

Assassins!

Game Master's Comments: Kamran was played by Scuba-Hero from the Hero Boards. Unlike the other two players, he was new to my group and the PBEM format, let alone my quirky method. He took to it like a fish to water. I was very impressed. As a result, I wanted to try out some combat, and get him involved in the greater long-term plotline, albeit in an oblique manner. Unfortunately, Scuba would also end up dropping out due to scheduling concerns, leaving it as a Sir Reinhardt solo-game, but not for several more turns, and not before Kamran had made a major contribution to Sir Reinhardt's initial efforts at Caer Nurel.

1 Helane 719, Gardirentown

Kamran had never celebrated the Banquet of St. Claudia in Gardiren before. It was unlike any celebration he had ever attended. He had known Countess Curo was among the kingdom's wealthiest nobles, but the lavish opulence of the evening, mixed with a festive air and uncommon high spirits, had settled in his mind that his new liege might rival even the crown in material grandeur. It seemed that, for one evening, the world had become a perfect place.

The vespers, lead by Dame Sophia, the Countess's aunt and Knight-Commander of the Order of St. Claudia, Our Lady of Paladins, in the castle's high-vaulted, brightly lit chapel, had been an ephemeral, beatific affair. The massive, round, stained-glass window of St. Claudia, clad in mail, kneeling in an attitude of prayer, her sword at her hip, had seemed to glow from within. The effect was a trick of the moonlight, he was sure, but a rousing spectacle nonetheless.

The Great Hall, draped in gold-embroidered crimson damask, lit with a rainbow of multi-hued alchemist's lamps, and filled with music and laughter, had been a joyous place. The banquet, opened by the Countess with a ritual benediction over a chalice of wine, had run to ten courses. Delicacies upon delicacies, dishes seasoned with spices from the length and breadth of Lythia, and served with an array of exotic wines selected for each - he had never seen or tasted the like.

Seated with the wedding parties of his older brother, Sir Wels, and his Wel's bride to be, Pura Castlen, it was a warm, mirthful night. Only his mother, nursing a cold at Gardiren's noblest inn, the Dragon's Rest, was not present. His father had clopped Kamran on the back with savage pride, and toasted his fete in his audience with the Countess time and time again. "I thought you'd right bitched yourself, lad, but your chance is made: Seize it! Seize it!"

And it wasn't just food and wine. Harpers, jesters, jugglers, acrobats, and magicians had been employed to entertain, but the pinnacle had been a dark-haired, dark-eyed, dusky-skinned Caravansi dancer from Gothmir whom the Countess had purchased. Young, lithe, supple, uncommonly fit, and clad in scant, brightly colored silks, her undulating, sensual movements, masterfully timed to a wild, tribal beat, had entranced the room.

It was during the final course that Kamran had begged the suggestion that he remain and continue until dawn, telling his father and brother he was going to pay his respects to his mother, the Lady Hallen. His head was swimming, and the fresh air had done wonders to clear it, though he could still feel the admixture of wine coursing in his blood.

He crossed the bridge from the castle to Gardiren Town, and made his way towards the Dragon's Rest. The town had retired before the castle, its streets, still lit by high torches, sputtering in the evening breeze, were almost empty, though laughter and sounds of feasting could still be heard from

some of the homes. The dancing girl was still twirling in the back of his mind as he contemplated Sir Pallon's drunken tabletop speech about mustering the flower of Kaldor to deal with the Kath and Solori; and the Countess's sly smile as her eyes locked onto Kamran's during the hoots and whistles that followed; and the raising of her chalice in silent, wry salute.

This Countess is quite the impressive woman, Kamran mused as he walked down the street. Intelligent, decisive, good humored - it is good that I serve House Curo. He made a quick mental note to guard his opinions carefully, should his path and Sir Pallon's cross in the future. The Countess's husband would likely take a dim view of any disagreement to his views.

What were these feelings stirring in his chest? The vague dissatisfaction that had driven him from Chelmarch, to criss-crossing Kaldor as a Harper, to Osselmarch, and finally to Gardiren, had dissipated. A new sense of purpose stood in its place. How far could a man with a sharp mind and a good sword rise in this situation? Indeed, could - Suddenly Kamran's scout-trained senses cut through the wine and musing. Something was not as it should be...

Approaching the end of the town's main street, where the Dragon's Rest, a massive, two story stone structure, lay, he caught sight of three men - or was it four? - skulking in the shadows to the side of the Dragon's Rest, whispering amongst themselves, as they pressed themselves against the wall, under the kitchen window. They were perhaps fifty feet away, and he could see the men wore dark, hooded shrouds with dark robes underneath. Kamran caught a glimpse of on sword in a scabbard as one of them adjusted his shroud. The men did not seem aware of his presence...

