

# Hunting Trip

*Gamemaster's Comment: We've been doing a lot of character establishment and background work for the overall reaching plot. Its all been productive and necessary, but I was starting to feel like we'd gotten bogged down in the details. I wanted to drive the plot and up the stakes a bit, and to give both of us a chance to flex our writing muscles in terms of action scenes.*

*Reinhardt's Commentary: I think the fact that we have gotten this far and maintained a plausible "medieval" campaign only makes the encounters here seem intensely fantastic. I think we moved out of ACT I and solidly into ACT II with this scene. Furthermore, this scene would not have occurred in the same manner had Reinhardt not made the decision to send Kamran after the peasants with Garoth, instead of lead it himself. This really adds to the tension of what happened into the storyline. When we started the scene, I had no idea who this gal was, Dave did a great job of introducing this character, and as you read through the logs you will see what I mean.*

## 18 Helane 719, The Northern Krista Forrest

The Shem River Valley was alive with pure golds, vibrant reds, and rich browns. The crisp autumn chill foretold the coming of winter. The great white oaks and hickories shed their glory in wafting gold coins and floating motes of glowing fire that settled in a moist bed under the hooves of the hunting party's horses. Reinhardt's great dun charger snorted impatiently and stamped as he reigned it to a halt and surveyed the forest around him, looking for the great stag they had pursued for the past league. The beast was nowhere in sight and, as he sat back in his saddle, he realized they were now well in the northern reaches of the Krista forest.

He looked over at Dame Savra, suitably rakish in her suit of russet hunting clothes and narrow cap, who had pulled her noble white charger up short next to his own. She was ruddy in the brisk air and had an almost girlish joy on her face as she exulted in the outing. Sir Miles and Faranir were close behind her, as was his mother, Lady Candace, on her spry palfrey in Lincoln green. Anna, Lady Candace's maid, was no hand at sport and had returned to Caer Nurel in the morning, shortly after they had set out. Now it was late afternoon, and the change in the weather had led the hunters to dress warmly, with gloves, scarves, and cloaks worn by all. It was apparent they had lost the chase.

Reinhardt shook his head and pulled a leather bound flask of the apple brandy Elsbeth had sent from his tunic, passing it to Dame Savra, who accepted it wordlessly and unscrewed the cap, taking a hard pull before wiping the rim with the side of her glove and passing it back. She coughed once, covering her mouth, and chuckled. Reinhardt took a drink himself, appreciating the burn of the red-gold liquid in his chest, and passed it to Sir Miles, who muttered his thanks and said, not without good humor: "I take it we've lost our dinner."

Reinhardt nodded. Were Garoth here they would have already had the beast's trail, but none of those present had the woodsman's skills, and it was unlikely they would find the stag again. And now, in the late afternoon, they were running out of light. It was no matter: he had told Dooley to catch some rabbits that morning, and a fine stew would be simmering at the Rectory, awaiting their return. Still, it had been a magnificent beast. The flask was offered to Faranir, who declined, and then to Lady Candace, who accepted it with regal gravitas.

Perhaps they would have another go at a stag when Garoth returned, Reinhardt thought. For now, they would have to do without him. Reinhardt had taken his mother's advice and sent the woodsman, along with the brothers Baffel and the men-at-arms Yadd and Lonn, on an expedition led by Kamran,

to raid the Orbaalese slaver caravans that would be departing for Coranon from Tashal for peasants. It was a bold move, and one fraught with risks, but he needed more peasants desperately, and if Kamran could pull it off – and convince the liberated slaves to come – then the risks were beside the point. He did not doubt the young gentle's motivation. He had tied a knighthood to success. And with Garoth keeping a shrewd eye on things, he had little doubt they would be met with success.

"What a delightful chase," Lady Candace said, passing the flask back to Reinhardt. "But have we not strayed rather far?"

