

15. Echoes and Awakening

The Taig held its breath under the weight of the moonless dark. Deep within the forest canopy, where the colossal trees formed interlocking vaults far overhead, Hiero and his small, disparate company completed their final preparations. The air was cool, damp, carrying the myriad scents of the night woods – decaying leaf mold, pungent fungi, the musky spoor of unseen animals, and beneath it all, drifting faintly on the intermittent breeze from the east, the acrid taint of the vast Unclean encampment, a sprawling city of menace nestled by the twin streams less than a league away.

Silence was their shield, stealth their only viable weapon against the overwhelming numbers and disciplined power arrayed against them. Hiero, his face streaked with dark mud to dull the copper sheen of his skin, moved with quiet intensity among his strange allies, finalizing the details of their audacious plan. It was a plan born of desperation, relying not on brute force, which they lacked, but on psychological disruption, exploiting the inherent weaknesses and simmering tensions within the enemy host. Tonight, they would be ghosts, nightmares made manifest, striking not at bodies, but at minds, sowing chaos and fear in the heart of S'duna's army.

The Mantan twins, Reyn and Geor, checked the slender darts for their long blowguns. These were not the instantly lethal slivers they usually employed. At Hiero's request, they had spent the previous day carefully preparing a different concoction, derived from rare fungi and psychoactive pollens known only to those who lived in deepest communion with the Taig's hidden pharmacopeia. A neurotoxin, Hiero surmised, designed not to kill, but to induce temporary paralysis, vivid hallucinations, overwhelming panic. The twins worked with the focused precision of master craftsmen, their weathered faces unreadable in the dim light filtering through the leaves, their sunken eyes holding the ancient, patient wisdom of the deep forest. Their task was critical: neutralize key sentries, create pockets of inexplicable terror within the human ranks, disrupt the chain of command without triggering a general alarm.

The Children of the Wind gathered around M'reen, the Speaker-to-be. B'uorgh, the war-chief, massive and scarred, Za'reekh and Ch'uirsh, the young warriors, lean and quivering with suppressed energy – all looked to her now. M'reen held the pouch containing the components of the Wind of Death, not the lethal mixture used against physical foes, but a subtler blend, its purpose refined through Hiero's careful mental instruction. He needed her to project not death, but fear – a wave of primal terror, amplified by her own burgeoning psychic abilities, targeted specifically at the Leemute contingent. Play on their inherent instability, their brutish anxieties, their potential resentment towards their human masters. Turn their own nature against them. M'reen's amber eyes met Hiero's, holding a mixture of apprehension and fierce determination. It was a perversion of her power, perhaps, but a necessary one. B'uorgh and the younger males would support her, creating phantom movements, mimicking the calls of unknown predators, adding to the atmosphere of dread, drawing patrols into fruitless chases.

Per Edard Maluin checked the edge on his great billhook, its polished surface gleaming dully. His role was simple, brutal: close support, the physical anchor of their strike force, ready to deal with any unexpected physical threat that broke through their screen of stealth and psychological warfare. His presence alone, a tower of northern muscle and grim determination, was a reassurance.

Per Sagenay remained slightly apart, seated cross-legged, his eyes closed, his face serene. His task was perhaps the most dangerous, the most vital. He was their psychic sentinel, his mind, though still healing, reaching out cautiously, monitoring the vast, complex mental landscape of the Unclean camp, listening for the faintest whisper of alarm, the subtle shift in awareness that would signal detection. He would provide early warning, attempt to subtly misdirect any searching probes, and act as the conduit for Hiero's coordination of the disparate elements of their attack. The strain on his still-fragile consciousness would be immense.

Hiero himself would be the nerve center, the coordinating intelligence. He moved to a position slightly elevated, settling himself against the trunk of an ancient pine, closing his eyes, extending his own heightened senses. He felt the rhythmic pulse of the sleeping camp – the dull awareness of the Leemutes dreaming of blood and submission, the anxious, fragmented thoughts of the human soldiers plagued by fear and resentment, the cold, shielded vigilance of the Unclean officers and adepts forming islands of focused malice within the larger sprawl. And beneath it all, he felt the faint, pervasive pressure of the Gaeian entity, a cold, ancient indifference that seemed to underpin the entire blighted region.

He waited, letting the rhythms of the night settle around him, synchronizing his breathing with the slow pulse of the forest. Then, carefully, delicately, he began to weave his own influence into the tapestry. He didn't probe directly, didn't risk triggering the Unclean shields. Instead, he focused on the ambient fear, the latent anxieties already present within the camp. He amplified them subtly, using his empathy like a tuning fork, resonating with the existing frequencies of dread, turning them back upon the sleepers. He projected images gleaned from the soldiers' own subconscious – shadows moving just beyond the firelight, the imagined glint of eyes in the darkness, the memory of past defeats, the fear of the unknown horrors lurking within the Taig.

Now, he sent, a multi-layered command directed simultaneously to the Mantans and the Catfolk.

