, letting the

banter continue while gleaning as much information as he could; hoping the clear path, God's path, would reveal itself to him.

"The real problem," Dooley said. "Is planting for winter."

"Aye," Ian sighed. "Normally we leave half fallow and plant the other half, rotating back and forth. They planted all but a few furlongs. We'll have to do the summer harvest and re-till the land before we can set the planting – and we're already a fortnight behind. Not to mention the slaughtering. I'm not sure we have enough bodies to do it all in time."

"Even then," Ardan began, but Ian Fahy shot him a look.

"Some of the oldsters have been talking, milord," the Reeve said. "And they're saying this year is going to be an early and hard winter with a late thaw. Normally I'd just say its gab and gossip and doom-saying – they haven't got anything better to do – but Old Ben has a strange sense of these things, and he was very certain. Even if we do plant, the crop may freeze out."

"Maybe we should just leave them all fallow for winter," Dooley offered. "We could do the harvest and slaughter, turn the fields, and then try to fix the roofs and fences before winter – not to mention gather and cut fuel."

"And then we've no crop for winter," Ardan objected. "And nothing with which to pay the Sheriff or Sir Reinhardt, come spring."

"We've got the sheep and goats," Dooley answered proudly. "And the swine – those girls have done a good job doing the herders' work. And they're like hounds. I wouldn't doubt they could round up every last pig in yonder wood. If we have too we pay the Sheriff in Master Hevel's sausages."

"As though Sir Harapa wants a sausage," Ardan began.

Reinhardt had been sitting quietly, his hand on his chin listening. He shifted in his chair, letting it scoot slightly on the floor and sat up. This was enough noise to silence the men as he chose now to speak. "I believe that Kural has put us in a position in which we need to take a risk," he said. "My sense tells me to proceed as thus: First, we will use our energy bring in the harvest and slaughter carefully, to maximize their output. Second, we will only plant the fields that were left fallow this summer. This will allow us to turn the over-used fields and they will be ready again for spring planting. The smaller winter crop should be enough to cover our responsibility to the Sheriff. Anything that remains we can determine what to do with when the time comes. You say winter is to be hard and fast this year. We can probably accomplish the shorter planting in the small time that would have made the full planting impossible. Moreover, having to plant less will mean that we can free up hands to repairing and preparing the village for winter. Furthermore, I wish to hear what condition the woodcutting is on the King's side of the river. The crime is already done, but if there is profit to be wasted, we should see about preparing what was already cut for the market. We will keep accurate account of these funds and it will go directly to the fines that will be levied by the Sheriff."

"I hope he don't confiscate the lot of it and then fine us," Ardan said sourly. The other men, however, having sensed Sir Reinhardt was a man who would let them speak, seemed more inclined to think in terms of solutions.

"How much was logged Ardan?" Ian Fahy asked, his voice gentle, but firm. There was no ignoring that the Reeve had an uncommon sense of command for one of his social station. The men listened to him – and obeyed.

"I'd say seventy acres - maybe more," he said, scratching his chin. "I'd have to do an exact survey. I don't know what a timber Wright pays in assart, let alone the Charcoalers, but it can't be less than fifty or sixty pence per acre. And then the fines to boot," his voice trailed off. "We could probably sell the wood to the local timber wrights double-quick - maybe break even as they didn't have to cut it. It's not like the Royal Ranger'll know to look before we tell him."

"If that aint the truth," Dooley said with a chuckle. "I can't remember the last time a forester royal set foot in the Krista or Kanir, let alone the Royal Ranger or Sheriff."

Reinhardt raised an eyebrow, but knew he shouldn't be surprised. The Krista and Kanir were wild regions, a part of Kaldor in name, but practically speaking, the outlands. With only bandits, barbarians, and wild beasts in the region - Caer Nurel would not merit much attention. Not when the funds for the foresters royal could be pocketed as a healthy sinecure without any embarrassing questions being asked.