"We have," Reinhardt confirmed, swishing the remnants of the flask's contents with an arch look before putting it back. He felt a pang of hunger and was about to suggest they return and partake of their dinner when he caught sight of a slender woman in a black cloak trimmed in red astride a pale, dappled horse just within the trees on the edge of the glen, not a hundred feet distant. She and her horse were deathly still amidst the falling leaves, and her face was a ghostly white, almost luminescent in the shadows of her hood. There was a sudden gust of wind and the horses began to stamp their feet, disturbed. There was something unnatural in the air. Then there was a tremor, followed by another. It was then that the branches to the left of the woman cracked and broke inward, revealing the tremor's source.

It was an insane mix of man and beast. Two men tall, it had the legs and tail of a goat, the torso of a man, and the head of a ram. It was covered in a thick layer of grotesque muscle and mottled fur, and wore nothing more than a loincloth. It bore a great club in its hands. And it was not alone. It came with three of its ilk, who lingered near the woman on the steed. She stroked one of their snouts in strange gesture of unholy intimacy and looked back at the hunting party. He shook himself free of his surprise as he heard Dame Savra exclaim: "Dear Lord above – Nephalliim!"

To assert that Reinhardt was not bewildered would be a false statement; he was. Legends of the Nephalliim, the soulless, monstrous offspring of one of the fallen prince's of heaven and a human concubine – the brood witch – were known by every child, and dismissed as superstitious mummary by almost every adult. That mummary confronted him now. Nevertheless, his training and combat experience now served him well. He immediately quashed his own fear and put his mind to the situation. He took a moment to scan the tree line around the glen, to see if these beasts were part of an encircling force. Convinced that they were not being surrounded, he tried to remain as calm as possible. It was clear that this Blood-Witch, if these were indeed the legendary Nephalliim, was – for the moment – not hostile, for her minions were not yet charging toward his party. They had to act quickly, before she did, to keep her guessing.

"Faranir," said Reinhardt calmly. "You will escort Lady Candace back to Caer Nurel. When I move forward you two will canter to the tree line at our rear and then break at your best speed for home. Raise the alarm." He took a breath. "Dame Savra and Sir Miles, with me." He nudged his horse in the ribs and it steadily stepped forward. He felt the other two knights close in on his left and right respectively. The sound of his mother and Faranir retreating also met his ears. He hoped this woman was open to parlay, and words only would be exchanged. He did not like the odds facing him. In reality, combat was not an option; these things clearly outmatched them, not to mention this witch may have unknown supernatural ability. Clearly though, the question of whether or not the old legends were true had been answered for those present.

A cruel smile crossed the Brood Witch's face – a face that would have been beautiful were it not for the malice it bore – and Reinhardt thought he saw pronounced canines between blood red lips. She gestured towards the approaching knights with a dismissive flick of her wrist and the closest of the beasts to her turned and roared from deep within its chest, its muscles tensing, its hands balled into

shaking fists, its hooves shaking the ground. It was a deafening, unholy sound, and Reinhardt's charger, Keystone, never a shy mount, snorted in concern, though it did not break its stride. The beast's companions joined its terrifying roar and then one of them stamped forward, smacking the haft of its great club – an uprooted sapling from the looks of it – in the palm of its hand. The others began to fan out in a line with it, the menace of impending violence filling the air. The blood-witch nudged her mount and pulled on the reins, disappearing into the trees.

Dame Savra unsheathed her battle sword and held it aloft, calling out: "She must not escape – the woman is the key. Even now more of them grow in her womb. If she escapes she will spawn another unholy brood!"

Sir Miles, however, sidestepped his mount to hers and, seizing the reins to keep her from charging forward, said emphatically, "With respect, Lady – Nay! We are outnumbered and without proper arms. And we know these woods not," He looked directly at Reinhardt who had looked back at them and, wisely letting go of Dame Savra's reins at the same time, said: "Milord, I submit to you that we \*must\* withdraw to the village where we can properly arm ourselves and call the men to arms."

