

12. Battle Morning

The mist lay cool and curtained over the lake, a vast, pearly shroud clinging to the dark water and blurring the edges of the world. It muffled sound, distorted distance, turning the familiar islands into half-glimpsed phantoms and the farther shores into mere suggestions against the paling eastern sky. It was the Lake of Weeping, a name Hiero found fitting now more than ever, a place where the sorrows of the past seemed to coalesce with the grim anxieties of the present. From his vantage point on the low, rocky promontory jutting into the water near the V's elbow, the world felt hushed, expectant, holding its breath before the coming storm.

Hiero sat astride Klootz, the great morse immense and patient beneath him, his own breath misting slightly in the chill air. He was weary, a bone-deep fatigue that sleep hadn't fully banished, the legacy of weeks of relentless travel, constant vigilance, and the draining weight of command. Yet, beneath the weariness, a core of resolve remained, hardened in the crucible of desert sun and subterranean darkness. He was here, at the appointed place, the nexus point where the converging paths of necessity and enemy design seemed destined to clash.

He let his altered senses drift outwards, probing the mist-laden landscape. The Abbey shields still clamped down, a frustrating blanket over the finer nuances of telepathic communication, yet he could feel the massed presence of the Metz forces deployed around him – the restless energy of the morse cavalry hidden in the woods behind, the disciplined readiness of the infantrymen lining the shore, the latent power humming from the five squat steamships anchored in a line further out, their forms vague outlines in the shifting vapors. He felt the minds of his commanders – Maluin, Saclare, Lejus – steady points of focus amidst the general tension. He felt the quiet concentration of Per Sagenay, seated nearby on a campstool, his eyes closed, his spirit perhaps reaching out in ways Hiero could no longer fully comprehend.

And he felt the enemy. Not clearly, not individually, but as a vast, slow-moving tide of inimical presence advancing from the east, filtering through the drowned land and treacherous marsh that formed the lake's northern arm. S'duna. The Master of the Blue Circle, his most persistent, most hated foe, was coming. Hiero could almost taste the cold, arrogant malice of the Unclean adept, feel the disciplined power of the legions he commanded – human soldiery warped to evil purpose, hordes of Leemutes bred for slaughter, perhaps even darker things drawn from the Unclean's hidden arsenals.

He shivered, though not from the morning chill. This battle would be unlike any he had fought before. Here, on this field chosen partly by Abbey strategy, partly by Unclean design, the nascent strength of the revitalized North would meet the full, resurgent power of one of the Brotherhood's most formidable Circles. Failure was unthinkable. The knowledge Sagenay carried, the future of the Abbeys, the very survival of decent life in Kanda – all hung in the balance.

He reviewed the dispositions again in his mind, tracing the lines of defense on the mental map he carried. The Lake of Weeping, shaped like a boomerang, offered both advantages and perils. The

long southern arm, stretching westward towards Namcush, was relatively secure, guarded by Berain's naval patrols and the depth of the water itself. The danger lay here, at the elbow, and along the northern arm, which faced the vast, trackless Palood marsh – the natural invasion route for any force striking south from the Unclean heartlands.

Their own forces were concentrated here, at the elbow and extending along the southern edge of the northern arm. The five steamships formed the first line, their cannon ports open, their ceramic-plated hulls designed to withstand conventional assault, though Hiero harbored grave doubts about their resilience against the Unclean's more esoteric weaponry – the dreaded lightning gun chief among them. Behind the steamers, the lighter, faster arrow barges waited, rowed craft manned by disciplined archers, their wicker mantlets offering some protection. On the shore itself, concealed within the tree line and amongst the islands dotting this part of the lake, were the bulk of the Metz infantry – four full regiments of Frontier Guards, the Republic's elite, augmented by two mixed regiments of militia, their quality variable but their numbers essential. And held in reserve, hidden deeper in the forest, waiting for the decisive moment, were the two precious regiments of morse cavalry, Hiero's own tactical trump card.

It was a formidable force on paper, perhaps seven thousand fighting souls, plus auxiliaries. But the Unclean host, Hiero knew from Gorm's harrowing reports relayed via Aldo, was likely far larger, hardened by decades of warfare, equipped with unknown technologies, and led by S'duna, a master strategist whose cunning was matched only by his cruelty. And they were fighting on ground of the enemy's choosing, reacting rather than initiating.

A quiet footfall announced Maluin's arrival. The big guardsman materialized from the mist, his face grim, his breath pluming. "Scouts reporting, General. Movement confirmed along the northern marsh edge. Heavy concentrations opposite the islands here," he gestured towards the chain of small, wooded islets stretching across the mouth of the northern arm. "Looks like they aim to use the islands as stepping stones, force a crossing under cover."

Hiero nodded. "As expected. Their main assault will come there. What of the eastern approaches? The lower lake?"

"Quieter. Some patrol activity, Leemutes mostly, but no major force detected. Berain's ships have engaged scattered probing attacks further east, near Falling Leaves Lake. Nothing serious, yet." Maluin spat thoughtfully. "S'duna's keeping his options open, feels like. Or maybe... maybe he's trying to draw our strength east, weaken the center here?"