"In twenty years," Ian said. "Not a one. And perhaps a little gift might smooth things over. I understand Sir Harapa appointed his father, Sir Chemin, Royal Ranger of the Krista and Kanir. I doubt Baron Indama would want to make a fuss if it could be handled quietly," he let his voice trail off and looked at Reinhardt cautiously. "We could sell the lumber and assess the land before we tell him, milord. That, at least, would give us something to show him."

"Maybe you could invite him and make a show of it, Sir Reinhardt" Dooley pitched in. The little herdsman grinned sheepishly and brushed an unruly lock of black hair from his face. "Deal with him direct instead of some lackey he might send. You could make a banquet and wine him and dine him, like. I know nobles like a good wine and shank of mutton - especially when from someone else's larder," the other men looked shocked by Dooley's unrepentant candor. Ian shot the Herdsman a warning look to silence him and made a failing attempt at a discreet gesture to cut him off; Ardan visibly paled and reached for his small beer, his hand shaking, but Dooley persevered. "And hobnobbing seems to be the lords' and ladies' primary preoccupation - traveling in train with their retinues from one party to the next. Maybe a quiet solution could be offered to him in person, as his own idea, like."

"Maybe he'd rather not know at all," Ardan snapped.

"I will deal with the Sheriff," said Reinhardt. "Your opinions are noted." He let that statement end the matter. Then he continued. "Before I left Gardiren, I had reports of the village's condition and have made arrangements to have more food and supplies delivered. These items will be arriving with or slightly behind my man Faranir. He will be building a new forge on the river to support my men-at-arms. The current forge will service the village. He will need our best carpenter to assist him. That man must be freed from all other duties and be at Faranir's disposal, so keep that in mind when planning how to deploy our villagers." Reinhardt looked at each man to ensure his words were being heard. "My Master Warden, Garoth, will be taking the village hunters under his wing and they should be successful in providing a good flow of fowl, venison, and rabbit. I will be having horses coming to stable here, and a Hostler will be joining the village. We need to plan a proper pasture. This could be a benefit for fertilizer and such."

"If its fine-work, or complex," Ian Fahy said. "Then you'll want to make an arrangement with Master Thondl. He's a right-fine craftsman - he deserves his title "master" - and his guild has the rights to such work by custom. But if you need men to raise a smithy, we have two or three men who have the skill to do that. And if most of the work can wait until the harvest is done, then we can peel off some more backs to help while the thatching and wood-gathering is being done. Its uncommon kind of you to bring in additional supplies out of your privy purse, let alone giving of the game from your own

wood," the men exchanged surprised glances, clearly awed by such an unprecedented gesture of generosity. "The village will want to be paying you back - and without much of a winter crop to tend, we'll have backs to spare."

"You will repay my generosity," said Reinhardt. "By rebuilding the Church when labor requirements permit. I am not one to play to the crowd and mince words. God has sent me to Nurelia to be a fair and just liege. It is my intent to maintain loyalty through love, not fear - faith and honor. I am a pious man and not greedy. However, order will be maintained. Any hunting must be sanctioned by the Master Warden, so that he may manage our stock and keep the game herds healthy. "Reinhardt finished speaking, and Ardan took his cue.

"I assume we'll need to raise a stable, too," Ardan said. When Reinhardt nodded he continued: "There's a good clearing just past the north hamlet that could be fenced for pasture. It's fairly level as well. It might be a good place for a stable and barracks." The fact that such a location would also mean the soldiers were outside of the village proper was lost on no one. "We could have a few men clear and level the ground when the harvest is done - so as to avoid having to work frozen earth - and then raise the building after the village work is done. I assume we have a few months for that?"

"It is my belief that some horses will arrive with my man Faranir, more will follow. We will have to make temporary arrangements for what arrives, until this area can be prepared. Grain and hay for the winter will also arrive. We are going to have a lean winter, despite our bumper crop and slaughter," said Reinhardt. "I am good to my word that nobody in this village will go hungry, but neither will we have a nightly feast. We must reserve everything that we can to put back to right what Kural has let fall. I am depending on the three of you to work together and with me to not only put this village back in shape, but to make it the envy of Nobility from here to Tashal. In the spring, we will have less winter crop to bring in. I wish to use that time to set the timber wrights to clearing more land for expanding the crop for the following year, think on this, where we should clear to gain the most for our efforts. We will have to plan on planting some hay and grain for the horses next year to see them through winter, thus the expanded fields. We will revisit our discussion on that matter later this winter. The Countess is asking us to perform a few miracles here. I believe, with the grace of God, that we can do it and beyond, if every man, woman, and child give their all."