Reinhardt looked at Dame Savra, her eyes were alight with adrenaline and fixed on the enemy. "If we die here, there will be nobody to defend the children at the village; all of my men are away," said Reinhardt forcibly toward her ear. "Sevra!" he barked, and she snapped her head around, her mind clearly bent on combat. Reinhardt looked her dead in the eyes, "We withdraw. Noses and Tails. On me!" It was cavalry slang from the war, but they had never trained together, so Reinhardt felt they would understand this way. Noses and Tails referred to a formation in which they rode in a strait line one rider behind the other. This was a good formation for attacking a single target, for it allowed each rider pass in turn and make his attack. Reinhardt was not attacking per se, but there was not time to turn at a dead stop and the start to run before the beasts would be on them. He broken forward angling, so that they would pass close to one of the beasts, but his body would block the others. Sir Miles, fell in step behind him, with Dame Savra immediately behind. Reinhardt pulled his sword from his horses left side and brought it up overhead and down as he passed the closest beast. However, his target was not the beast itself, but its massive club. He hoped to at least skew the incoming sapling. Perhaps the following riders would strike a blow for the creature to remember them by. There was a crack and a ring as his sword went flying end over end into the field, the strength and power behind the club was incredible. What save Reinhardt's life was the fact that he had managed to deflect just enough of the club's arc that he did not take the full force of the blow; it glanced off his shoulder. Nevertheless, he was forced back to the point that he was nearly laying with his head on his horses rump. It was worse than any charge of lance that he had taken in any joust. The fact that he wore little armor did not help the matter. He dug his knees and boots into his horse with all the strength he could muster. His head swirled for a moment as the pain in his shoulder struck. His horse kept running.

Sir Miles, ducking below the beasts swinging fist as he passed, lashed out with his sword, giving a stinging cut with the tip across the beast's ribs and spurred his horse to follow Reinhardt who had regained control of his mount and had now turned his horse and begun the race back to Caer Nurel. Dame Savra, taking advantage of the beast's recoiling from Sir Mile's blow, drove her blade deep into the creature's side, and wrenching it free as the beast tried to dance away, screaming in fury, pressed her mount forward and struck again, her blade sinking deep into the beast's lower back where the kidney's should be. Spurring her horse forward she narrowly ducked under the beast's berserk onslaught of swinging fists. Ducking a swing from a second beast's club she turned her horse in mid stride and spurred her horse for Sir Reinhardt and Sir Miles, who had reached the edge of the clearing at a full gallop.

Later at Caer Nurel...

They reached Caer Nurel just as the sun fell in the East, the horses flagging and glistening from the exertion, two leagues being pushed to their limits, though most of it had been on the Shem River Road. Reinhardt's dun charger, Keystone, and Dame Savra's white stallion, Ghost, had outpaced the others, who had fallen behind almost a league before. Yet the others had fine mounts, and Reinhardt was confident they would outpace their pursuers and arrive safely shortly after full dark. He called out to the villagers in the cottages to gather at the Church as Keystone charged, hooves thundering, through the north hamlet. He pulled the reins reaching the open gate and slowing to a canter, entered the churchyard, catching sight of Bvarlan holding the reins of his midnight black warhorse, bathed in the golden light that spilled from around Mareth in the doorway.

The one eyed warrior looked up at Reinhardt as he approached and slid from his mount before him, and said, his expression grave: "Milord, I departed Tashal in haste and rode straight through only stopping to change horses..." But catching sight of Reinhardt's heaving mount and the expression on his face he fell silent, his look growing even darker. His unspoken question: "what is afoot," hung in the air. Dame Savra, just behind Reinhardt, all but leapt from Ghost's back, letting the noble steed trot free in the yard, and sprinted for the church, vaulting the steps as she reached it.

Reinhardt heaved a breath and returned Bvarlan's grim expression: "Providence has returned you early for certain. We met four Nephallim and their Blood Witch while hunting the Northern Krista. As God is my witness, it is true. There was a skirmish, only so that we could withdraw. We made all haste here to raise the alarm." As he finished speaking church bell began to ring, sounding an urgent, tumultuous alarm. He added: "Garoth, Kamran, and our other battle-seasoned men are away."

"Lord preserve these innocents," Bvarlan said with understanding, touching his knuckle to his forehead and heart. "Things are worse than I thought."

