

# Liberation Day!

*Game Master's Comments: Yes - More Combat! As an aside: players hate being bailed out by non-player characters, especially when the rescue in question is carried out in "Pro From Dover" style. I was trying to write the scene in such a way as to give Reinhardt center stage. After all, he's a chivalric juggernaut and a player character. The fumble and bail out was the player's decision - not mine. Shocking, but true...*

*Reinhardt's Comments: I knew when I sent my mail to David that Mareth would'nt be successful twice. But she was there, and I figured she would continue to try and help. David could not make that decision to open with her without stepping on my toes as a player. It is similar to the later situation with Bvarlan that he comments on. This was my choice for the story. Reinhardt had proven his combat skill in the last scene. I wanted to make sure he remained human. I have a distaste for scenes where a thousand bullets are shot at the hero, and he emerges unscathed. Furthermore, I wanted to build up Bvarlan's "boogey-man" as well, since he is on my side!*

## **9 Helane 719, Caer Nurel**

As the sun had risen over the peaks of the Sorkin Mountains a morning river-mist was rising the Shem River Valley like steam from a hot bath, giving the village and its environs an ethereal air. In the rectory, all was quiet, though a palpable tension was evident. Bvarlan sat smoking his pipe meditatively at the table in the main room, his long-knife sitting ready on the table by his hand, while Mareth and Erin had been moved to the bedroom, where Reinhardt stood at the window, watching from a narrow opening between the shutters. From his vantage point he could make out the hazy form of the keep in the dim morning light, and could see Ian Fahy sitting on a log near the bank just south of the West Common where the boat would land, whittling on a piece of river wood, his crutches at his side. In the coming moments the man would have a critical role to play.

They had sent Kamran back to the inn, which lay closer to the landing site than the rectory. He too would be watching. His role, when the man rounded the rectory to approach the door and was lost from view, was to secure the boat and block the man's path of egress in the event something went wrong. Reinhardt sighed. Everything that could be done had been done - except sleep. There had been none of that. As he ran his hand through his hair the door of the keep opened and the figure of a man made its way to the boat, a large bundle on his shoulder. After putting the bundle in the prow he returned to the keep for another. This was repeated three times before the man finally pushed off. In the swift current he passed between the island and the large river rock that sat between keep and shore, and then emerged on the other side, running the boat smoothly ashore not ten feet from Ian Fahy's log.

The man hopped out, still hazy in the mist, and Reinhardt could see words were being exchanged. After a moment the man threw the rope to Fahy and stomped up the west path towards them. As he approached Reinhardt could see he wore chain mail covered with leathers, an iron helm that covered the cranium, and had a broadsword in the scabbard at his waist. He wore a kite-shield over his back. In his middle thirties, he was ugly, squat, powerful, and angry. A litany of curses poured from his mouth as he approached and unhooked the gate to the glebe, pushing it open, his gestures emphatic.

"Wake up you whoreson double-boxed goat-buggerers!" The man roared as he passed from Reinhardt's view. "Damn your eyes! Drinking and dicing and fornicating with these low-rent village sluts at all hours of the night...!"

Reinhardt took one quick glance to ensure Kamran was moving for the boat and made his way past the women with a gesture for Mareth to keep Erin quiet. In the main room he found Bvarlan with his back pressed to the wall beside the door, where he would both be concealed by the door when the man opened it and be able to push it closed if the man, as expected, entered. Reinhardt quietly drew his sword and took up the position opposite. He took one last look at Bvarlan. "Alive if possible," he silently mouthed, but it was more to steady himself; he was quite sure the grizzled warrior remembered.

"Come on, rise and shine you dumb asinine bastards!" The door shuddered violently as the man pounded his fist into it, working himself into a fine lather as he did so. "A few more weeks in this dark hole in the sweet Countess's aromatic arse and we're free of this dog-mad frothing bailiff and his diseased spot-faced whore with more gold than you illiterate rump-humper bandits could count were arithmetic not beyond your wee-addled-wits - if you don't slip in your own stinking shite and muck it up that is.!"

The door shuddered under a new onslaught and then swung open. "Wakey-wakey you bleeding catamites! Eggs and Bakey...!" The man's diatribe ended in a sudden throaty sound of surprise followed by the sound of a blade rasping against leather. The man's voice was wary. He did not enter. "Wharton... Bull... Everything alright in there boyos? You hear me in there?"