"Amen," Ardan said quietly. The other men nodded.

"If we're free from but a small winter planting it should be doable," Dooley ventured, giving Ian Fahy a challenging look. "And I'd wager a decanter of Master Jared's best apple brandy that I can bring every missing pig in with the help of the girls alone - which would give you the other herdsman's backs to put to work in on raising the smithy and leveling for the stables in the meantime."

"By when?" Ian asked, taking up the challenge.

"Blood Helane," Dooley said, not without a certain degree of bravado, for Blood Helane, the Full Moon, when the slaughter had traditionally begun dating back to pagan times, was a mere four days hence. "And if Master Hevel will deign to help, the girls and I can free up the other herdsman from the slaughter as well."

"The hell you say," Ardan exclaimed, but Ian Fahy and Dooley spit in their palms and shook hands vigorously across the table. Ian laughed, "You're on, Dooley of Bendeth - and I'll be enjoying your Brandy!"

"The girls will be happy to sip yours!" Dooley retorted, not without a convincing air of certitude and

pride.

"Men, I want as much hard facts as you can provide," Reinhardt interjected, feeling as much that could be done would be done, and not wanting to keep the Mangai waiting longer than he must. "I want an accurate accounting of what we have. Then I want to know what we absolutely have to have, and what we need but could get by without. This will allow me to spend my coin in the wisest fashion. Look for ways to improve the village. Look to each family and see what they need, to live lean but comfortably through the winter. I want your opinions on what I have said, can we bring in the harvest, deliver what has already been prepared to the timber wrights, repair the village, and plant the winter wheat in the time we have left? How can we accomplish this minor miracle?"

"I propose we follow your plan," Ian Fahy said to Reinhardt. "We put every back into bringing in the harvest and turning the fields. Dooley and the village girls can set to the slaughter - if Master Hevel will help - and the herdsman can help your man raise his smithy. That done, we put everyone to thatching and repairing the paths and gathering fuel. With God's help it can be done by first snow. You'll know better than we how to deal with the Sir Chemin, milord," he added with an annoyed look at Dooley.

"And then we can set to your stables and drilling with spears or whatnot," Arden said. "As the winter crop won't take much work, and the animals will be in their byres for the most part. And we talked about men who might make passable men at arms, or yeoman. I can only think of three who might be suitable, aside from the brother's Baffel, and can be spared: Ryhl Caddat, Anon Shaddog, and Valor of Nausch."

Ian Fahy nodded. "All good men, sir. Strong and quick. And spirited enough. I might add Erran Danner - the youngest of Red Will's brothers, and the tallest - to the list."

"Just now nineteen," Dooley said. "And doesn't like farming; works hard, but grumbles. He's a dreamer: Knights and ladies and such. He doesn't think farming suits."

"It might do Erran some good to get out from under his big brother's thumb," Ardan conceded. "All of them are better men than Red Will, but that's the only one who hasn't learned the worst from him yet."

"I'd like to keep them all until the first snow, however, milord," Ian Fahy said. "I need all the backs I can get right now."

"Yes, that should not be a problem. I may pull one of them only daily, for training. When the first snow comes, I will pull them all." Reinhardt didn't mention the fact that more peasants might come to village. He didn't feel it relevant to speculate on what he was not sure to occur. "Very well men, there is much to do. If you please, I will speak to the Mangai now. The men stood and bowed, then made their way over to a side table where they began discussing the particulars. Before motioning to the Mangai, Reinhardt looked over at Kamran who leaned on the wall nearby, well within earshot. He motioned him over, and when he neared Reinhardt spoke quietly. "Go and retrieve the Miller's wife, I wish to have this issue finished now."