The response was immediate, coordinated. From the darkness surrounding the camp, the Mantans' blowguns sighed, almost inaudible. Slender darts, tipped with nightmare, found their marks among the perimeter sentries. Hiero felt brief flashes of surprise, then overwhelming, irrational terror flooding the minds of the targeted humans before they succumbed to the paralyzing agent, collapsing silently at their posts or stumbling away into the darkness, their minds consumed by phantoms.

Simultaneously, the Catfolk went into action. M'reen opened the pouch. The Wind of Death, in its subtler formulation, drifted outwards, an invisible cloud of pure, primal fear. It washed over the Leemute pens, over the areas where the Howlers and Man-rats were bivouacked. Hiero felt the effect instantly – a sudden surge of brutish panic, a wave of mindless terror spreading through the Leemute ranks. Snarls turned to whimpers, aggressive posturing dissolved into cowering

submission. They sensed something terrible, ancient, inimical to their very being, lurking just beyond the firelight, moving through the trees.

B'uorgh, Ch'uirsh, and Za'reekh added to the effect, their movements ghost-like at the edge of the camp's perception. A flicker of movement here, the snap of a twig there, a low growl mimicking some unknown predator, a high-pitched shriek that might have been a night bird or something far worse. They played on the heightened senses of the Leemutes, amplifying the fear M'reen projected, creating an atmosphere thick with unseen menace.

Chaos began to ripple through the encampment. Hounds, infected by the Leemutes' panic, began to howl, straining at their leashes. Human soldiers awoke, startled, reaching for weapons, their minds already poisoned by Hiero's subtle suggestions and the growing cacophony. Officers shouted contradictory orders, trying to quell the rising panic, their own shielded minds perhaps immune to the direct psychic assault but baffled by the inexplicable behavior of their troops and slaves.

Hiero intensified his efforts, focusing now on the simmering resentment between human and Leemute. He projected images of Howler brutality, of Man-rat treachery, subtly twisting the fear into suspicion, suspicion into outright hostility. He felt minds waver, discipline crack. A Howler, maddened by the Wind of Death, turned on its handler, its great jaws snapping. A Man-rat, convinced the human guards were the source of the terror, suddenly lunged with its spear.

Isolated pockets of violence erupted. Shouts turned to screams. The sharp crack of projectile weapons echoed sporadically as panicked soldiers fired at shadows, sometimes hitting their own comrades. The shielded adepts tried to intervene, their cold minds attempting to impose order, but the chaos was too widespread, the fear too deep-seated, amplified now by real bloodshed. Hiero felt their frustration, their rage, their inability to pinpoint the source of the disruption. They were blind, fighting phantoms, their own rigid discipline and reliance on hierarchy hindering their ability to react to this fluid, unconventional assault.

Withdraw, Hiero commanded his team, sensing the opportune moment, before the adepts could organize a coordinated psychic sweep, before S'duna himself intervened. Slowly. Leave no trace.

As carefully as they had approached, they melted back into the depths of the Taig. The Mantans retrieved their darts where possible, erasing signs of their passage. The Catfolk flowed through the trees like smoke, leaving only the lingering scent of primal fear behind them. Maluin brought up the rear, his billhook clean, his face split by a fierce grin. Sagenay, supported by Hiero, moved steadily, his eyes distant but his mind now a calm pool amidst the receding psychic storm.

Behind them, the Unclean camp remained engulfed in chaos. Shouts, screams, the occasional crack of a weapon still echoed through the trees, overlaid now by the strident blare of alarm horns. Hiero allowed himself a moment of grim satisfaction. They hadn't killed many, hadn't destroyed significant supplies. But they had struck a blow far more damaging. They had sown fear, discord, mistrust. They had awakened the simmering tensions within the enemy host, turning their own internal weaknesses against them. They had reminded the Unclean that the Taig was ancient, alive, and possessed teeth far sharper than any Leemute fang.

They put several leagues between themselves and the disrupted camp before halting, seeking refuge high in the branches of another forest giant as the first true light of dawn began to filter through the canopy. Exhausted but exhilarated, they looked at each other, Metz, D'alwahn princess, ancient woodsmen, alien catfolk, young priest – a strange alliance indeed, bound by shared peril and a common enemy.

Effective, Maluin sent mentally, his first successful attempt at the nuanced communication, surprising them all. He grinned again, rubbing his billhook affectionately.

They will be... displeased, M'reen purred, a sound that held more menace than amusement.

S'duna will feel this, Hiero thought, his mind reaching out cautiously towards the east. He felt the distant rage, the cold, focused fury of the Master of the Blue Circle, baffled, momentarily thwarted, but already calculating, planning retribution. He knows we are near. He knows we are... different. The hunt will intensify.

He looked at his companions, saw the weariness, the lingering tension, but also the shared resolve in their diverse eyes. The echoes of their nighttime raid would reverberate through the Unclean host, delaying their advance, perhaps, sowing seeds of doubt. But the awakening was mutual. They had awakened the enemy's fear, but they had also awakened its full attention. The crucible of the Taig was growing hotter.

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