

6. Runners in the Night

The valley stronghold, nestled deep within the loyalist-held foothills, became a crucible in the weeks following Hiero's return. The initial relief and reunion gave way swiftly to the harsh realities of their precarious position. They were an island of resistance in a sea increasingly tainted by Unclean influence and the lingering, chilling awareness of the Gaeian entity lurking beneath the southwestern deserts. Hiero, accepting the mantle of command thrust upon him by necessity and circumstance, moved with a restless energy that belied the deep weariness still clinging to his bones.

He oversaw the integration of his small, disparate band with the remnants of Danyale's forces. The Metz Guardsmen under Maluin, initially viewed with suspicion by the D'alwahn regulars, quickly earned respect through their dour competence and unwavering discipline. The Children of the Wind, M'reen, B'uorgh, Ch'uirsh, and Za'reekh, remained an enigma to most, their silent movements and unsettling amber eyes inspiring awe and a measure of fear. Hiero relied on them heavily, their preternatural senses and unmatched speed making them ideal scouts and skirmishers in the dense southern terrain. They moved through the forest canopy or along the ground like flowing shadows, gathering intelligence, striking swift, silent blows against isolated enemy patrols, vanishing before any effective response could be mounted.

Hiero himself was undergoing a profound internal shift. The loss of his offensive mental powers, the ability to compel or destroy with thought alone, was a constant ache, a phantom limb still twitching with remembered strength. Yet, in its place, the heightened empathy, the amplified receptive senses gifted or perhaps merely unlocked by Solitaire, continued to evolve. He found he could feel the pulse of the camp, sense the undercurrents of morale, the flickers of fear or determination in the minds around him, even without direct probing. He felt the land itself more acutely – the slow, ancient thoughts of the great trees, the sharp, fleeting anxieties of small animals, the subtle wrongness that sometimes emanated from patches of blighted ground or stagnant water. It was disorienting, overwhelming at times, this flood of sensory data untempered by the ability to shield or selectively filter. He learned, slowly, painfully, to build new kinds of barriers, not walls of force, but disciplines of focus, mental techniques borrowed from Elevenner practices Aldo had shared, allowing him to navigate the torrent without being consumed.

His relationship with Luchare deepened, transformed by the shared ordeal and the acknowledged bond between them. She was no longer merely the princess he had rescued, nor the lover whose passion offered solace. She was his partner, his confidante, her sharp intelligence and growing understanding of D'alwahn politics proving invaluable. She moved easily between the different factions – the wary nobles, the anxious priests, the pragmatic soldiers – her royal authority asserted not through decree, but through quiet competence and fierce loyalty to her wounded father and her chosen mate. Her own mental abilities, though still nascent, grew stronger under Hiero's tutelage, her mind a clear, bright flame complementing his own altered senses. They spent hours together, often in silent communion, sharing thoughts, fears, hopes, forging a connection that transcended the need for words.

Intelligence gathering became Hiero's primary focus. Reliable information was the lifeblood of their resistance. Mitrash, the Elevener lieutenant, proved his worth tenfold. His network, built over years of quiet observation within the palace guard, reached surprisingly far. Whispers came from occupied D'alwah City – tales of Amibale's increasingly erratic behavior, his deepening paranoia, his utter reliance on the shadowy figures who now surrounded him, figures Hiero recognized from Mitrash's descriptions as Unclean adepts of S'lorn's Green Circle, likely sent south after the Neeyana debacle. Joseato, the treacherous priest, seemed to be the true architect of the occupation, consolidating Unclean control over the city's administration, purging loyalists, establishing a reign of quiet terror.

The catfolk scouts brought back troubling reports from the west and south. Unclean forces were probing deeper into the savannas, establishing hidden outposts, seemingly searching for something. Leemute patrols, often led by shielded human officers, grew bolder, clashing more frequently with loyalist pickets. And from the southwest, from the direction of the Deserts of The Death, came unsettling accounts gathered from frightened villagers and nomadic herdsman – tales of strange lights in the sky at night, of unsettling psychic pressures that drove animals mad, of disappearances near the blighted zones. The Other Mind, though its primary anchor was shattered, was not idle. Its influence seeped into the world like a slow poison.