Kamran nodded and quietly made his way out of the inn. As he watched the young gentle go, Reinhardt felt alone in his new domain: Kamran was on his errand, Garoth was working with his sub-wardens and watching the Keep, Bvarlan had gone on his mission to Gardarin and Tashal, and Faranir was not expected for a few more days. He needed more people. He needed guards, pages, messengers, a herald; he needed servants, stable hands, cooks... the list boggled him. How was he to put this all together himself? He needed his mother or sister, or a chamberlain, someone to see to the

day to day affairs of running a Noble household. He could manage the big decisions – the military decisions and the political decisions. But he was incapable of putting a feast on for the Sheriff.

He hoped his letters sent at Gardiren were answered soon. Would Dame Sophia aid him? Would his mother come? Was his father open to relations, and was his half-sister married? Would Elsbeth pull the rug out from under him and deny him anyone to train his horse. The last was a silly notion, she knew as well as he the necessities for establishing a green troop of Heavy Horse. Then it hit him – they will be green. How to get them some combat experience? Perhaps a tournament or competition between them would suit. It was not combat, but something more than drill for sure. He would discuss it with Kamran and whoever was sent to lead the horse.

His mind settled on Kamran. Reinhardt still was unsure where to place him. Knight him and give him a fief, or make him Captain of the soon to be Heavy Horse? Captain of the guard – or perhaps steward for Caer Nurel? Garoth and Faranir were easy to place – each had his role and his expertise – but Kamran was of noble birth and presented more options. Still, there was time. He didn't want to be hasty. As for Mareth, he owed the woman something more than employment and free rent for the short term. Perhaps he could grant her a boon, let her use it as she desired. Reinhardt took a drink from his cup, and then signaled for the Mangai to approach: “Good masters, if you will.”

The three men sitting at the far table rose and approached, each nodding respectfully as they took their seats at Reinhardt's behest. They were quiet and watchful, their expressions polite masks of withdrawn caution. These were freemen with more money and status than most peasants could ever hope for – and more concern for maintaining or increasing it. Much like the nobility, petty fiefdoms and social pecking order were the rule of their day. Reinhardt immediately knew the lanky, sandy haired man who sat across from him. He was Hevel of Whayryn, the son of Jandil the Salter, and Reinhardt remembered him from his own days at Whayryn manor – before his hopes for a knighthood had been temporarily dashed and he had been packed off to Abriel to study for the priesthood. It was a slight acquaintance, but it was more than he had with the other men. He decided to break the ice: “Hevel of Whayryn, right?”

“That's right, milord,” the man said with a half-smile, relaxing somewhat. “I was wondering if you'd remember me.” When Reinhardt nodded his affirmation the man continued: “My older brother, Davon, is to inherit my father's franchise when he passes so I saved up, and when I became a master in the guild, I married Saliah– your father's Woodward's daughter – and came out here to start my own franchise.” It was at this point that Donnal, Master Jarred's brother, emerged from the kitchen and joined them. Hevel said: “Enough of that – This here,” he said, gesturing to the newcomer, who nodded as he was introduced, “is Master Donnal of the Innkeepers Guild. This,” he said gesturing to the plump balding man to his left. “Is Master Harrold of the Miller's Guild. And this,” he said, gesturing to the narrow, sharp featured man with a shock of white hair and a drooping mustache, who sat directly across from Reinhardt. “Is Master Thondl of the Woodcrafter's Guild. Master Olin – Mareth's man – was our President. We haven't appointed a replacement as of yet.”

“Thank you for the introduction,” Reinhardt began. “You all know who I am, so let us proceed: I have spoken with the village leaders, and laid out a plan for the coming winter.” Reinhardt briefly recounted the particulars to the guildsmen. They listened quietly, and looks were exchanged, but Reinhardt did not let them interject. When the Mangai were informed of the particulars of his conversation with the village officers, Reinhardt moved to the matters that directly impacted the guildsmen. “Does bringing in the slaughter as we have lain out cause any problems for you Hevel? Will you be willing to assist with the slaughter?”

