

2. The Fractured Kingdom

Their entry into the recognized sovereign territory of D'alwah was marked by no fanfare, no welcoming committees, but by a subtle, yet palpable, shift in the atmosphere of the land itself. The untamed southern woodlands, though still vast and only thinly mapped by human knowledge, gradually yielded to terrain bearing the unmistakable scars of conflict and the deeper wounds of a kingdom tearing itself apart. They moved now through groves where ancient trees stood sentinel over abandoned clearings, their lower trunks blackened by the passage of recent, hasty fires. Villages glimpsed through the thinning trees lay unnaturally silent, smoke rising from only a few scattered hearths, the usual bustle of rural life replaced by a shuttered, watchful stillness. Fields lay fallow, irrigation ditches dry and choked with weeds, the promise of harvest surrendered to the exigencies of war.

Segi, the great hopper, moved with a new caution now, his long ears constantly swiveling, his sensitive nostrils flaring as he tasted the wind for scents both natural and unnatural. Hiero rode alert, his hand never far from his sword-knife, his senses stretched taut, probing the periphery, feeling the low thrum of fear and suspicion that emanated even from the very soil. Luchare, seated before him, was tense, her own growing mental awareness adding to Hiero's, her gaze sweeping the landscape, recognizing landmarks, noting deviations from the memories of her flight northward what seemed a lifetime ago.

The few peasants they encountered were ghosts haunting their own land. They emerged hesitantly from thatched huts or forest tracks, their faces gaunt, their eyes hollowed by fear and deprivation. They offered no greeting, only a sullen, guarded watchfulness, melting back into the shadows at the first sign of approach. Hiero probed their minds gently, brushing against walls of raw, simple terror – fear of the Unclean legions, yes, but also fear of Amibale's rebels, fear of bandits spawned by chaos, fear even of the King's depleted authority and the demands of his remaining troops. Trust was a casualty as profound as any slain soldier. Here, every stranger was a potential threat, every uniform a possible harbinger of plunder or forced levy. There was no welcome in these borderlands, only the grim determination of survival.

It was a relief when, late on the third day after crossing the ill-defined border, they were challenged by a loyalist patrol. They emerged suddenly from a dense thicket of broad-leafed, flowering shrubs – a dozen riders on lean, hardy hoppers, their D'alwahn kilts and leather armor stained with travel and battle, their faces grim beneath their conical helmets. Spears leveled, crossbows spanned, they formed a crescent barring the path, their commander, a scarred veteran with eyes like chips of flint, barking a harsh challenge.

Recognition, when it came, was instantaneous, explosive. The sight of Luchare, unveiled and regal even in her travel-worn leathers, brought gasps, then shouts, then a ragged, heartfelt cheer that echoed through the silent woods. Spears were raised in salute, helmets doffed. The princess was alive! The King's line endured! Hope, fragile but fierce, flared in eyes that had seen too much despair.

The patrol commander, his formality struggling with emotion, quickly apprised them of the situation and offered escort. Their destination was a valley several leagues deeper into loyalist territory, a natural fortress carved by ancient rivers, reachable only by winding, easily guarded paths. It served now as a temporary command center, a rallying point for the forces still loyal to Danyale IX.

As they journeyed under escort, Hiero observed the subtle signs of organization, the hidden sentry posts, the carefully chosen ambush sites along the route. Despite the setbacks, despite the Unclean infiltration, the core of D'alwah's military structure, particularly the elements commanded by men like Count Hamili, remained disciplined and effective.

The stronghold, when they reached it as dusk settled, was impressive. A deep valley, its sides sheer cliffs of ancient, water-smoothed rock, opened before them. The entrance was narrow, guarded by heavy timber gates and manned watchtowers camouflaged amongst the clinging vines. Within, the valley floor hummed with restrained activity. Campfires glowed, casting flickering shadows on orderly rows of tents and temporary shelters. The reassuring clink of armor, the low murmur of voices, the stamp and snort of hoppers from well-guarded picket lines – all spoke of a force battered but unbroken, preparing to endure, to fight back.

They were led directly to the central command tent, larger than the others, pitched beneath a massive overhang of rock. Guards bearing the royal insignia saluted sharply as they passed. Inside, seated around a rough-hewn campaign table lit by shielded lanterns, were the men Hiero needed to see. King Danyale IX sat propped on campaign cushions, his face pale and drawn beneath his graying beard, one arm immobile in a sling, yet his eyes held the steady light of command. Beside him, Count Ghiftah Hamili, leaner, harder than Hiero remembered, rose to greet them, his dark face an impassive mask that couldn't entirely conceal the relief in his eyes. And standing quietly in the shadows, instantly recognizable despite the simple guard uniform, was Mitrash, the Elevener acolyte, his presence a silent reassurance.

The reunion was brief, weighted by the gravity of their situation. Formalities were quickly dispensed with. Luchare embraced her father, a silent exchange passing between them, before turning to the council. Food and wine were brought – simple campaign fare, but welcome. Then, the maps were spread, and the grim accounting began.

