

1. Southward Bound

The wind, sighing off the vast, restless expanse of the Inland Sea, carried a fading tang of salt and distance, a memory already receding northward with every league the tireless hopper bore them south. Behind them, the hazy blue shimmer of the great freshwater ocean dissolved into the curve of the earth; ahead lay the unknown continent, the fractured kingdom of D'alwah, and the culmination of a mission twisted into unforeseen, perilous shapes. Segi, the giant mutated marsupial, covered the ground in great, space-eating bounds, his powerful hind legs thudding rhythmically on the dry coastal turf, the high-cantled saddle rocking gently between his massive shoulders.

Days ago, on that same shore where desperate battle had been joined and a strange alliance forged, they had parted ways. Brother Aldo, the ancient Elevener sage, his wisdom a deep, comforting pool, had turned his dark face north. With him went Captain Gimp, the squat, profane, yet utterly reliable freshwater mariner, and his polyglot crew, their salvaged Metz steamship laden with hope and the potential key to survival – the three volumes detailing the Principles of a Basic Computer. Gorm, too, the young bear whose mind held the cool depths of forest pools and the nascent strength of mountains, had gone with them, a furry ambassador carrying word of the unfolding crisis back to the hidden Wise Ones of his own secretive folk. And Klootz... Hiero's heart gave a familiar pang. Klootz, the great morse, his brother since childhood, had also vanished into the northern territories, dispatched by Aldo on some vital errand Hiero could only guess at, carrying the precious books towards the distant Abbeys of the Kandan Confederacy. The separation felt like a physical wound, a missing limb.

Now, only two riders shared the hopper's broad back. Hiero sat behind Luchare, his arms loosely encircling her waist, the familiar weight of his weapons – the ancient sword-knife heavy across his shoulders, the long poniard snug at his belt, the crossbow resting before him – a scant comfort against the gnawing uncertainty that chewed at the edges of his thoughts. His mental powers, the core of his identity as Killman and Priest, felt... different. Alien. The encounter with Solitaire, the ancient, godlike entity dwelling in its hidden lake, had been transformative, restorative, yet altering. The Unclean drug, Joseato's poison, had wrought damage perhaps irreparable; the sharp, deadly edge of offensive mental compulsion, the power to seize and command another's will, was gone, blunted beyond recovery. Yet, in its place, something else stirred. His receptive senses – the silent reach of telepathy, the subtle currents of empathy, the low, thrumming awareness of the life force flowing through the world around him – seemed heightened, amplified, sometimes almost painfully acute. He felt the pulse of the land, the fear of the hunted, the hunger of the hunter, with a clarity that was both exhilarating and deeply unsettling. Solitaire had returned much, but the gift came with a new, unfamiliar weight. It was a trade he hadn't asked for, a balance shifted, a power redefined. He must learn its contours, master its strange demands.

Before him, Luchare, princess of D'alwah, rode easily, her lithe form swaying with Segi's powerful bounds, her dark curls a fragrant cloud just beneath his chin. She carried herself with a new, quiet authority, the fire of recent battle and the ice of impending crisis having forged steel in her spirit.

The flight from D'alwah City, the desperate stand against Amibale's Unclean-backed rebellion, the loss and uncertainty – these had tempered her, stripped away the last vestiges of pampered royalty, revealing the warrior queen beneath. Her own nascent mental abilities, nurtured by Hiero's patient, often frustrating instruction during their long journey south, flickered like candle flames against the vast backdrop of the world's thought – fragile, perhaps, but steady, and undeniably growing. She was no longer the rescued damsel, but a partner, an equal in the struggle ahead.

Their immediate goal was D'alwah itself, or what remained of it loyal to her father, King Danyale IX. Aldo's parting message, delivered mentally with the calm, unshakeable assurance of the Eleveners, had been stark, painting a grim picture of a kingdom tearing itself apart. Civil war raged. Danyale, though alive, was wounded, his hold on power precarious. Duke Amibale, Luchare's own cousin, handsome, charismatic, utterly mad, had vanished during the fall of D'alwah, only to reappear openly at the head of the rebellion, his sanity consumed by Unclean influence. And Joseato, the seemingly harmless priest-bureaucrat, had also shed his disguise, revealed as a cunning Unclean adept, manipulating events from the shadows. Hiero had faced them both, felt the chill of their perverted power, the icy touch of minds allied with the ancient darkness. The kingdom was fractured, splintered, the Unclean deeply enmeshed in its affairs, pulling strings, fanning flames.

The landscape itself reflected the transition. The sparse coastal scrub, tough and salt-resistant, gradually gave way to denser, more varied woodlands. Patches of hardy grasses appeared, then low, thorny bushes, then taller trees Hiero couldn't name, their foliage thicker, stranger than the familiar pines and maples of the northern Taig. The air grew warmer, damper, losing the clean bite of the sea, becoming thick with the complex, layered scents of the southern forests – rich loam, decaying vegetation, the heavy perfume of unseen blossoms, and an underlying musk of teeming, alien life. Overhead, unfamiliar birds wheeled and cried, their calls sharper, more discordant than the familiar sounds of the north. This was a different world, ancient and vital, yet carrying its own shadows, its own perils.