“It will make the preparations smoking and curing a tribulation, and it's not in accordance with guild

law," Hevel said with a simple shrug. The other men remained quiet and showed little reaction. It was clear they were waiting for this man to set the tone. "Slaughtering is the Butcher's Guild's work, but there's never been a butcher in this village, nor in any other village that comes to mind, and by tradition peasants do it, so I don't see any reason to be punctilious." – This with an unfriendly glance at Thondl – "If I put Saliah to the grindstone salting and smoking we should be able to get it done without any spoilage. I'll lend a hand – it's not as though the poor souls don't need the help."

Reinhardt nodded in simple acceptance of the Salter's words and turned his attention to Thondl: "Now, my man Faranir is a Master in the Weaponsmith's guild, and he is to build a new forge by the river. He will require your assistance Thondl, and I expect you to make his requests first priority. Expect him to ask for items you may have never created before. He is going to try a new forge design."

There was a pique of curiosity at the table now – innovations were rare and slow in coming – though none of the men voiced the questions that were racing through their minds. Thondl nodded thoughtfully, a gleam of interest in his eye. It was clear he was a man who prided himself on his craft: "With pleasure, milord. Your man will have my full attention – and my fairest rates. I don't reckon there is anything he can ask for that I can't make."

"Master Harrold," Reinhardt said, turning to the Miller without preamble. "Faranir mentioned some issue of water-wheels being the sole province of your Guild – is this true?"

"Why yes, Excellency," the Miller said, surprised not only at the question, but the new lord's attention being turned so suddenly upon him. His pale hung-over look became flushed. "They are."

"Strange," Reinhardt commented. "Yet, he will need at least one. You will license its use."

There was a murmur from the men. It was a mixture of surprise and curiosity. Master Harrold was clearly taken aback, but collected himself quickly, and said: "Well – certainly – milord. There isn't any Guild Law or precedent that says I couldn't. It's right unusual," he said shaking his head, looking around the table for a show of support from his fellow guildsmen. There were nods and grunts of affirmation, but no one spoke. "But I don't see why it could not be done."

"A forge that needs a water-wheel..." Thondl said in an undertone, as though thinking out-loud to himself.

"Is your man to be a Bonded Master?" Harrold asked.

"That would make things simpler," Master Donnal interjected, explaining the flabbergasted and less eloquent Miller's line of reasoning. "The Mangai Court in Tashal might make a fuss about licensing a right to another guild, but they would likely tread lightly with a Baron – in a domain that will soon be home to a market town and new trade. Were the wheel licensed to you they might decide it best to overlook the matter – attached to an armory or no."

"He is to be a Bonded Master," said Reinhardt. "At least he will be initially. In the future he and I may change the agreement."

"I don't doubt they'll make a damned ruckus anyhow," Thondl said zealously. "But we'll think of a way to outfox them."

The other men were clearly surprised by the Woodcrafter's words and exchanged incredulous looks. Reinhardt now remembered that Kamran had reported the Woodcrafter was unpopular with his fellows, and he had not missed the look Hevel had shot the man before. "If Faranir succeeds, I dare

say we can expect a visit from the Mangai Council of Tashal. That is *if* he is successful." The statement widened their eyes. What could be so important as to cause the leaders of guilds to come all the way out to Nurelia?

"One more thing, I expect you to keep all knowledge you gain of his activities amongst yourselves until I deem the information can leave the Barony. You are to direct any inquiries, even by your respective Guild leaders to me. If I discover anyone has discussed this information, their franchise will be revoked and they will be kicked out of my lands." Reinhardt hated making threats, but Faranir's project probably would be more important to Elsbeth's war chest, than the mine, if war came. Wanting to reduce the tension, he changed his tack: "I have sent a man to post broadsheets in Tashal for a new Blacksmith, Cooper, and a Hostler. I expect there will be candidates who choose to build their trade in a new Barony with a real chance of growth beyond the norm."

"Few young masters would say no," Hevel agreed. "And a Cooper will be much needed. I'll need to buy every barrel Master Roderick had made from Ethne for the sausages and meats we're preparing for market. I only hope there will be enough."

