

10. Musterings in the North

The chamber was high and narrow, walled with unadorned, grey stone that seemed to absorb the light from the single, shielded lantern hanging from a soot-blackened chain overhead. It was Abbot Kulase Demero's private council room, a place few outside the highest echelons of the Abbey hierarchy ever saw, a space stripped bare of comfort, dedicated solely to the grim calculus of survival. The weight of five thousand years of precarious civilization, clinging stubbornly to life in the vast, mutated wilderness of Kanda, seemed to press down from the vaulted ceiling, a palpable presence in the cool, still air.

Demero, Supreme Abbot of the Metz Republic, Hierarch, First Gonfalonier of the Kandan Universal Church, and reluctant General-in-Chief of its armies, sat hunched over the heavy oak table, his lean, copper-hued face a mask of weary concentration. Maps lay spread before him – Abbey survey charts meticulously updated over generations, strange, alien schematics recovered from the Unclean adept S'nerg, Fuala's cryptic star-charts copied onto reed paper by Hiero – a confusing palimpsest of known territories, hostile incursions, and vast, terrifying blanks. His dark eyes, usually sharp and piercing, were shadowed by lack of sleep, the skin stretched taut over high cheekbones. He slept little these days, the burdens of command, the anxieties of a two-front war against enemies both known and unimagined, allowing only fleeting, dream-haunted respite.

His temper, never placid, frayed easily now. He found himself snapping at trusted subordinates, his patience worn thin by the endless demands, the constant stream of reports – filtered intelligence from Mitrash's Elevener network operating deep within D'alwah's fractured society, curt dispatches from Frontier Guard commanders like Saclare and Lejus holding precarious lines along the southern shores of the Inland Sea, anxious queries from Otwah League allies struggling to mobilize their own levies against the ever-present Unclean threat within their borders. He missed Brother Aldo's calm, pragmatic wisdom more than ever, the old Elevener's presence a steadying influence now urgently needed elsewhere, guiding the precious, fragile vessel of Per Sagenay and the knowledge he carried towards the North.

And Hiero... Demero sighed, rubbing his tired eyes. Hiero Destein. His former pupil, the skilled Killman, the reluctant priest, the improbable prince-consort, now the linchpin of the entire Southern Front. A responsibility too immense for any one man, let alone one so young, so recently stripped of his most formidable powers. Demero trusted Hiero's courage, his resilience, his innate tactical sense. But the boy was isolated, facing enemies and forces beyond any previous Abbey experience. The reports filtering north spoke of successful raids, of growing loyalist resistance, but also of strange new Leemute forms, of unsettling psychic phenomena near the Blight lands, of the Unclean seemingly collaborating with something older, more alien. The weight on Hiero must be immense.

Demero's current frustration, however, stemmed from a different source, a communication barrier as profound as any static-filled transmission. Before him, crouched patiently, yet somehow radiating an aura of immense, contained power, was Charoo, chief engineer – the human title felt

ludicrously inadequate – of the Dam People. The great creature, easily surpassing Hiero's Klootz in sheer bulk, filled the space near the hearth, his dark, rippling fur absorbing the lantern light, his blunt, chisel-toothed head resting low between massive shoulders. The small ears were laid back tight against the long skull, the bright, obsidian-bead eyes fixed unwaveringly on Demero. The air was thick with the heavy, pungent musk of castor, a scent now inextricably linked in Demero's mind with the baffling, often frustrating, intricacies of interspecies diplomacy.

For the third time that session, Demero marshaled his thoughts, projecting them with focused clarity towards the alien mind before him. Charoo, friend. The Council values the Dam People's aid. Your skills built the channels that brought our fleet south. Your strength helped defend Namcush. But the larger war now demands more. The Unclean threaten all, human and Dam Person alike. We need your warriors, your engineers, not just defending your home lodges, but mobile, integrated with our forces. We must strike together, pool our strengths. He sent supporting images – the Abbey steamships battling Unclean vessels, Frontier Guardsmen fighting Howlers, the shared threat, the need for unified action.