"They're both dead-drunk and dead-asleeping in here milord," said Mareth. "I'd drag their arses out for you and put them to the cold trough to rouse them, but alas my strength only goes so far." She appeared at the doorway of the bedroom with the same sultry aura she had at the door the night before, and curtsied with a nod. Reinhardt admired the woman's quick thinking and cleverness - she was as sharp as one of Garoth's arrows. It was another risk she was taking for them, a chancy one, but necessary. If they could not overbear him within they would have to take him without - and that would mean deadly combat in an open area and the possibility of the keep being alerted. There was a naughty promise in Mareth's final words: "Come on in and give a girl a hand..."

For an instant the tableau held - there was no faulting the woman's performance - but not knowing what had set the man on edge, it had been a desperate hope at best. "Hell and death," the man spat. There was the whisper of withdrawing footfalls and the man's shadow disappeared from the doorway. Mareth shot Reinhardt a pointed "do something" look, her entire body suddenly rigid from the implications of her failure.

Passing through the doorway into the yard Reinhardt could see the man had first ducked sideways towards the gate, and seeing his path to the boat blocked by another man, darted quickly for the front of the tabernacle. He was over half way there, and had pulled a polished ram's horn from his belt. His expression turned grim as he saw Reinhardt emerge, Bvarlan a step behind, and still backing away from the newcomers, brought the ram's horn to his lips. There was a loud heart-stopping blast, followed by a rapid bleating. The alarm had been given.

Reinhardt gritted his teeth and snarled at the tactical failure. Nevertheless, the boat seemed secured. He headed straight after the brigand, bringing up his sword. "Sound the Signal!" he shouted on the run. They now had to alert the woodsmen on their side of the river that it was time to overcome their guards. There was no hiding the fact now, the contest for the village had begun. Reinhardt had a more looming problem, the foe before him was neither incompetent nor drunk.

The ugly guard dropped the horn and unshouldered his shield, reaching the steps of the tabernacle and backing up them as Reinhardt closed on him. He moved like a man who knew his business. The doors, ornately carved and dark stained, were twelve feet tall and at least three inches thick. One was

closed – probably with bolts shot into the stone framework – the other, the latch clearly having been hacked away with an axe, hung open. The man backed just through the open door and stood his ground. It was good defensive ground to face a frontal assault. He had both the door and his shield for protection, and only one assailant could come at him at a time. What's more, Reinhardt would be forced to fight on the steps, while the man himself had level ground.

Reinhardt reached the man and crossed blades for the first pass as Bvarlan sounded the signal on his own ram's horn. A long blast followed by three truncated blasts and another long blast. The ugly guard probed Reinhardt's defenses. The guard was clearly an experienced swordsman, if uninspired, and while not quick, his strokes were strong and precise. Reinhardt knew he had the better of the man in skill and speed – and probably endurance – but forcing him back from the door would be no simple matter. The man blocked Reinhardt's sudden counter with his shield, but just barely, and Reinhardt felt his blade rasp across the leather and chain on the man's shoulder.

The fear and fury of a near-blow upon him the ugly guard stepped into the doorway itself and rained a series of hard strokes on Reinhardt's guard in an effort to drive his opponent onto the lower steps. At that same moment, however, Bvarlan moved past the melee at the door and rounded the northern corner of the tabernacle, stopping at the first of the high windows he came to. Reinhardt heard wood crack and glass shatter as Bvarlan drove his axe into the ornate latticework that held what remained of the tabernacle's stained glass windows. Reinhardt heard two more blows, and then the sound of the lattice being torn from the frame. The ugly guard had heard it too. Outflanked and outnumbered the odds had turned suddenly and severely against him, and his options had run to nil. He swore vociferously and his face set in a grim, angry expression – an expression Reinhardt recognized as that of a man intent on playing a hopeless endgame to its inevitable finish. Reinhardt would have happily given his own life in the service of his Countess, or the people of his village, but wondered, for a second only, what drove this man to fight on to the end.

The man gave ground rapidly and retreated rapidly through the door. He was quick, and proved able to show his back and stay a step ahead of Reinhardt's sword. Just on his heels, Reinhardt was determined not to let the duel end with the guard's escape. Reinhardt slashed high, behind the man's head, just to keep the threat fresh in his mind. He assumed the man would turn and try to finish him, rather than face Reinhardt and Bvarlan together.