"I don't doubt Jared'll have to build a bigger inn," Master Donnal said happily, to no one in particular. "Or that one day we'll need a new one."

"As for your electing a new President," Reinhardt said. "It would be my choice for you to wait for Faranir and Jarred to arrive. Their council would be most welcome on the matters facing the village over the next year."

For a long moment there was only uncomfortable silence. It was Thondl who broke it, speaking politely, but with unmistakable firmness: "I don't object to waiting for your man, Milord, or for Master Jarred – though Donnal has cast his Guild's vote in Jarred's absence before – but I want the matter settled before the new Guildsmen from Tashal arrive."

There was a strong current of assent from the other men at the table.

"I will be employing Mareth and Ethne as domestics to give them an income, so rest your minds on their state for now. If there are any other hardships in the village, I expect to be informed. I also want a report from each of you about your state of readiness to perform your respective trades. I wish to know if there is anything Kural took or destroyed that needs replaced. Also, if you feel the village could support other guilds, I wish to know so proper requests to the guilds can be made."

"I think we're on the road to remedying most the hardships," Donnal said. "But there's Ian Fahy, sir. With his legs broken and healed all wrong he has trouble doing more than standing of traveling with his crutches. His wife died some years back and with Emily," his voice trailed off and he jerked his thumb in the direction of the keep. "Well, he needs a woman's care in the home – at the very least, a woman's hands."

"And he can't work his own fields, either," Hevel added. "The men will help, no doubt, but they will have their own crops – and yours – to look after."

"Emily...Yes, that issue has me concerned. I have a notion of how to work out his domestic chores. As for his fields, I will roll them into my own and pay him a fair wage as Reeve if he is agreeable to it. A small cart and mule can be provided for his transportation." The Mangai seemed surprised – who was this strange Noble? He didn't act like a noble, or their conception of those mighty beings. Was he right in the head?

"As to other guilds, milord," The Miller said. "We produce a lot of wool and send it out. The women do some fine weaving – and a few do right fine stitch-work – but they've no license to sell their fabrics, or the garments they make, at market. If we had a clothier here he could purchase the finished fabric instead of raw wool, which would bring more money to their pockets, and he might put some of the more talented one's to make garments on consignment. Is not Mareth's father a Clothier?"

"Aye," Thondl said. "And she has three brothers who are all Master's in the guild with no hope of their own franchise. She's a fine seamstress herself – and her cousin, Ethne."

"That they are," Hevel smiled. "Those two could run up a dress any lady fair would die for – given the right materials, of course."

"Very good," Reinhardt said. "I will write to her father and offer him the chance to send one of his sons to start a franchise here, and employ his kinswomen."

"What do you know about the Timber Wright's Guild camps in Nurelia – and their leaders?"

The men looked at Donnal, who took their cue and spoke: "There are six master Timber wrights out here, each with his own camp – and two Master Charcoalers. Most of them bring in a crew of lumberjacks and work from first bloom to the last of fall and then return home for the winter; maybe a dozen or so men per camp. They used to come in quite regular, at least camp a week, to take a whet and enjoy a meal. Sometimes more would come. The masters would meet here to do business. A rowdy bunch, I'd say, with no women and out there to smooth them out, but no real hard cases, either. Arden usually grabs a few men and keeps an eye on things when they come in – which they haven't since Kural... well, for the past four or five months – since Kural's madness went the extra mile. I reckon we'll see some of the one's working farther north pass through on their way home in the coming weeks. Then not a peep until spring."

"Aside from Master Baldan," the Miller offered. "He stays out and works right through winter with his men. There's only eight or nine of them, mostly Ivinian, like Baldan himself. They like to work the Kanir – much farther out than the other men."

"And don't come in as often," Donnal said. "We usually only see them every few months. And then they mostly they just want supplies. One of them is sweet on Meg Handa, Uther's girl. No trouble from them, though – ever. A quiet group: not at all like the Ivinians you hear tales about."

Reinhardt ran his hand through his hair and took a deep breath. "Now, I want to know everything there is to know about this Master Miner in the Keep. Every little anecdote or tidbit of information you have."

