

3. The Serpent's Lair

The council of war, held in the flickering lantern light of the loyalist field camp, had been brief, decisive, weighted with the grim necessities of their desperate situation. Hiero, though accorded the deference due a prince-consort and the proven savior of the Metz fleet, felt the unfamiliar burden of command settle heavily upon his shoulders. He was no strategist accustomed to moving regiments like pieces on a game board; he was a Killman, a scout, a man trained for solitary action or the leadership of small, elite patrols. Yet here, in this fractured southern kingdom, facing an enemy ancient and multifaceted, the mantle of overall field command had fallen to him. Danyale, though recovering, was confined to the secure rear areas; Hamili, though a capable soldier, lacked the unique, if currently hampered, perspective Hiero possessed; Mitrash, invaluable for intelligence, was no battlefield commander. Only Hiero, stranger though he was, held the threads – knowledge of the Unclean's methods, awareness, however fragmented, of the Other Mind, and the fragile allegiance of the diverse forces now gathered under D'alwah's tattered banner.

Preparations for the southwestern probe were swift, dictated by the urgency Hiero felt pressing upon them like the humid southern air. The force was small, as he'd requested: himself, mounted again on the strangely attuned hopper Segi, whose quiet acceptance of his return felt like a balm on his weary spirit; Maluin, his steadfast Metz comrade, his great billhook gleaming dully even in the firelight, a rock of northern dependability in this alien land; Per Sagenay, the young priest whose spirit held depths Hiero was only beginning to fathom; the silent, lethal Mantan twins, Reyn and Geor, their faces unreadable, their loyalty absolute; and the four Children of the Wind – M'reen, her Speaker's authority nascent but undeniable, B'uorgh, the massive war-chief whose initial suspicion had grudgingly yielded to respect, and the two young warriors, Ch'uirsh and Za'reekh, their feline grace barely concealing their eagerness for the hunt. Klootz and Gorm remained behind – the morse too valuable a strategic asset to risk, the bear needed, perhaps, for communion with Aldo and the northern front. Luchare, after a single, fierce argument where love warred with duty, also stayed, her presence vital to maintaining unity in the loyalist camps. Their parting had been brief, intense, a silent promise exchanged that transcended words.

They departed under the cloak of a moonless night, slipping past their own sentries and melting into the dense woodlands that bordered the rolling savanna. Their immediate goal lay leagues to the southwest: the shunned territory once ruled by the sorceress Fuala, Amibale's monstrous mother, the region whispered to hold secrets older than D'alwah itself, and now suspected, based on Fuala's records and Hiero's fragmented intuition, to conceal the buried pre-Death installation housing the ancient computer.

The journey itself was a descent into a different reality. The relatively open woodlands gave way to denser jungle, the air growing thick, heavy, saturated with moisture and the cloying perfumes of unseen, night-blooming flora. The colossal trees, mere outliers before, now formed a near-continuous canopy far overhead, filtering the starlight, plunging the world below into profound darkness. Progress was slow, guided primarily by the Mantans' uncanny woodcraft and the catfolks' preternatural night vision. They moved like ghosts through a realm of shadow and whispering

leaves, the silence broken only by the sudden, startling cries of nocturnal predators or the rustle of unseen things in the thick undergrowth.

Hiero, riding Segi now with practiced ease, found his senses straining, adapting. Deprived of the full spectrum of his mental powers, he learned to rely more on the physical – the subtle shift of air currents, the snap of a twig under a distant footfall, the faint, musky scent of predators on the prowl. Yet, beneath this heightened physical awareness, he felt something else, a growing miasma, a psychic weight pressing down from the southwest. It was not the direct, focused malice of the Unclean adepts, nor the chaotic hunger of the House. This was older, colder, a dispassionate awareness that seemed to emanate from the land itself, a residue of ancient power and sorrow, perhaps the lingering psychic echo of Fuala's long reign, or something deeper still, connected to the Gaeian entity Solitaire had warned of.

