

11. In the Taig

The brief, charged council in Abbot Demero's austere chamber concluded as the first gray fingers of dawn probed the eastern sky over Sask City. The weight of the decisions made, the perils embraced, settled upon Hiero not as a crushing burden, but as a cold, clarifying imperative. There was no time for doubt, no space for the lingering ghosts of past failures or the phantom ache of lost powers. S'duna, Master of the Blue Circle, architect of Manoon's horrors, architect perhaps of evils reaching back millennia, was on the march. And Hiero, armed with fragmented knowledge, strange allies, and a resolve forged in desert fires and subterranean darkness, was tasked with intercepting him.

Preparations began immediately, driven by Demero's quiet urgency and Hiero's own grim determination. The sprawling Abbey complex, usually a place of scholarly quietude or disciplined military routine, now buzzed with a focused, purposeful energy. Hiero, moving with the swift efficiency of a Killman accustomed to operating on the edge, found his requests met with surprising speed. Demero's authority, it seemed, smoothed all paths.

His chosen force gathered in a secluded courtyard as the city outside slowly awoke. It was a small company, deliberately so, designed for speed, stealth, and lethality, a scalpel rather than a bludgeon. Per Edard Maluin stood beside him, a granite tower of Metz loyalty, his great billhook strapped across his back, his scarred face impassive but his eyes holding a familiar spark of battle-readiness. The big guardsman had grumbled good-naturedly about being pulled from his naval command ("Barely got my sea legs back, priest, and now you want me stomping through bloody pine needles!"), but Hiero knew there was no man he'd rather have covering his back in a close fight.

The Mantan twins, Reyn and Geor, materialized from the shadows as if summoned by thought alone. Identical in their lean, weathered appearance, clad in stained leather that blended seamlessly with the forest floor, they were walking embodiments of the northern wilderness. Their sunken eyes, devoid of easily readable emotion, missed nothing. They carried their long, dark blowguns, quivers filled with slender, needle-sharp darts tipped with poisons brewed from secrets whispered only between father and son, alongside the more conventional long knives and belt axes. Their presence was both reassuring and unsettling; they were legends, ghosts of the borderlands, their loyalty absolute but their methods often brutal, shaped by a lifetime of solitary war against the Unclean and the harsh indifference of the Taig itself.

Then came the Children of the Wind. M'reen, the Speaker-to-be, moved with a fluid grace that belied the coiled tension Hiero sensed within her. Her amber eyes, slitted now against the nascent light, held a fierce intelligence and an unwavering loyalty that transcended species. B'uorgh, the war-chief, massive even for his kind, carried himself with a quiet dignity, the scars on his blunt muzzle testifying to countless battles. His initial suspicion of Hiero had evolved into a grudging respect, cemented perhaps by their shared ordeal in the drowned city and the priest's unexpected defense of their worth. Za'reekh and Ch'uirsh, the two young warriors, leaner, faster, vibrated with

suppressed energy, their sharp claws occasionally unsheathing and retracting, their tails twitching – eagerness for the hunt warring with the discipline imposed by their chief. They carried their long knives strapped to their thighs and pouches filled with rations and the mysterious components of the Wind of Death, M'reen alone holding the secret of its activation.

Hiero surveyed his strange company. Metz Guardsman, ancient woodsmen, alien catfolk, and himself, a priest-warrior grappling with altered senses and immense responsibility. Could such a disparate group function as a cohesive unit? Could they face the disciplined legions of S'duna, led by one of the most powerful and malevolent minds he had ever encountered? He pushed the doubts aside. They must.

Supplies were minimal: dried rations, water skins, basic medical kits, repair materials for weapons and leather, extra quarrels for Hiero's crossbow (though Sagenay was gone, taking his bowyer's skill with him). Speed and silence were their primary assets. Each member carried their own necessities; there would be no pack animals, no slow-moving baggage train. Klootz, chafing at being left behind but understanding the necessity, watched their departure from the Abbey stables, his great head held high, a low rumble of farewell vibrating in his massive chest.

They slipped from Sask City unseen, utilizing ancient service tunnels known only to the Abbey hierarchy, emerging miles north into the familiar embrace of the Taig. The transition was abrupt. One moment the cold stone of the buried passages, the next the damp, fragrant air of the great coniferous forest, the soft sigh of wind in the high branches, the carpet of resilient needles underfoot. The sun, climbing higher now, sent shafts of dusty gold slanting down between the immense, shaggy boles of pine and spruce, illuminating patches of resilient moss and tenacious undergrowth.

They set a relentless pace northward, following trails known only to the Mantans, trails that skirted the main arteries of trade and communication, weaving through the deepest, most seldom-traveled sections of the forest. Hiero led, relying not on maps, but on the twins' instinctive knowledge and his own internal compass, constantly adjusting their course based on the subtle feedback from his heightened senses. He felt the vast, slow life of the Taig around him – the deep roots drawing sustenance, the patient endurance of ancient trees, the fleeting lives of birds and small mammals, the constant, invisible warfare between predator and prey.