Charoo shifted his immense bulk, the movement surprisingly fluid for his size. The musk intensified. His clawed hands, incongruously delicate, wove intricate, fleeting patterns in the air. The mental response, when it came, was a cascade of images and feelings, symbolic, indirect, maddeningly ambiguous. Demero caught fragments: the deep, cold safety of the underwater lodge, the intricate structure of Dam People society – families, lodges, councils – the profound, almost religious attachment to specific territories, the remembered terror of Unclean raids violating their ancestral waters... then, again, the barrier, the polite but firm refusal. Cannot leave. Must guard HERE. Water... lodge... young ones... negative danger elsewhere... primary threat HERE. Followed by an image of Hiero, strangely clear, and a feeling of... respect? Curiosity? Two-Legs... understands... speaks beaver...

Demero leaned back, suppressing a sigh. It was useless. Charoo, though clearly intelligent, perhaps even possessing a form of wisdom alien to human understanding, was bound by traditions, instincts, priorities Demero could only guess at. Their world was the water, their society centered on the lodge, their concerns intensely local. The larger, abstract concepts of continental warfare, strategic alliances, existential threats to life itself – these seemed to hold little resonance. They would defend their own territory, yes, fiercely and effectively, as reports from Namcush attested. But venturing forth, joining a human war for human reasons... that seemed beyond their current comprehension, or perhaps, beyond Charoo's authority to command. He needed Hiero. Only Hiero seemed to possess the key to unlock this particular communication barrier.

As if summoned by the Abbot's own frustrated thought, the chamber door opened, admitting the man himself. Hiero Desteen stood framed there, taller, leaner than Demero remembered, the southern sun having burned away any trace of northern softness. He was travel-stained, yes, the familiar leather breeches and shirt scuffed and worn, but he moved with a quiet confidence, an authority that sat easily upon him now. The haunted look Demero had noted after his escape from Manoon was gone, replaced by a steady, assessing gaze. The loss of his primary mental powers hadn't broken him; it seemed, paradoxically, to have forged him anew, stripping away reliance on the esoteric, forcing a deeper engagement with the world through physical senses and a nascent, unsettling empathy.

“Hiero!” Demero felt a surge of genuine relief, rising to greet the younger man, grasping his arm firmly. “By the Saints, boy, it’s good to see you back in the North! Your timing is... impeccable. I find myself... linguistically challenged.” He gestured towards the impassive bulk of Charoo.

Hiero grinned, the flash of white teeth startling in his sun-darkened face. He turned to the great beaver, dropping easily into the complex interplay of hand gestures, subtle mental probes, and resonant, chirruping sounds that constituted ‘beaver-speak’. Charoo responded instantly, his whole massive frame seeming to come alive, his eyes bright with interest, his hands weaving counter-patterns, his musky scent intensifying with shifting emotional nuances. Demero watched, fascinated and humbled, feeling like an eavesdropper on a conversation conducted in a language just beyond his grasp. He caught fragments – references to Hiero’s southern journey, the Gaeen entity, the computer, the threat to D’alwah, the mustering of Unclean forces – but the deeper context, the flow of understanding between man and beaver, remained elusive.

The exchange lasted perhaps ten minutes, intense, focused. Then, with a final chirrup and a brief touch of claws to Hiero’s hand, Charoo rose, bowed his massive head once to Demero, and scuttled silently from the chamber, leaving behind only the lingering scent of castor and a profound sense of bewildered respect in the Abbot’s mind.

Hiero turned back to Demero, a thoughtful expression on his face. “Well, Reverend Sir, it’s... complicated. Charoo understands the threat, intellectually. But his people’s primary loyalty is to their specific lodge, their territory. Mobilizing them for offensive action outside their waters requires a full Council decision, and that Council convenes only under specific, traditional circumstances, often tied to seasonal changes or direct, overwhelming threats to multiple lodges.”

“So,” Demero sighed, “more delay. More uncertainty.”