They encountered life, but it was furtive, often misshapen. Strange, phosphorescent fungi pulsed with faint light on rotting logs. Multi-legged insects scuttled away from their approach, their carapaces clicking on the damp leaf mold. Once, twin points of orange fire glared from the darkness ahead, belonging to some large predator they wisely detoured around, sensing its territorial hostility. Another time, a colossal snake, thick as Hiero's thigh and patterned in sickly greens and yellows, dropped silently from an overhead branch, forcing a hasty, heart-stopping retreat. The jungle teemed, but it was a life twisted, secretive, imbued with the latent menace of Fuala's legacy and the encroaching influence from the deserts beyond.

Per Sagenay, despite his lack of woodcraft, proved invaluable. His deep spiritual calm seemed almost a shield in itself, warding off the more overt psychic disturbances. Often, Hiero would feel the young priest's mind brush gently against his own, offering not words, but a quiet stream of reassurance, a shared strength that bolstered Hiero's own flagging focus. Maluin remained a bulwark of physical presence, his massive frame seemingly impervious to fatigue, his rare comments blunt, practical, grounding them all in the harsh realities of their trek. The Mantans scouted tirelessly, their knowledge of traps, spoor, and the subtle language of the forest unparalleled. And the catfolk... they were poetry in motion, fluid shadows navigating the darkness, their senses mapping a world hidden from human perception, their fierce loyalty a silent promise. M'reen, in particular, stayed close to Hiero, her amber eyes often meeting his in the gloom, a shared understanding passing between them, remnants of the strange rapport born in the drowned city.

After ten days that felt like an eternity, the terrain began to change again. The trees, though still immense, grew slightly less dense. Patches of rough, broken ground appeared, littered with black, volcanic-looking rock. The air grew drier, carrying the first faint, acrid tang of the deserts ahead. They were entering the borderlands, the shunned fiefdom itself. The psychic pressure intensified, becoming a near-constant thrum at the edge of Hiero's awareness.

They found Fuala's fortress exactly where the ancient charts, cross-referenced with Hiero's memory of the Unclean maps, indicated it should be – perched like a malevolent bird of prey on a sheer cliff overlooking the Lantik Sea, which gleamed sullenly far below under a sky suddenly vast and empty after the jungle's embrace. It was a structure of black basalt, stark and forbidding, seeming to grow organically from the rock itself. Its architecture was alien, non-human, unsettling

in its sharp angles and unexpected curves. No banners flew, no guards patrolled the crumbling battlements. It appeared deserted, abandoned to the sea winds and the cries of the gulls circling overhead.

Yet, as they drew closer, concealing themselves in a final patch of twisted, wind-stunted trees, Hiero knew it was not empty. The cold, watching presence he had felt growing stronger throughout their journey emanated powerfully from the black stones. It was shielded, yes, but the shield felt... different. Not the layered, disciplined constructs of the Unclean adepts, nor the natural, instinctive barriers of powerful animals. This felt ancient, organic, almost alive, like the shell of some vast, slumbering crustacean.

Leaving the others concealed under Maluin's command, Hiero began his solitary approach. He moved with infinite caution, testing each step, his senses straining to pierce the unnatural stillness. The path leading up to the fortress gate was clear, swept clean by the wind, yet he felt... traps. Not physical snares, but psychic lures, illusions waiting to ensnare the unwary mind. He recognized the signature – cruder, perhaps, but related to the glamour the Dweller in the Mist had employed. Fuala's legacy, or the direct influence of the Other Mind?

He deployed the defensive techniques Solitaire's vast experience had imprinted on his mind during their brief, intense communion, weaving intricate patterns of thought, creating mental diversions, shielding his core consciousness behind layers of deceptive calm. He felt minds brush against his defenses – cold, inquisitive, reptilian almost – then withdraw, baffled. He reached the massive, iron-bound gate. It stood slightly ajar, revealing only darkness within.