Reinhardt had left his shield with his horse, rather than attempt to bring it where there was too much risk of making noise on their mission of stealth the night before. The ugly guard, however, had his shield, and therefore, an advantage. Reinhardt pulled his knife from his sheath in mid-step – he had been fighting hand and a half style, but now he wanted another blade to parry with when he faced his opponent. Suddenly the guard stopped, as though on a farthing, and in one motion twisted into a hopping whirl, bringing his sword arcing back at Reinhardt in a lethal arc. Reinhardt shot his upper body desperately backward to avoid the stroke, his boots slipping on the soot and charred remains of the tabernacle roof, his feet shooting out from underneath him. Reinhardt slammed down on his back and rump.

The ugly guard realized the great advantage he'd gained – and with the prospect of a quick kill a new hope for escape – and his eyes shown with bloodthirsty triumph as he brought his blade up high to finish his downed foe. He moved quickly to strike, but there was a sudden whirling in the air, followed by a 'thunk' as metal penetrated flesh and bone. The tip of Bvarlan's long-knife protruded from the man's skull. What shocked Reinhardt the most was not that Bvarlan had thrown his blade and struck a target the size of a melon with such force that pierced both head and helmet, but that he had done so from twenty feet away, and on a moving target. Bvarlan gave Reinhardt the sober nod indicating a difficult job was done. Reinhardt returned the nod in thanks as Bvarlan crossed to retrieve his knife.

"We must make haste," Reinhardt stated as he rose, brushing himself off. "Kural will be confused and unsure at first, and we must move quickly to ensure he doesn't escape the island - and we must cross to help the village men."

Bvarlan deliberately wiped his blade on his pant-leg as he knelt, checking the point on a finger nail with a slight frown before sheathing it. "Well have to be quick about it," he agreed as he stood. "But I'm not sure of this Red Will and his brothers. They're able bodied and on this side of the river. We'll want at least one man here to keep an eye on them until we can get the rest across."

Reinhardt, Bvarlan's words in still his ears and the man himself just a step behind, turned and ran from the church, making his way to where Kamran and Ian Fahy waited by the West Common with the river-boat. They had pulled the four bundles of provisions from the boat, as well as a crossbow and a quiver of crossbow bolts. "Sir Reinhardt," Kamran said as a greeting and by way of an introduction. "This is Ian Fahy, the former Reeve."

Ian Fahy dipped his head, "Milord."

"Well met," Reinhardt said, noting a group of peasants starting to form nearby and motion on the keep's battlements. Bvarlan had already untied the boat and began to unfurl the sail. Reinhardt looked pointedly at Fahy. "Will the current Reeve move against us?" He asked, and then followed up his question with another before Fahy could answer: "Or should I leave Kamran here with you?"

"Would be best to leave him, Milord," Fahy said, nodding to Red Will's massive form approaching like a lumbering bear from across the common with a short handled hoe in his hand, six large hulking brothers in tow. The Mangai were approaching from various directions as well - Thondl, indeed, had a sheathed broadsword in hand - they the mangai were fewer in number and smaller in stature should the matter come to blows. "Red Will'll fold when he hears the new laird has arrived, but having one of your men here to make it official like," Fahy's expression had a hint of wryness in it. "Well, It'd avoid misunderstandings, if you take my meaning."

Reinhardt turned and got into the boat, which Kamran, with the help of two village boys who had crept close to eavesdrop none to surreptitiously, pushed out into the current. He heard Red Will bellowing as he approached. "As you like, Fahy" Reinhardt said in a voice loud enough for those assembling on the West Common to hear. "The village is in your and Kamran's hands until I return." As Bvarlan turned the sail to better catch the wind, Reinhardt heard Red Will's protest: "What the devil is going on here, Fahy?"

"The new laird has arrived from Gardiren, Reeve-Darlin'," Fahy crowed. Reinhardt noticed, of all the Mangai, it was Thondl who moved to stand next to Kamran and the former Reeve. The others were close at hand, but made no overt moves of support. There were a few thankful chuckles from a few of the peasants and one woman collapsed and began to weep bodily - and loudly - in relief. Most of those present, however, seemed shocked by the news. There was a quiet confusion on the common.

"New Laird?" Red Will guffawed. Then, stubbornly: "Who?"

"Sir Reinhardt Maddox," Kamran said with a dramatic flourish and emphasis, gesturing to the boat as the current and sudden filling of the sail pulled them out of earshot. "Baron of Nurelia!"

— *David Queenann* 2006/02/16 11:45

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