They could already see village men emerging from their homes in the last of the day's failing light, with Dooley sprinting in the lead beside Ian Fahy in his cart pushed by Red Will puffing earnestly behind. As the first of the men approached Reinhardt said: "Dooley, grab some men and bring as much food and water into the church as you can manage. Fahy, we need the women and children gathered in the church - send a party of men to handle it." He saw Dame Savra emerge from the Church, someone else having taken over the ringing, and called out: "Lady, if you will, take Sir Mile's recruits to the smithy and bring the arms from Garderin - especially the crossbows - to the church to prepare for its defense. Men!" he announced in a loud voice intended for all as he turned towards the rectory door. "See to your duty! Bvarlan, you're with me."

Reinhardt ducked into the rectory with Bvarlan on his heels and nodded to Mareth, who gave a perfunctory curtsy and motioned to the table where she had laid out a loaf of bread, a round of cheese, and a flagon of ale. She was ladling steaming rabbit stew into wooden bowls and said matter-of-factly: "You'll need your strength, good lords."

Realizing he was famished as the hearty aroma of the stew hit his nostrils Reinhardt took a seat and gave Bvarlan a complete recap of the encounter with the Blood Witch and the current status of Kamran and the rest of the village's currently unavailable militia. Between bites, he donned his armor and grabbed his shield. Unfortunately, his sword was still back in the glen, probably broken - again. It was no great loss: it never felt balanced, anyway. He would have to make do with one of the weapons Faranir had brought from Gardiren. He could now hear the frantic noise of people in motion outside.

Bvarlan was about to speak when one of the recruits, an ugly, pocked face dwarf of a man with obscenely wide shoulders named Anon Shaddog poked his head through the door and said: "I was told you need a sword sir." He was about to enter when Mareth intercepted him and took the blade

before shutting him out. She brought the battle-sword, sturdy but otherwise unworthy of comment, to Reinhardt and withdrew to her pot as Bvarlan cleared his throat and broke the silence. "Milord," he said. "I know we have little time, but what I learned in Tashal may be pertinent. I was only in the Royal Seat for three days, but I learned a great deal. I left the matter of the guildsmen hanging, though the broadsheets were posted in the House of the Mangai. Someone will have to return to deal with that matter as I left in haste having no time to speak to anyone. That aside, I believe I understand how this Master Olin plays into our affairs here. He is a Master in the Miner's Guild, though not one who is respected for his craft. I suspect he purchased his ascent rather than toiled for it." Bvarlan settled himself and cleared his throat; His voice was even, but there was something forbidding in his tone. "I applied some pressure and determined he runs bag for a Consortium of Guildsmen rumored to be involved with the Lia-Kavir both in Tashal and Coranon. I don't know the extent of it, but from the surface I scratched it would seem they have their hands in a lot of pots..."

Dame Savra could be heard outside, yelling shrilly at the recruits and organizing the men, and Reinhardt's eyes flicked impatiently to the door. He looked over at Mareth busy at the stove. "Mareth, grab what you can and see your children into the church." His gaze returned to Bvarlan as the warrior continued: "Another moment, milord, please bear with me. Most of these Guildsmen and merchants are from Tharda, and most of them Hlean though some are from the Dark Cults - but through this Olin they have dealings with some of the senior Mangai and the high-muckety-mucks in the Bernan Circle. It's said the Bernan Circle has a 'High Council,' that meets in secret and performs 'rituals,' but that could just be a cover for the licentious behavior that goes on at the parties. Still, with the connection to these Hlean merchants I feel some hard questions need to be asked. I haven't learned who, exactly, but I do know your uncle, Baron Ethasial, and Cheselyne the Younger, are counted among them."

Reinhardt could hear horses entering the churchyard and Sir Miles' voice above the din, shouting orders, screaming the enemy was but a half-league - perhaps ten minutes - away. Reinhardt began to rise, saying "This is all very interesting Bvarlan..."