Taking a deep breath, Hiero slipped through the opening. The air inside was cold, still, carrying the scent of ancient dust and something else... a faint, musky, reptilian odor that prickled his skin. He stood in a vast, echoing hall, dimly lit by unseen sources high above. Tapestries, depicting scenes of bizarre, inhuman revelry and conquest, crumbled into dust on the walls. Ornate, alien furniture lay overturned or broken. The place felt... violated, yet still occupied.

He moved deeper, sword drawn, poniard loose in its sheath. He felt the watching presence intensify, focusing upon him now. It was not Fuala's mind – that, he felt certain, was extinguished. This was something else, perhaps a guardian left behind, or a new occupant drawn to the vacuum of power.

He found the central chamber, the throne room Hiero instinctively knew it to be. And there, coiled upon the great black pearl throne Fuala had occupied in his vision, was the source of the presence. It was not human, not Leemute, not like anything he had ever encountered. A serpent. Colossal, ancient, its scales shimmering with shifting patterns of obsidian and jade. Its head, broad and flat, rested upon its coils, and from it regarded him two eyes, lidless, anciently wise, and filled with a cold, reptilian intelligence that held no trace of human emotion. The air around it crackled with psychic power.

It didn't attack physically. It didn't need to. Its mind simply... opened. And Hiero found himself drowning in a flood of alien thought, ancient memories, cold, implacable purpose. He saw the rise and fall of continents, the birth and death of stars, the slow, patient weaving of a web across

millennia, a purpose utterly inimical to the warm, fleeting lives of mammals. He felt the cold touch of the Other Mind, not as an abstract threat, but as a direct, overwhelming reality, using this ancient serpent as its conduit, its probe.

You seek the machine, the serpent's thought whispered, cold as glacial ice, ancient as the stone around them. It is here. Beneath us. Guarded. It sleeps, but it can be woken. It can be... attuned. Images flooded Hiero's mind – the computer, not as a repository of knowledge, but as a weapon, a focusing lens for the Other Mind's vast psychic power, capable of sweeping the continent clean, initiating the final, terrible Cleansing.

Join us, the serpent whispered, the thought a cold caress. Your primitive power is... interesting. You could be shaped. Useful.

The temptation was subtle, chilling. Not a promise of power, but of understanding, of belonging to something vast, eternal, inevitable. Hiero felt his own human will wavering, dwarfed by the sheer scale of the ancient, alien consciousness.

Then, cutting through the psychic miasma, came another thought, clear, sharp, familiar. Hiero! Danger! Behind you!

Luchare! Breaking through the distance, through the shield, alerted by their shared bond. Hiero whirled, sword flashing, just as a figure detached itself from the deepest shadows behind the throne – Joseato! The Unclean priest, his face a mask of triumphant hatred, a strange, crystal-tipped rod raised to strike.

The serpent hissed, its attention momentarily diverted. In that instant, Hiero acted. Not attacking the serpent – that, he knew, was suicide – but lunging past it, his sword aimed not at Joseato, but at the throne itself, the great black pearl, the focus, he now realized, of the serpent's power and its connection to the Other Mind.

His blade struck true. The pearl shattered with a soundless explosion of psychic energy. The serpent screamed, a mind-rending sound that echoed through the fortress. Joseato faltered, the crystal rod falling from his grasp. The cold, oppressive weight lifted from Hiero's mind. He turned, grabbing the stunned Joseato, and ran, dragging the Unclean priest back through the echoing halls, towards the gate, towards escape, leaving the writhing, wounded serpent and the collapsing psychic matrix of the fortress behind him. The lair had been breached, a blow struck, but the true enemy remained, vast and waiting.

Revision #3

Created 2025-03-30 20:49:49 UTC by Matt

Updated 2025-03-31 01:09:18 UTC by Matt