"Well," Donnal said. "When they first came they stopped here in the Boar. The Master, Orlan of Tashal, was dressed like a lord – more like a peacock truth be told. And he didn't look much like a miner – very, well, I don't like to say. Perfumed kerchiefs, manicured hands, and nice tastes – in the sense that they were too nice for a place like Caer Nurel. Not the type to get his hands dirty. Anyways, he had two sell-swords with him. Nasty looking fellows. No livery on them – or anything else to say what troop they might have worked for."

"I'd lay money on brigands," Thondl said. "Like Kural's men probably were."

"They had a bunch of journeymen with them," Donnal continued. "Eight all told. Looked like ordinary mining men to me. The workers kept to themselves; didn't like questions. We just kept a steady flow of food and drink coming from the kitchen and minded our own business." He paused as though thinking and then said. "Jarred did say one thing, though: he said he thought this Orlan wasn't the

type to go prospecting, or to do anything more than quaff wine and primp himself. Jarred thought he might be someone else's intermediary. Someone... more substantial."

"Intermediary?" Hevel asked, surprised. "What makes you say that?"

"I can't say," Donnal said. "It wasn't me who said it. It was something he said to Jarred, but I don't know what."

"I know one thing," Thondl declared, thumping his hand on the table. "Those men weren't going prospecting – and who prospects in winter? The river is liable to freeze – and them along with it. Only a crazy Ivinia-man like Bardan would go out there this time of year. The sane men are going the other direction. And they wanted some tools – as though a woodcrafter and a blacksmith are one in the same – and the tools they wanted weren't prospector's tools. Not a pan or a sifter to their name!"

"I sent Garoth to find the miners; he found they had met a demise that is still under investigation." He dropped it there, but the looks of the Mangai, forced him to cool their speculation. "Garoth thinks some sort of wild animals and fire was involved in their camp, he noted they had not experience woodsman guiding them and made a lot of errors. Sad really, a tromp into a deep forest with nothing to show for it but death. God's will." He sighed empathetically. "I wish to have a copy of your rental contracts and any agreements you had with Sir Vaern. All agreements with Kural are nullified from this point onward. I will review the agreements you made with Sir Vaern, and then we will negotiate our own agreements. If you are unable to present any agreements from Vaern, then we will determine something fair between us. I make this clear: I do not wish any one of you to earn more than the fair profit for his work. I have distaste for gluttony and greed. I will give you a lot of freedom, but abusing that freedom and overcharging these people for your services will be the quickest way to get my nose in your business, remember that."

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The men were silent and still and Reinhardt let the words sink a moment, then he lightened his tone: "I know this group did much for these people under Kural's tyranny, and I will not forget those deeds. This village is going to row, and that growth will profit each of your franchises. I want this village to have reputation of honest and fair dealings. Wealth is coming – enough for all."

Before anyone could respond Kamran poked his head through the door and he gave Reinhardt a nod. "Now there is one issue," said Reinhardt. "That needs to be dealt with now. If you have anything you would like to discuss with me, or bring to my attention, speak to Kamran as you leave. I wish to speak with Master Harrold alone."

There was a series of 'milords' and scooting chairs, and then Hevel and Thondl made their exit while Donnal discreetly withdrew to the kitchen. Again alone, Reinhardt motioned to Kamran, who brought in Erin, the Miller's wife. He had a firm grip on her upper arm, and led her toward Reinhardt's table.

Master Harrold's face quickly ran from concerned to perplexed, then his face became comically blank. He looked directly at Reinhardt: "I assume I won't like this, Milord."

"We found her fornicating with Kural's men in the rectory," said Reinhardt calmly.

"I can explain..." Erin began to protest.

Before she could finish, however, Reinhardt snapped a venomous look at her and his voice rose. "You will stand and be silent woman!"

His tone having brought dead silence to the inn, Reinhardt looked back at Master Harrold, whose face had now gone from blank to dark and grim. "I will release her to your custody, and as her husband let you punish her for her impropriety. Let it be known her sin in the rectory of the house of God displeases me greatly. If you wish, Master, I will have her put in stocks in the center of the village for a few days, fed only bread and water, and a guard posted near her at night."