Kamran quietly melted into the shadows, assessing the situation. There was no way to cross the street without being seen. He edged as close as he dared. There was no doubt in his mind that they were up to no good. He was also keenly aware that his mother was but a few feet from the men skulking by the inn. What lawlessness were they planning, in the very heart of his new liege's castle-town? He strained to catch any bits of their words, spoken in low tones. "He's be in the common room smoking his pipe. Sittin' back like a right tight laird."

"Id' that scarred-old-cyclops-bastard-knight-of-a-demon-spawn wid' 'im?"

"Nay, Old Spook aint come yet."

"Then lets deal wid' 'im before he does."

"Wait, he's movin' for the front door..."

"No time to waste *fools!*" - this from the last man in an impatient hiss.

The men began throwing their shrouds over their shoulders, their swords, still scabbarded, now in plain view. They hugged the wall, making their way back towards the front of the inn. Clearly he had to act now, before they could further advance their plans. Three or four 'gainst one - not good odds, though Kamran would have stood willingly in the path of an entire Thardic Legion to prevent harm to his mother. No armor; it would have been a grave insult during his audience and the feast. How best to proceed? Kamran took a deep breath and tried to let the feel of the wine run through his body without affecting his mind. He stepped into the street, staggering and singing a popular bawdy song, deliberately off-key:

*And the husband walked
Through the front door
Saw his wife and the tinker*

There on the floor...

"What 'dat?" One of the cloaked men asked his companions in an angry whisper.

"Id' be a damn fool drunken sod." another answered.

"Loud bugger."

"Ignore him." This from the last man again, and with authority, by the man nearest the porch, clearly the leader. "We've work to do."

A tall stork-like man with a trimmed beard stepped onto the porch, bathed in golden light from within. He looked young, in his early twenties, and was dressed in a tailored, but modestly so, suit of russet clothes. He sucked on a straight, cured-wood pipe, his eyes taking in the street. He caught sight of Kamran.

Kamran addressed the cloaked men and gestured expansively. "What, ho! The early revelers have retired to their beds, but men of good spirit carry on. Come with me to yonder inn - I'll buy the first round!" He patted his purse, letting the coins clink significantly.

"We done been made!" one of the men shrieked.

"Then do the job!" the leader snapped, his broadsword rasping from its scabbard. He lunged from the alley, a thick stubby finger pointing at the man - the startled man - on the porch. "Kill him!"

The other three men's swords rasped from their sheaths and the men surged forward, towards their target, as one.

Kamran, only fifteen feet away now, was positive. There were four of them. He dropped all pretense of drunkenness as his own sword cleared its scabbard. "Retire to the inn, neighbor! Help is near!"

The assassins' intended target stood shocked as the men rushed towards the inn's porch, blinking in shock. As the leader vaulted the porch rail and lunged forward with his sword, the young man with the pipe regained his senses, narrowly dodging the point of the killing blade.

"Your scheme has failed! Surrender, and justice will be tempered with mercy!" Fleet footed, Kamran reached the edge of the porch on the assassins' heels, driving his blade into the voluminous shroud of the nearest man. "Hello the inn! Robbers! Murderers! To arms!"

The man roared as the blade bit flesh, but it was not a lethal blow. Kamran could feel the partial deflection of the blade as it struck armor, but no grate of metal on metal. The wounded man spun, his face contorted in pained rage, his blade raised in a defensive posture, his free hand pressed into his side. "Our rear, you fools!"

The wounded man stepped forward taking a flurry of probative swings at Kamran. The man's onslaught came with more fury than skill, and with no finesse. His blows, while powerful, were easily cast turned by a more skilled warrior, and Kamran was the more skilled of the two, but two of the man's companions - one with a hair lip, the other with three fingers on his left hand - turned to face the newcomer.

Kamran took a few quick steps to put distance between himself and the wounded man before engaging the other two assassins. Assuming them to be of roughly equal fighting ability, he kept his guard up as they approached, snarling curses at him, then stepped away from one thrust as he

parried the other, then quickly turned the momentum of his blade and sliced across Hair Lip's forearm. It wasn't a deep wound, but it would slow the man's sword arm, making it easier to avoid.

Another quick sidestep to disengage and try to face Three Fingers alone.

A quick glance back; the first man seemed more interested in stemming the flow of blood from his side than pursuing Kamran, but Hair Lip was being persistent, trying to circle and hedge him in. The man spat and menaced with his blade.

Kamran looked back just in time: Three Fingers' sword was already whistling towards Kamran's midsection. He barely turned the blade, and his counter-stroke was off-balance and easily parried.

Kamran turned, keeping Three Fingers between him and Hair Lip. The turn brought the inn's entrance into view. No one was visible; but crashes and startled shrieks came from within. There was nothing Kamran could do about it right now; he needed all his concentration to keep steel from penetrating his unarmored flesh.

A second clash of blades and Kamran had figured out Three Finger's style - he was slow, too slow. As Three Fingers drew back for a decisive blow, Kamran's sword darted in, quick and low, slicing the unprotected flesh above the man's knee. His celebration was short-lived, however: still recovering from his stroke, Kamran was unable to parry, and Hair Lip lunged in, taking advantage of the opening. Kamran twisted away from the blade, but it raked along his ribs; a painful wound, but not incapacitating.