He pushed his receptive abilities, learning their new limits, their strange strengths. He found he could sense the emotional state of the forest itself – areas of tranquility, patches of subtle wrongness where old blights lingered or unnatural life perhaps stirred. He could follow the 'mind-trails' of animals long after their physical spoor had vanished, sensing the residual fear of a fleeing deer, the focused hunger of a stalking lynx. But detecting shielded Unclean minds remained impossible, a frustrating blankness in the otherwise rich sensory tapestry. His offensive capabilities were truly gone; he was now purely a receiver, an interpreter of the world's silent communications.

Maluin, marching tirelessly beside him, occasionally offered blunt observations on terrain or potential ambush sites, his practical soldier's mind a valuable counterpoint to Hiero's more intuitive approach. The big man worried about Sagenay, about the knowledge the young priest carried. "Think he's safe, Hiero? Think Aldo got him clear?"

“Aldo will manage, Edard,” Hiero reassured him, though his own heart echoed the concern. “He has ways... the Eleveners are more resourceful than most realize. And Sagenay... he has a strength of spirit that defies easy measure. Our task is to ensure their efforts weren't in vain. We must intercept S'duna.”

The catfolk scouted ahead and flank, moving through the dense undergrowth with impossible silence and speed. M'reen relayed their findings mentally to Hiero, her thoughts clear, concise, devoid of unnecessary clutter. Tracks ahead. Howlers. Two days old. Moving east. Or: Water source. Clean. Small game nearby. Or, more chillingly: Wrongness. Stronger now. North-east. Still distant.

They rested briefly during the heat of midday, gnawing on tough dried meat, conserving water. Hiero used these pauses to confer with his disparate allies, sharing intelligence, refining plans. He found the catfolk minds fascinating, alien yet comprehensible – focused, practical, intensely loyal to their Pride, their perceptions dominated by scent and movement. Communicating complex strategy required patience, the use of vivid mental imagery, but M'reen proved a quick study, translating Hiero's broader concepts into terms B'uorgh and the younger warriors could readily grasp. The Mantans remained largely inscrutable, their thoughts as economical as their speech, their minds deep, still pools reflecting ancient forest lore, concerned primarily with the immediate realities of track, trail, and threat.

As the days passed, the sense of the approaching enemy grew stronger. Hiero felt S'duna's host now as a vast, slow-moving wave of disciplined malice washing westward through the Taig. It was a large force, larger than Gorm's initial estimate – multiple regiments, human and Leemute, supported by siege engines dragged laboriously through the forest, and spearheaded by a core of shielded adepts whose cold intelligence Hiero could now faintly discern even through their protective barriers. S'duna was not merely seeking battle; he was bringing the full weight of the Blue Circle's northern power to bear, intending nothing less than the utter destruction of the Metz Republic's heartland.

Closer, M'reen sent one evening, as they made cold camp high in the branches of a colossal, ancient maple, the forest floor far below lost in shadow. They feel... like disturbed hornets. Anger. Impatience.

Hiero nodded grimly, scanning the twilight forest with his far-looker, though he knew physical sight was almost useless now. S'duna knows we're near. Or suspects. He feels the interference, perhaps. The resistance. He focused his own mind, reaching out, a delicate probe towards the leading edge of the Unclean advance, still leagues away but drawing inexorably closer. He felt the powerful shield of S'duna himself, a vortex of cold, calculating hatred, utterly confident, utterly ruthless. And behind it, supporting it, were the lesser shields of other adepts, a formidable psychic phalanx. Penetrating that barrier was impossible.

But he could sense the minds around it. The fear and resentment of the human troops, driven tools in a war they barely understood. The brutish, chaotic hunger of the Howlers. The cunning, rat-like nervousness of the Man-rats. The army was powerful, yes, but not monolithic. There were stresses, frictions, potential weaknesses, if only he could find a way to exploit them.

“Maluin,” he said aloud, turning to the big guardsman who sat patiently cleaning his billhook by the light of a single, shielded glow-stick. “Tomorrow, we make contact. Not direct assault. Harassment. We bleed them, slow them, divert them if possible. We are the thorn in their flank.”

Maluin grinned, a flash of white teeth in the gloom. “About time, priest. My axe arm’s getting rusty.”

Hiero looked at the silent figures gathered around him in the vast, ancient tree – the stoic Mantans, the alert catfolk, the calm priest Sagenay whose inner strength Hiero increasingly relied upon. A strange company, indeed, facing impossible odds in the heart of the great Taig. Yet, as he met their diverse gazes – human, feline, ursine-that-was-no-longer-ursine – he felt not despair, but a surge of fierce, determined hope. They were few, but they were united. And S’duna, for all his power, did not yet know the true nature of the allies arrayed against him. The mustering in the North was complete. The battle for the Taig was about to be joined.

Revision #1

Created 2025-03-31 01:05:17 UTC by Matt

Updated 2025-03-31 01:06:11 UTC by Matt