Erin gasped, but Master Harrold ignored her and said simply: "You can do what you want with her, Milord. I don't want her back. I want a divorce. She can do for herself." He turned and looked at his wife, his voice was and angry hiss. "You hear me, Erin: You can do for yourself."

"Very well, I will bear witness to the priest or glebe when they arrive," said Reinhardt unmoved. He looked at Harrold in the eye and nodded. "The shame is hers, not yours. She has not affected my judgment of you; I take each man for his own actions." He then turned to Erin. "You are impertinent and need to learn your place woman. If the village was in good order you would indeed be at the stocks - unclothed since - you are so ready for other men beside your husband to see your flesh." He let the threat build in her imagination. "Erin, as lord of this domain, I rule that you must repay your husband for your manumission."

Erin shook Kamran's hand off and stared, wide-eyed. "That's two pound."

"The amount is irrelevant," Reinhardt answered.

"I don't have two pound."

"Then you are in debt and cannot pay?" Reinhardt asked, knowing the answer.

"Milord," she began pitifully. She seemed close to fainting.

"Then as your liege I will agree to take you as an indentured servant in exchange for the remission of your debts." The miller tried to quell a smug expression that was vying for control of his face. "You will regain your freedom after seven years service, or on the day you re-marry a free man in good standing or enter the service of the Lord taking on orders in a cloister."

The woman began to sob, Reinhardt looked to Kamran: "Is Ian Fahy still nearby?"

Kamran's answer was one of action. He turned to the door and opened it. Catching the Reeve's attention, he motioned him back inside. The Reeve ducked inside, an expectant expression on his face.

"This woman," Reinhardt said, gesturing to Erin. "Has been discarded by her husband due to her sins against him and our God. I have ruled she must repay her manumission, which she cannot. As a result she has become indentured to me. She will serve as your domestic servant. Any working hours she has to spare will be used as you direct in cleaning out or maintaining the church and its grounds. She will perform all your domestic chores in exchange for food and shelter. This will serve your needs, the needs of my Reeve, until my men and I can rescue Emily from the keep." He looked pointedly at the Reeve. "Your daughter has not been forgotten my friend."

Turning to look directly at Erin, but still speaking to the Reeve he said. "She is in my service, so if she refuses to perform her duties, or steps out of line in anyway then I am to be informed. Furthermore," he turned back to the Reeve. "Since you are here Reeve, after discussing matters with the Mangai, I have determined it may be beneficial to roll your fields into mine and pay you a fair wage for performing the duties as village Reeve. This will free you from having to work in your physical condition, and let you focus on duties beneficial to the entire village. Your fee will include free rent of your home and maintenance of a mule and cart. Your status will be akin to that of a yeoman, but rather than military service, you will serve as Reeve. Furthermore, as an incentive for the village to prosper, your wage will be based on the income of from my personal fields and herds. The more money I make, the more you will make. If I lose money, you lose money. I will scribe an agreement for us to formalize later. What say you?"

Fahy's smiled broadly and bowed as best he could on his crutches. He said: "A deal I cannot refuse, milord."

"Then it shall be so," Reinhardt said. "Erin, get your things from the Miller's house and report to the Reeve's residence. If you decide to enter the service of our Lord, then you can inform Fahy and I will make the arrangements. Let this be clear woman, if you are found breaking the laws of God or my own again, you will find this sentence merciful by comparison to what comes next. Use these seven years to repent and reform, and to work your way back into my good graces - and God's. Your judgment before him is independent from mine, and he will know your hidden heart and deeds.

The woman nodded he submission, but was unable to speak. He face was wet with tears.

"Take her to get her things Kamran," Reinhardt said, and then looked back at Fahy. "Are there any boys in the village who are the scrawny type and not much good use to you in the fields? I believe I need a page."

Fahy laughed. "I reckon we can find one, milord."

— *David Queenann* 2006/02/17 05:29

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