Even as Kamran gasped from his wound the first man he'd struck - his hand still clasped to his side - roared at his fellows' incompetence and lunged forward to enter the melee. A dark figure loomed up from the shadows of the alley behind him; a man's face, twisted in battle-passion, a hideous scar running through a ruined eye, flashed in the torchlight; a wicked looking hand axe sliced down through the night, cleaving the roaring man's head in two with a sickening, wet sounding whack.

There was no cry, only a spray of blood as the axe's already dead victim fell to his knees. For the briefest of instants there was a deathly pall. Hair Lip and Three Fingers glanced towards their fallen comrade in horror as the scar-faced warrior planted his boot in the dead man's back and wrenched his axe free, his countenance a horrible, blood spattered mask. The body fell into the dust at his feet.

"God above." Hair Lip said in an awed hush.

"Its Cyclops!" Three Fingers screamed. "Run!"

A man's scream of agony came from the inn; everything rushed back into frightful motion. Kamran took advantage of the men's momentary distraction with a two-handed, full-force swing, burying his blade deep in Three Fingers' neck. Jerking his blade free, he darted for the front of the inn, checking Hair Lip with his shoulder as he ran past, leaving the man to the dark newcomer.

Behind him, Hair Lip turned tail and ran, but he never stood a chance. The hand-axe whistled through the air and buried itself between his shoulder blades before he'd gone a dozen paces. He let out a startled cry like a wounded animal, lurched forward, and fell in the street.

Kamran burst through the still-open door of the Dragon's Rest. The common room was pandemonium. The body of a barmaid, no more than fourteen, was sprawled on her side at his feet, dead from a sword thrust to the abdomen. Several tables were overturned, and those few guests who had not retired for the night, or fled when the assassin had entered, were huddled in the corner by the hearth.

A barmaid, holding a small boy protectively, and Kamran's mother, Lady Hallen, who had seized the poker from the fire, standing above them, her face grim.

The assassin, a short, broad-shouldered man, with a powerful physique, paid Kamran's mother no mind. He stood over his prey, his bloody sword in hand, his brutal features lit with the ecstatic delight of a hunter finishing its kill. He spun the blade with a practiced flourish and raised it high, grasped in both hands, its blade pointed towards the bearded man on the floor, his suit of clothes were already stained with blood from a grievous wound.

The assassin's dark eyes met Kamran's, his lips curled into a wolfish grin, the point of the blade hovered in the air, ready to be thrust home...

Outside, Hair Lip clawed at the ground, desperately trying to escape, trying to reach the nearest building. The one eyed warrior's footfalls stopped beside him. A boot slammed into his back knocked the wind from him as the ax was yanked free. A pitiless instant later, he was dead.

Kamran pulled his dagger from its sheath and made an awkward, left-handed cast, hoping to distract the assassin long enough to bridge the distance between them. A heartbeat later he lunged across the room.

The assassin snapped his sword up, deflecting Kamran's oncoming dagger with a singing scrape of metal, the blade continuing in a fluid, deadly arc, retuning to its original position. As the blade dropped, Kamran turned his last step into a desperate leap, crashing heavily onto the floor, deflecting the blow from its intended target with a wild swing of his own sword, the blade slicing his own shoulder. A stinging, but inconsequential wound.

The assassin was forced to back peddle to avoid having his legs taken out from underneath him. The bearded man still lived, though he his life clung by a tenuous thread to its mortal container. The bell of the Town Chapel began to ring madly, its rope being pulled madly, sounding the alarm. Kamran rolled onto his side, facing an enemy he now knew to be far more skilled than the three in the street. He raised his blade defensively, bracing for an offensive flurry he did not expect to survive.

The assault did not come. The assassin, his perception uncanny, turned as Kamran's mother stepped behind him, swinging the iron poker with both hands. He caught the poker with a leather gauntleted hand and twisted it free, casting it aside. In the same motion he reversed his hand, clenched his fist, and dealt her a savage backhanded blow. She crashed into the wall and fell, unconscious, to the floor. He turned back as Kamran made a controlled lunge, his blade thrusting for the heart.

Nimble as a cat, the assassin bent backwards, falling into a three-limbed crouch, Kamran's blade narrowly missing its mark. Just as quickly the man sprung erect, his own blade locking Kamran's down and to the side. The two men heaved against one another, their faces inches apart, shifting minutely for leverage. Shouts of alarm were rising in the street, men could be heard closing on the inn, there were footfalls in the doorway. The assassin smiled his wolfish smile. A knee drove between Kamran's legs with such force that it nearly lifted him from the floor. In that agonizing instant the assassin snapped his forehead into Karman's, sending Kamran falling into darkness.

— [David Queenann](#) 2006/02/16 02:57

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