"We move too slowly," Luchare's thought touched his, a clear, sharp signal cutting through his reflections. The intimacy of the mental contact was still new, something they used sparingly, conscious of potential listeners even in this seeming emptiness. "The kingdom bleeds while we crawl. My father..." Her anxiety was a tangible wave.

"He lives," Hiero sent back, shaping the thought carefully, filtering out his own deeper concerns, his mental voice still feeling rougher, less fluid than it once was. The restoration was incomplete, the pathways re-mapped but not fully smoothed. "Aldo was certain. Mitrash watches him. The palace guard remains loyal, for the most part. Danyale endures." He projected calm, reassurance, though his own heart felt heavy with foreboding.

They fell silent again, the shared thought dissolving, leaving only the rhythm of their passage. The thud of Segi's great hind legs on the turf, the soft creak and sigh of the leather saddle and harness, the whisper of the wind through the increasingly dense foliage. They were moving deeper inland now, leaving the coast behind, entering the true southern forest. Trees Hiero vaguely recognized from his disastrous previous journey towered overhead, draped in thick, cable-like vines and cloaked in layers of parasitic growths, their massive trunks forming the pillars of a vast, green cathedral.

Danger was a constant companion, an unseen presence shadowing their path. Twice they were forced to make wide detours, skirting the edges of vast herds of Poros, the four-tusked, elephantine herbivores whose sheer, blundering size and unpredictable tempers made them perilous obstacles. The ground trembled under their passage, the air filled with their deep, rumbling calls. Hiero watched them from a distance, marveling at their bulk, remembering the terror of the one that had charged their campfire weeks ago, its ruby eyes burning with primal rage.

Once, as dusk painted the sky in bruised purples and oranges, a pack of striped, saber-fanged cats, larger, leaner, more menacing than any northern wolf, materialized from the deepening shadows. They flowed around the travelers, silent as ghosts, yellow eyes burning with cold appraisal in the gloom. Hiero felt Segi tense beneath them, gathering his powerful legs for a desperate leap. He himself drew his sword-knife, its familiar weight reassuring in his hand, while Luchare silently nocked a quarrel to her crossbow. He met the gaze of the lead cat, a great scarred male, projecting not hostility, but a cold, unwavering determination, a warning. For a long moment, predator and prey measured each other. Then, as silently as they had appeared, the cats melted back into the forest, conceding the path, unwilling perhaps to test the mettle of the strange, two-headed creature astride the giant hopper. Hiero let out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding, the sweat suddenly cold on his skin.

And always, beneath the surface threats, there was the awareness of the true enemy. The Unclean. S'lorn, the Green Master, S'duna of the Blue, S'tarn of the Red – though S'duna was presumed dead, slain by the great bears, Hiero harbored no illusions. The Brotherhood was vast, its resources deep, its malice infinite. They would be hunting him, using every resource, every Leemute tracker, every foul alliance gleaned over centuries of hidden manipulation. The shields provided by the Abbeys, adapted by Aldo for their southern allies, offered protection against casual mental sweeps, but Hiero knew they would not deter a determined, high-level probe for long. He kept his own mental signature damped, shielded, a constant, wearying effort.

On the fifth day south, as they traversed a belt of drier woodland where tall, broad-leafed trees replaced the jungle giants, they came upon signs of recent passage. The evidence was stark, brutal, unmistakable. The tracks of many kaws, the heavy imprint of shod human feet, and mingled with them, the splayed, clawed spoor of Hairy Howlers. A large Unclean patrol, heavily laden with Leemute muscle, heading north, away from D'alwah. The tracks were no more than a day old.

Luchare reined Segi in, her hand automatically resting on the hilt of the bone-handled dagger Hiero had given her, a relic taken from the Unclean adept near Solitaire's lake. "They seek us still," she murmured aloud, her voice tight.

Hiero dismounted, examining the tracks closely, his woodsman's eye missing nothing. "Or Aldo," he replied grimly, straightening up. "They know something vital, something precious, travels north from D'alwah. Books, knowledge... Gorm, Aldo himself. They won't find him, not easily. Aldo knows these lands better than they guess, and Gorm... Gorm has his own paths, paths hidden even from the Unclean." He swung back into the saddle behind Luchare, urging Segi forward once more, southwest, deeper into the vast, unmapped territory. "But we must be cautious. Very cautious. This close to D'alwah, their agents, their spies, will be numerous. We walk among thorns."

He settled himself, his senses reaching out, probing the path ahead, the weight of their mission, the fate of kingdoms, resting heavily upon his scarred, travel-weary shoulders. The southward journey had truly begun.

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