“Not entirely,” Hiero countered. “Charoo himself is convinced. He carries considerable weight. He believes he can persuade the Council, especially given my... unique status as one who ‘speaks beaver’. He proposes a compromise. They will vastly increase their patrols along the rivers connecting their lakes to the Inland Sea. They will establish hidden watch posts. They will provide intelligence on any Unclean movement through the waterways – a critical factor, as we know the Unclean often use rivers for swift troop transport. And,” Hiero paused, a faint smile touching his lips, “they offer a contingent of their younger males, the ‘unsettled ones’ who haven’t yet established their own lodges, to serve directly with our forces as engineers and, potentially, shock troops in amphibious assaults. Charoo calls them... ‘volunteers’.”

Demero considered this. It was far less than he’d hoped for, yet far more than he’d expected after his own frustrating attempts. Intelligence, engineering support, even a small contingent of beaver shock troops whose strength and aquatic prowess were legendary... it was a significant gain. “Hiero,” he said slowly, “you possess talents far beyond those taught in any Abbey school. First the catfolk, now the Dam People... you seem to weave alliances from the very air.”

Hiero shrugged, uncomfortable with the praise. “Circumstance, Father. And perhaps... understanding that not all intelligence speaks human.” He changed the subject abruptly. “But this news from the South, Father Abbot... Aldo’s message implied... urgency. Tell me.”

Demero's face grew grave again. He recounted the Elevener's filtered report – the civil war, Danyale wounded, Amibale and Joseato's treachery confirmed, Luchare's desperate resistance, and Hiero's own disappearance, now blessedly resolved. "Aldo feared the worst, Hiero. He left immediately after sending the message, heading south himself, taking Gorm, hoping to find some trace of you, rally resistance, perhaps."

"Aldo is south? Alone?" Hiero felt a surge of alarm. "He must be warned! S'duna knows of his involvement now! The Unclean will be hunting him specifically!"

"He knows the risks, boy," Demero said heavily. "As do we all. He travels under Elevener protection, using paths unknown even to the Mantans. But yes, the danger is great." He met Hiero's gaze directly. "Which brings us back to S'duna. Gorm's intelligence confirms his westward march. His objective is clear: crush our nascent fleet at Namcush, destroy our main army before the Otawah levies arrive, break the back of the Confederacy in one decisive campaign."

"Then we must meet him before he reaches the sea," Hiero stated, his mind already leaping ahead, assessing terrain, calculating timetables. "Not head-on. Not yet. But we must delay him, bleed him, force him to turn and face us here, in the Taig, where our knowledge of the land gives us advantage, where his heavy siege engines are useless, where his Leemute hordes can be countered by... other forces." He thought of the Catfolk, of the potential, however limited, of the Dam People volunteers.

"My thought exactly," Demero nodded, a grim light entering his eyes. "Berain's fleet controls the Inland Sea for now, barring any surprise from those damned secret ships. Maluin commands the Frontier Guard regiments already moving to intercept S'duna's advance columns. Saclare and Lejus are mobilizing the morse cavalry. Your role, Hiero, is crucial. You know S'duna. You have faced him, felt the quality of his mind, even through the shield. You, with your... unique company... must be the spearhead. Find him. Harass him. Disrupt his command. Sow confusion. Buy us the time we need."

He rose, walking to the window, looking out over the sprawling city towards the vast, silent expanse of the northern Taig. "The mustering is proceeding, Hiero. North, East, West... forces converge. But the timeline is desperately tight. Everything depends on delaying S'duna's main host until our full strength can be brought to bear." He turned back, his eyes locking with Hiero's. "Can you do it, boy? Can you face the Master of the Blue Circle again, knowing what he is, knowing what you have lost?"

Hiero met the old Abbot's gaze, his own weariness falling away, replaced by the cold fire of purpose. He thought of Luchare, fighting for her kingdom, her life, far to the south. He thought of Aldo and Gorm, risking everything on their perilous journey. He thought of Sagenay, carrying the weight of worlds within his mind. He thought of Klootz, his lost brother. And he thought of S'duna, the architect of so much of his pain, the embodiment of the ancient evil that sought to extinguish the light from the world.

"Yes, Father Abbot," Hiero said softly, his voice ringing with absolute conviction in the silent chamber. "I can. And I will." The mustering in the North was complete. It was time for the Killman to go hunting.

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