

14. The Unclean Host

Days melted into a green-tinged, sweat-soaked monotony of silent movement and constant vigilance. Since leaving the relative bustle and perceived security of Namcush Fort, Hiero's small, disparate company had plunged deep into the northern Taig, that vast, ancient arboreal ocean that separated the Metz Republic from the true heartlands of the Otawah League and guarded the approaches to the Inland Sea. Their mission, laid upon them by Abbot Demero himself, was stark: locate, assess, and ultimately harass and delay the formidable Unclean host known to be marching westward under the command of S'duna, Master of the Blue Circle. Time was the critical commodity - time for the northern levies to fully muster, time for the fledgling Abbey fleet to consolidate its unexpected victory, time, perhaps, for the knowledge carried within Per Sagenay's mind to yield secrets that might shift the very balance of the war.

They moved now through a world utterly dwarfed by the scale of its vegetation. The colossal conifers and mutated maples and oaks formed a canopy hundreds of feet overhead, filtering the sunlight into a perpetual, dusty green twilight. The forest floor was a tangled maze of fallen logs thick as Abbey ramparts, mossy hummocks concealing treacherous bogs, and dense thickets of strange, often thorny, undergrowth. Progress was slow, dictated by the terrain and the absolute necessity for stealth. They followed paths known only to the Mantan twins, ancient game trails invisible to any but those bred to the deepest secrets of the Taig, weaving a course northward and eastward, angling to intercept the predicted line of S'duna's advance.

Hiero rode Segi, the great hopper's resilience a constant marvel. The animal, though clearly out of its preferred savanna environment, navigated the broken ground with surprising agility, its powerful legs finding purchase on mossy logs, its blunt head held high, constantly testing the air with flared nostrils. Per Sagenay rode behind Hiero, silent for the most part, his dreaming eyes seeming to look beyond the immediate surroundings, yet Hiero felt the steady, focused hum of the young priest's mind, a beacon of quiet strength. Often, Sagenay would offer a subtle warning, a feeling of unease directed towards a particular sector, guiding Hiero's own more active probes. The computer knowledge, though largely dormant, seemed to have sensitized the priest to psychic nuances, atmospheric pressures Hiero himself, even with his altered empathy, barely registered.

Per Edard Maluin marched beside the hopper, his usual gruff commentary muted by the oppressive silence of the deep woods. He moved with the tireless endurance of the Frontier Guard, his billhook carried easily across one massive shoulder, his keen eyes constantly scanning the treeline, assessing potential ambush points, judging the defensive value of every ridge and ravine. He worried about their dwindling rations, fretted about the lack of open ground for maneuver, grumbled about the humidity that made his leather harness chafe, yet his presence was a bedrock of dependability, a tangible link to the disciplined military structure Hiero had left behind.

The true scouts, however, were the catfolk and the Mantans. Reyn and Geor Mantan flowed through the forest ahead and on the right flank, utterly silent, indistinguishable from the shifting shadows. Their reports, when they came, were delivered either through brief, coded bird calls that

blended seamlessly with the forest's natural chorus, or through terse, economical thoughts directed solely to Hiero: Tracks. Heavy passage. Two days old. Many Leemutes. Or: Water. Slow stream. Brackish but drinkable. Or: Ambush site. Old. Unused. Their knowledge of the Taig, its hazards, its hidden pathways, its subtle signs, was profound, instinctive, accumulated over generations of solitary warfare.

The Children of the Wind patrolled the left flank and ranged further ahead, their movements quicker, more fluid, less bound by the constraints of the forest floor. M'reen, B'uorgh, Ch'uirsh, and Za'reekh utilized the arboreal highways, leaping from branch to colossal branch with breathtaking agility, their spotted coats making them fleeting apparitions in the green gloom. Their reports, relayed mentally to Hiero or sometimes directly to Sagenay whom they seemed to accept as a fellow sensitive, were rich with sensory detail – the scent of distant woodsmoke, the faint vibration of heavy movement through the earth, the lingering fear-scent of animals disturbed by unnatural passage. M'reen, accepting her role as leader of her small contingent, coordinated their movements, her mind a clear, focused channel amidst the forest's psychic background noise.

Hiero himself acted as the central node, the receiving station for this complex flow of information. He rode mostly in a state of heightened receptivity, his own mind reaching outwards, tasting the air, feeling the pulse of the forest, constantly sifting the sensory data provided by his diverse allies, searching for the discordant note, the alien signature, that would betray the enemy's presence. The loss of his offensive powers was a constant frustration, particularly the inability to pierce the Unclean shields he knew must be approaching. He could only rely on his receptive empathy, his ability to feel the emotional state of the landscape, to sense the subtle wrongness that accompanied the Unclean's passage.

Late on the third day of their northward trek, the first definitive signs appeared. Geor Mantan materialized beside Hiero, silently pointing to the ground. There, impressed deeply into a patch of damp earth near a slow-moving stream, were the tracks. Not the familiar prints of deer or Grokon, nor the splayed pads of the great northern bears. These were different. Large, three-toed tracks, heavily clawed, accompanied by the unmistakable imprint of booted human feet, and the dragging shuffle of... something else. Hairy Howlers, Man-rats, and their human masters. And mixed with them, the deeper, more troubling impressions left by heavy, dragged objects – the siege engines Gorm had warned of. The Unclean host had passed this way, and recently.