"Possible," Hiero conceded. "Or maybe he simply assumes the main lake is impassable for his heavy forces. The distances are greater, the water deeper. This northern marsh... it's the logical chokepoint." He peered into the mist again, frustration gnawing at him. The Abbey shields, designed to protect against Unclean mental intrusion, were a double-edged sword, blinding him as effectively as they blinded the enemy. "Damn these shields! If I could just feel his intentions..."

"We fight what we see, lad," Maluin said gruffly, clapping a reassuring hand on Hiero's shoulder. "We have the ground, we have the men. Let them come."

Per Sagenay joined them, emerging silently from his meditative trance. His young face was pale, but his eyes held a serene, unnerving clarity. "The currents shift, Per Hiero," he said softly, his voice barely audible above the gentle lapping of the water. "There is... disturbance. Not just the focused malice of the Unclean, but something else. Older. Deeper." He gestured vaguely towards the northeast, towards the vast, unseen expanse of the Palood. "A watching presence. It does not actively interfere, yet. But it is... aware."

Hiero exchanged a look with Maluin. The Palood. A place even the Unclean avoided, a morass teeming with strange life and stranger legends. Could S'duna have awakened something there? Forged some unholy alliance? The thought was deeply disturbing. "Keep... listening, Per Sagenay," Hiero said slowly. "Warn me instantly if that presence shifts, focuses, becomes actively hostile."

Sagenay inclined his head. "As God wills, Per Desteen."

Now, borne on the strengthening breeze that began to shred the mist, came new sounds. Not the familiar calls of waterfowl or the rustle of wind in reeds, but the harsh clang of metal, the guttural shouts of command in the Unclean tongue, the low, menacing rumble of heavy objects being moved. Trumpets blared, thin, metallic notes that grated on the nerves, answered by the deeper, more sonorous call of the Metz horns from the warships anchored offshore.

The mist swirled, thinned, revealing glimpses of the scene unfolding across the water. The islands guarding the northern arm were no longer tranquil havens of green. Dark figures swarmed over them, erecting makeshift causeways of logs and earth between them, hauling strange, bulky objects towards the southern shores. Barges, heavier, cruder than the light assault boats Hiero had anticipated, wallowed in the channels, packed with Howlers and Man-rats. And on the nearest island, clearly visible now, Hiero saw them – the squat, menacing shapes of Unclean siege engines, catapults or trebuchets of some kind, being winched into position, their long arms pointing towards the Metz lines.

"By the Book!" Maluin breathed. "They mean to bombard us before the main assault! Trying to soften up the shore defenses, maybe even drive the ships back!"

Hiero watched intently through the far-looker, his mind racing. Siege engines. A slow, cumbersome tactic. Why? Unless... unless it was a feint, a diversion to draw their attention while the main thrust came elsewhere? Or perhaps S'duna, cautious despite his arrogance, sought to minimize his own casualties, relying on brute firepower before committing his troops to the uncertainties of the marsh crossing?

Even as he weighed the possibilities, the first projectiles arced through the air – great, dark spheres trailing plumes of oily smoke. They fell short, splashing harmlessly into the water midway between the islands and the Metz warships, releasing clouds of noxious, choking vapor that drifted sluggishly on the breeze.

"Gas!" Hiero yelled, pulling a dampened cloth over his nose and mouth, signaling the alert along the line. "Hold positions! Archers, stand ready!"

The bombardment intensified. More projectiles fell, some finding their mark on the decks of the steamships, others splashing closer to the shore, the acrid fumes stinging eyes and throats. Return fire commenced from the Abbey vessels, the deep boom of their ceramic cannon echoing across the lake, their crude language shot tearing through the Unclean emplacements on the islands, sending bodies and shattered equipment flying. Smoke, thick and black from the burning siege engines, mingled with the swirling mist and the sickly chemical vapors, creating a hellish landscape of noise, confusion, and choking fumes.

Through the chaos, Hiero tried to maintain focus, scanning the enemy lines, searching for the tell-tale signs of the main assault. The bombardment continued relentlessly, a brutal, unsubtle pounding designed to shatter morale and breach defenses. But where was S'duna? Where were the elite troops, the shielded adepts, the core of the Unclean power? This felt... wrong. Too straightforward. Too crude for the Master of the Blue Circle.

Then he saw it. Or rather, felt it. A sudden, sharp intensification of the Gaeian wrongness emanating from the northeast, the direction Sagenay had indicated earlier. Simultaneously, a frantic mental message pulsed from M'reen, scouting far out on the eastern flank. Hiero! Ambush! Not Unclean! Something else! Vast! Coming fast through the deep marsh! Creatures... unseen... terrible... Her thought dissolved into a wave of pure, primal terror before cutting off abruptly.

Hiero spun around, his heart suddenly cold. S'duna's bombardment was a feint. The true attack, unexpected, terrifying, drawn perhaps from the deepest horrors of the Palood by Unclean sorcery or Gaeian malice, was coming not from the north, but from the east, through the supposedly impassable deep marsh, aimed directly at their vulnerable flank. The Battle Morning had dawned, but the true enemy had yet to fully reveal its face.

Revision #1

Created 2025-03-31 01:08:03 UTC by Matt

Updated 2025-03-31 01:08:13 UTC by Matt