"The situation is... precarious, Per Hiero, Highness," Hamili began, his voice flat, devoid of inflection, the voice of a soldier reporting unpleasant facts. He traced lines on the map with a scarred finger. "D'alwah City remains contested. His Majesty holds the palace, the Citadel, and the central administrative districts." He indicated a tight cluster of symbols. "But the outer sectors, the artisan quarters, the merchants' wards, and, crucially, the port itself, are in rebel hands." His finger tapped the harbor area. "Amibale controls the waterfront. Unclean soldiery – Howlers, Man-rats, Gliths even, we suspect – swarm through the lower city. And their ships..." He grimaced. "Ships arrive daily. Sleek craft, faster than anything we possess, unloading fresh troops, weapons, supplies we cannot identify."

"The secret ships," Hiero confirmed grimly. "Atom-powered, most likely. We destroyed two on the Inland Sea, but clearly, they possess more. How many?"

"At least four have been sighted operating from the port," Mitrash interjected quietly from the shadows. His Elevener network, though hampered, still gathered whispers of intelligence. "Possibly more held in reserve further down the coast."

"And Joseato?" Luchare asked, her voice tight with controlled anger. "That viper?"

"He is Amibale's shadow," Hamili replied. "Never leaves his side. His influence spreads daily. The priesthood is deeply divided. Many of the younger priests, swayed by his promises or perhaps... coerced by other means... have declared for Amibale. Even Markama, the Archpriest, though publicly loyal to His Majesty, seems... paralyzed. He preaches peace, patience, negotiation, while the kingdom burns!"

"He preaches treason, is what you mean," Danyale rasped, shifting painfully on his cushions. "But proving it... that is another matter. Joseato is subtle. He leaves no tracks."

"And the nobles?" Hiero asked, remembering the undercurrents he'd sensed even before his capture.

"Wavering," Hamili admitted. "Many of the southern lords resent Danyale's rule, resent the northern influence..." he nodded towards Hiero, "...no offense intended, Per. They see Amibale, with his D'alwahn lineage, as a more... suitable... claimant, especially now he controls the trade routes through the port. Joseato plays on these old ambitions, these regional prides."

Hiero fell silent, absorbing the grim picture. A city divided, a port controlled by the enemy, Unclean ships reinforcing the rebels, a wavering nobility, a compromised church, and somewhere, pulling strings, the ancient evil Fuala and perhaps the greater shadow of the Other Mind itself. He felt a familiar weariness settle upon him. Always, it seemed, the Unclean exploited the flaws inherent in human society – ambition, greed, division, superstition.

He pushed the weariness aside. "The computer," he said, his voice cutting through the gloom. "Aldo's information pointed south of here. Deep in the jungle territories. Lands formerly held by... Fuala." He watched their faces closely.

A flicker of unease crossed Hamili's features. Danyale frowned. Mitrash remained impassive. "That region is... shunned, Per," Hamili said carefully. "Even before Fuala's... retirement... it was considered unhealthy. Strange tales have always emerged from those jungles. Plants that move. Rocks that whisper. Animals unlike any known beast." He shrugged. "Travelers vanish. Expeditions sent by the Crown... they did not return. Fuala ruled there, yes. Her power derived from that place, many believe. It borders the Blight lands, and further south, the great deserts where, legend says, the fires of The Death still burn."

"Fuala," Hiero pressed, ignoring the superstitious overlay. "Did she have dealings with the Unclean?"

Danyale answered this time, his voice heavy. "We suspected. Always. Her power felt... wrong. Not of the Church. Not of nature as we understand it. She held Amibale close, tutored him in secret arts after his father, my cousin Karimbale, died under... questionable circumstances. We could prove

nothing. Her domain was impenetrable, guarded by... things... we could not fight.” He looked Hiero squarely in the eye. “If this computer you seek lies within her former lands, Per, then retrieving it may be impossible. It may already be in the hands of the true enemy.”

“Perhaps,” Hiero conceded. “But we know the Unclean themselves only recently began to focus on these ancient technologies. S’nerg, the adept I slew far north, carried maps similar to the Abbey’s, marked with potential sites. They were searching, just as we were. It is possible the computer remains undiscovered, or at least, unmastered. Fuala may have guarded it, used its peripheral energies perhaps, without understanding its core function. It represents a power far beyond even her considerable sorcery, I suspect.” He leaned forward, his own intensity matching the King’s. “It is a risk we must take. That knowledge... it is not merely a weapon for D’alwah, or for the Metz Republic. It may be the key to understanding the Other Mind, the Gaeian entity. It may hold the means to save not just our kingdoms, but the world itself from a fate worse than The Death.”

A heavy silence filled the tent. The weight of Hiero’s words, the sheer, terrifying scope of the conflict he described, seemed to suck the air from the room. Outside, the sounds of the camp – the stamp of hoppers, the murmur of voices, the distant cry of a night bird – seemed fragile, ephemeral against the backdrop of cosmic struggle Hiero had unveiled.

Finally, Danyale IX, King of D’alwah, nodded slowly, his gaze fixed on the map spread before them, on the ominous blank space marking the shunned lands to the southwest. “So be it, Per Destein. If this is the path fate has set before us... then D’alwah will walk it with you. Hamili. Mitrash. You will give the Prince whatever he requires. Select our best. Scouts, trackers, warriors familiar with the deep jungle. This venture must not fail.” His eyes met Hiero’s again, filled now not with doubt, but with a king’s grim resolve. “Bring back this knowledge, son. Bring back hope.”

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