Confirmation came swiftly from the catfolk. Scent strong now, M'reen sent, her thought sharp with warning. Many bodies. Unclean feel... strong. Metal... machines.

They proceeded now with extreme caution, the Mantans taking the lead, Hiero relying heavily on their ability to read the faintest sign, to interpret the age of a broken twig, the disturbance of leaf mold. They found evidence of recent campsites – hastily cleared areas, the ashes of cookfires (inefficiently doused, Hiero noted with grim satisfaction), discarded ration packs bearing Unclean symbols, and the ubiquitous, foul spoor of Leemutes. The army was large, disorganized in its passage despite its disciplined core, leaving a broad, easily followed trail through the forest.

“They move fast,” Maluin observed, examining a broken sapling. “Too fast for dragging heavy gear without... help.” He looked questioningly at Hiero.

Hiero nodded, understanding the implication. Leemute power. The Unclean relied heavily on their mutated slaves not just for combat, but for labor. Hairy Howlers, possessing immense strength, could haul heavy siege engines through terrain impassable for wheeled vehicles. Man-rats, though smaller, were numerous and tireless. S'duna's army was not merely a fighting force; it was a self-contained logistical entity, capable of sustaining itself deep within hostile territory.

As dusk began to gather, casting long, distorted shadows through the trees, Reyn Mantan signaled an urgent halt. He pointed eastward, towards a slight rise in the terrain, a low ridge crowned with denser pines. Smoke. Many fires. Camp ahead.

Hiero dismounted instantly, signaling the others to take cover. He crawled forward with Reyn to the crest of the ridge, parting the concealing ferns with infinite care. Below them, spread out across a broad, relatively flat expanse nestled between two converging streams, lay the Unclean encampment.

His breath caught in his throat. It was vast, far larger than he had dared imagine. A veritable city of temporary shelters, animal pens, and cookfires stretched for at least a mile in either direction, following the course of the streams. Thousands of figures moved among the tents – the dark uniforms of human soldiers, the hulking, furred shapes of Howlers, the smaller, quicker forms of Man-rats. He saw patrols moving along the perimeter, sentries posted near cleared fields of fire. He saw the siege engines, ugly, skeletal frameworks of wood and metal, parked in orderly rows. He saw pens filled with trussed animals – deer, Grokon, evidently captured for provisions. And he saw, scattered throughout the camp, the unmistakable gray robes of Unclean adepts, moving with quiet authority, their presence a chilling focus amidst the surrounding bustle.

His eyes swept the encampment, searching for the command center, for any sign of S'duna himself. He located it finally, near the center of the vast sprawl – a cluster of larger tents, pitched apart from the main body, guarded by elite human troops and several Gliths, their gray, scaled forms unnervingly still amidst the surrounding activity. A powerful psychic shield, tangible even at this distance, emanated from the command complex, a blanketing opacity that completely masked the minds within. S'duna was there, Hiero knew it with absolute certainty, cloaked, protected, directing his legions.

He scanned the perimeter again, assessing defenses. They were formidable. Watchtowers, hastily constructed from forest timber, overlooked the approaches. Leemute patrols, utilizing both hounds and Man-rats, constantly circled the outer edges. And the shielded adepts were strategically positioned, forming a psychic early-warning network. A direct assault was suicide. Harassment seemed almost equally futile against such numbers and discipline.

He focused on a peripheral area, a supply dump near the western edge of the camp, less heavily guarded than the command center. He extended his mind, probing gently, carefully, towards the human soldiers stationed there. Their shields were crude, easily bypassed by his altered senses. He felt their thoughts – boredom, resentment, fear of their Leemute comrades, hunger, a longing for home. Morale, at least among the lower ranks of the human contingent, seemed low. They were tools, expendable cogs in the Unclean war machine, and they knew it.

An idea began to form, audacious, risky, playing on the enemy's known weaknesses and Hiero's own unique combination of allies. He couldn't defeat S'duna's host here, not physically. But perhaps... perhaps he could sow chaos, discord, exploit the inherent distrust between human and Leemute, between soldier and Master. Perhaps he could turn their own fear against them.

He withdrew his mind carefully, relaying his observations to Maluin and the others who had crawled up beside him. "It's larger than we thought," he murmured, his voice barely a whisper. "Well-organized, well-defended. But not... monolithic. There are tensions. Weaknesses." He pointed towards the supply dump. "We strike there. Tonight. Not a battle, but... a visitation. Something to remind them that the Taig has teeth, that not all horrors serve the Unclean." He looked at the silent, waiting forms of the Mantans, at the glowing amber eyes of M'reen beside him. "Reyn, Geor... I need your poisons. Not the lethal ones. Something to induce... nightmares. M'reen, B'uorgh... can the Wind of Death be used subtly? Not to kill, but to... persuade?"

A low purr answered him from the darkness. A silent nod from the Mantans. Maluin gripped his billhook, a slow grin spreading across his face. Even Sagenay, listening intently, seemed to catch the spark of Hiero's desperate, unorthodox plan. Tonight, the ghosts of the Taig would walk, and the Unclean host would learn a new kind of fear.

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