"Milord," Bvarlan said. "Among this consortium of merchants was a woman they call the Black Rose. She's not a Merchant at all. She's a Morgathian Priestess, a member of The Namana-Khidur - The Black Orb - their Pontiff's advisory council, and from all reports has the cruelest of hearts. These people are feared even by their fellow Morgathians. The men I talked to - hard men of the worst sort - went pale at her mention. A terror I have rarely seen." Bvarlan paused, his gaze firmly seizing Reinhardt's. "Her description matches that of Kural's whore. She's not his whore at all. She's a sorceress who practices the blackest arts, and I suspect she was the eighth miner from the expedition Garoth could not account for at the mine. Why else would the keep have remained so quiet with such a woman inside? There is something about this mine we don't know and need to find out. And more, I submit to you that she may well be your Brood Witch."

The realization set in, perhaps all of Tashal was being infiltrated by this secret evil- a slow poison to destroy all that was good and replace it with sinister evil. If what Bvarlan had discovered was true, then any in league with this group would be the enemies of everything Reinhardt stood for, and the represented a grave and present danger to the future of Tashal. This group was probably positioning itself for a power grab when the King died with civil war itself if the wrong monarch ascended the throne. Kural was perhaps a significant piece in their plot, and Reinhardt had interrupted the dark plan. That someone as important as the Black Rose was here only strengthened his reasoning.

Bvarlan was indeed correct, there was something in that mine more than wealth that the dark forces were keen to obtain or control. Now Reinhardt wanted to know if Elsbeth was hiding something back from him. Perhaps she and her father knew more about the mine than she let on. Sapphires were a great cover story, but a simple gemstone mine would have been opened, droits of the crown aside, it

would have made House Curo significantly more wealth over the past decade. As to the issue of Reinhardt choosing political sides, it had already been decided; he was now at war with these dark forces. The first overt battle of the fate of Tashal would be fought here, tonight.

It was in that moment that the door opened and Lady Candace entered with Faranir, ducking in the doorway, one step behind. She stopped, regarding Bvarlan with a moment's surprised recognition, and tucking the expression away said: "Reinhardt, the beasts were a league behind us, perhaps less. They will be upon us in but a few minutes..." Even as she spoke the horn of one of the men on the northern outskirts of the village began to bleat its warning. Reinhardt wanted to punch himself for not assaulting the Keep and taking it. His fear of high casualties would have been miniscule to what these beasts would cause if they got loose amongst the villagers. Moreover, had they had the keep they would have had a sturdy refuge. Instead they had to rely upon the burnt out church, with most of its roof gone.

The church – Reinhardt wandered if perhaps there was something Dame Savra and his mother might be able to conjure there. Obviously, the dark supernatural existed, therefore, so must the good supernatural. He looked at his mother, "Milady, I implore you to go to the church and seek out Dame Savra, perhaps there is something the two of you with your collected knowledge of church lore can institute to protect these people. There must be some ritual or chant of holiness to battle this ungodliness with. In the meanwhile, we warriors will try to at least even the odds."

"My son," Lady Candace said firmly. "For all the scholarship in the world, neither Dame Savra or myself know anything of the Workings of the Divine Chariot." Her eyes flicked to Bvarlan and rested on the man. "Even among the Church father's there are few who have attained such a lofty plateau that they have license from Heaven to grasp the Scepter of God."

There was an uncomfortable silence in the Rectory as a wordless contest played out between Lady Candace and Bvarlan. It's ended when she spoke, her voice a hoarse whisper. "You must."

Bvarlan nodded, his one eye closing with pain, his face setting in a mask of resignation. "God forgive me," the warrior said with palpable sadness, opening his eye and looking to Reinhardt. "It never should have gone this far. I will join you in the churchyard. I must have a moment's solitude to prepare."

Reinhardt sheathed the sword in his empty scabbard as Bvarlan scooped up his bag and disappeared into the bedroom. He moved to the corner of the Rectory where some of his personal stores were being kept. He hefted up a barrel of spirits sent by Elsbeth. "Quickly Faranir, we will need all of these barrels and the spices there at the stove."

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