"We cannot remain passive," Hiero declared during a council meeting with Danyale (now recovering, his arm still in a sling but his eyes clear), Hamili, Maluin, Luchare, and Mitrash. "Waiting here invites attack. We must strike, disrupt their plans, remind them the South is not yet conquered." He spread a map, worn and stained, across the table. "Mitrash has reports of an Unclean supply depot and communication hub here," he pointed to a location marked near a confluence of two minor rivers, several days' march east. "It controls movement along the inland routes towards the Lantik coast. If we could neutralize it, even temporarily, it would disrupt their logistics, perhaps force Amibale to divert forces from the siege of D'alwah."

Hamili frowned, studying the map. "That area is notoriously difficult, Per. Swampland, thick jungle. Easily defended, hard to assault."

"Precisely," Hiero agreed. "Which is why they won't expect a direct attack. Especially not one led by... unconventional forces." He looked towards the tent entrance, where M'reen and B'uorgh waited silently.

The plan was audacious: a swift, nighttime raid, bypassing conventional routes, moving directly through the swamps and deep jungle judged impassable by D'alwahn troops. The catfolk would lead, their night vision and agility unmatched. Hiero, Maluin, and a small, handpicked force of Metz Guardsmen and loyal D'alwahn scouts would provide the core striking power. Sagenay, whose mental acuity was slowly returning alongside his physical strength (though the vast computer knowledge remained largely locked away, accessible only in fragmented flashes), would provide psychic support and early warning. Their objective: infiltrate the depot, destroy the communication equipment and as many supplies as possible, and withdraw before the Unclean could mount an effective response.

The journey began two nights later, under a sliver of moon obscured by gathering storm clouds. They moved like wraiths, following Za'reekh and Ch'uirsh through terrain that would have stopped a conventional force dead. They waded through chest-deep, stagnant water, navigated treacherous bogs where phosphorescent will-o'-the-wisps danced, and climbed the buttressed roots of colossal trees to bypass impassable stretches of jungle. The air was thick with the buzz of nocturnal insects, the croaking of unseen amphibians, the occasional shriek of a predator or its prey. Hiero, moving near the front with M'reen and B'uorgh, relied heavily on the catfolks' senses, his own mind focused outwards, constantly probing for shielded minds or the chilling touch of Gaeian influence.

They encountered resistance only once – a lone Man-rat sentry, hidden cunningly in a high tree fork, armed with a silent blowgun. Ch'uirsh, moving with impossible speed along an overhead vine, dispatched the creature before it could even raise its weapon, its surprised gurgle lost in the ambient sounds of the swamp.

On the second night, M'reen signaled a halt. They were close. Ahead, Hiero could now feel it himself – a concentration of minds, mostly the dull, brutish awareness of Leemutes (Howlers and Man-rats, primarily), but overlaid with the sharper, colder presence of several shielded humans, and one stronger, more focused shield that marked the commander. There was also a faint, underlying hum of technology, the signature of Unclean communication devices.

Hiero conferred mentally with M'reen and B'uorgh. The depot was situated on a low island of relatively firm ground within the swamp, connected to the main inland trail by a single, heavily guarded causeway built of logs and packed earth. Watchtowers, likely manned by Howlers, overlooked the approaches. Getting close undetected would be difficult.

The water, M'reen sent, her thought a ripple of silken movement. The reeds are thickest on the western approach. We can move through them, unheard, unseen.

And the guards in the towers? Hiero queried.

The wind is rising, B'uorgh added, his own thought a low rumble. Rain comes. Thunder. It will mask our passage. And Za'reekh has... suggestions... for the watchers. He projected an image of the young warrior preparing slender darts tipped with a fast-acting soporific derived from jungle plants.

It was decided. While the wind rose, whipping the reeds into a frenzy and masking their approach with driving rain, the catfolk would neutralize the sentries in the western towers. Hiero, Maluin, and the main force would then follow through the water, timing their final assault to coincide with the peak of the predicted thunderstorm. Sagenay would remain shielded, providing psychic cover and attempting to subtly influence the Leemute guards on the causeway, creating a diversion if needed.

As the first fat drops of rain began to fall, Hiero watched M'reen, Ch'uirsh, and Za'reekh melt into the darkness towards the western perimeter. He felt a surge of admiration for these fierce, alien allies, Children of the Night Wind, running silent errands of war in the heart of their ancient enemy's domain. He checked his weapons, settled his shield more firmly on his arm, and exchanged a grim nod with Maluin. The air crackled with anticipation, the scent of ozone mingling with the smell of rain and damp earth. Thunder rumbled in the distance. The runners in the night

prepared to strike.

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