

16. The Price of Fear

The pre-dawn hours found them miles deeper within the labyrinthine embrace of the Taig, having put as much distance as possible between themselves and the chaos they had sown in the Unclean encampment. They moved now not with the desperate haste of their initial flight, but with a measured, wary urgency, conserving strength, knowing that the true test was yet to come. The storm had long since passed, leaving the forest floor sodden, amplifying the myriad scents of damp earth, decaying vegetation, and the subtle, unseen life that stirred in the profound darkness preceding dawn. The air was cool, almost chill, a welcome respite from the oppressive humidity of the previous days, yet it carried a tension that had little to do with the weather.

Hiero led the way, alternating between riding Segi on the rare stretches of clear ground and moving ahead on foot when the terrain demanded intricate navigation through tangled roots and low-hanging, moss-draped branches. His senses were stretched to their utmost limit, a complex web reaching out into the surrounding darkness. He felt the forest waking around him – the first tentative calls of birds high in the unseen canopy, the rustle of small mammals in the undergrowth, the slow, deep pulse of the ancient trees themselves. But interwoven with these natural rhythms, he felt the lingering discord of the enemy – the residual psychic static of the Unclean adepts, the faint, lingering fear-scent of the terrified Leemutes, and, more disturbingly, the cold, focused beam of a single, powerful mind probing outwards from the direction of the disrupted camp. S'duna. The Master of the Blue Circle was awake, aware, and undoubtedly furious.

He relayed his findings silently to the others. They regroup. Commander active. Searching, but... unfocused yet. Anger clouds their discipline.

Maluin, trudging stoically beside the hopper, grunted mentally. Good. Let the bastard stew. Bought us some time, then, priest?

Some, Hiero confirmed. But not much. He will organize. He will send trackers. Not just hounds this time, I suspect. He thought of the Glith, the reptilian horror whose scaled hide seemed impervious to conventional poisons, whose hypnotic gaze could paralyze the will. Had S'duna brought more such creatures? The ancient records were fragmentary, unreliable. The Unclean were constantly breeding new abominations, twisting life to serve their dark purposes.

Per Sagenay, riding now strapped securely behind Hiero on Segi's broad back, stirred. His physical recovery was slow, but his mind, though still containing vast, unexplored continents of ancient knowledge, felt clearer, more stable. Hiero felt the young priest's own tentative probes reaching out, augmenting his own reconnaissance. The... structure... of their thought is disrupted, Per Hiero, Sagenay sent, his mental voice still hesitant, carrying echoes of the immense data flood he had absorbed. Fear acts as... a corrosive. Especially among the Leemute contingent. The link between Master and slave is... strained.

Exploitable? Hiero queried instantly.

Perhaps. But dangerous. Direct mental contact risks revealing our own position, our own nature. Their adepts are skilled in tracing such links, even through shields. Sagenay paused, gathering his thoughts. Subtlety remains our best weapon. Misdirection. Amplifying their existing anxieties.

Hiero fell silent again, considering. Sagenay was right. Direct mental combat against S'duna and his shielded adepts was out of the question. But psychological warfare... that had proven effective. Could they sustain it? Could they continue to play on the inherent weaknesses of the Unclean host - the distrust between human and Leemute, the arrogance of the Masters, the fear that lurked beneath the surface of their disciplined brutality?

Their path now led them steadily northeastward, following the Mantans' guidance along barely discernible trails that wound through colossal stands of ancient pines and spruces, interspersed with groves of mutated hardwoods whose leaves rustled like parchment in the faint breeze. The ground rose gradually, the air grew slightly drier, the oppressive humidity of the deeper forest lessening. They crossed streams bridged by fallen giants, skirted patches of treacherous muskeg where iridescent bubbles hinted at unspeakable decay beneath the surface, and traversed clearings where wildflowers bloomed in defiant splashes of color against the somber green and brown tapestry of the Taig.

They rested briefly at midday, choosing a defensible position within a ring of lichen-covered boulders, a place where springs fed a small, clear pool. While the Mantans and Catfolk established a silent perimeter watch, Hiero conferred again with Maluin and Sagenay.

"S'duna pushes them hard," Hiero reported, relaying the impressions gleaned from his ongoing mental scan. "The pursuit is organizing faster than I expected. He uses the adepts now, imposing order directly onto the Leemute minds, overriding their panic. They move on parallel tracks, attempting to flank us, anticipate our route north." He frowned. "And there's something else. Specialized units. Smaller groups, moving faster, trying to cut ahead. Trackers."

"The Mantans can handle conventional trackers," Maluin stated confidently, checking the priming of a heavy Metz pistol he'd acquired in Namcush. "But if they send Leemutes..."

"Worse," Sagenay interjected softly, his eyes closed in concentration. "Not Leemutes. Or not just Leemutes. I feel... minds adapted for this. Focused. Sensitive to... psychic spoor. A resonance left by our passage, perhaps amplified by the stress, the fear." He opened his eyes, meeting Hiero's gaze. "They may be tracking you specifically, Per Hiero. Your unique signature, even shielded, even altered, might leave an echo they can follow."

A cold knot formed in Hiero's stomach. Could it be true? Was his very presence, his altered mental state, a beacon leading the enemy to them? The thought was deeply unsettling. Yet, it explained the enemy's relentless focus, their seeming ability to anticipate his movements.

What kind? Hiero directed the thought towards Sagenay, reinforcing it with mental imagery of various tracking beasts.

Sagenay struggled, the effort evident in the fine sheen of sweat on his brow. Difficult... not animal as we know it... more like... insects? Collective... hive-like... sensitive to... mental pheromones? The

concepts were alien, drawn perhaps from the ancient computer data, difficult to translate into comprehensible thought. They are... hunters of minds.

Hiero absorbed this grim possibility. Hunters of minds. Another weapon from the Unclean's perverse arsenal. How to counter it? Conventional stealth was useless. Misdirection might only lead the hunters faster to their quarry. He needed... a way to mask his own mental signature, to confuse the scent.

He looked at Sagenay again. The young priest, though pale and clearly strained, met his gaze steadily. The vast knowledge within him, though largely inaccessible, occasionally yielded flashes of insight, fragments of ancient science that might offer a solution. Per Sagenay, Hiero sent carefully, the computer data... shielding technologies... masking protocols... is there anything...?

Sagenay's mind flickered, accessing, searching. Complex... requires energy source... specific frequencies... but... yes. A possibility. A resonance dampener. Crude. Short-range. Might... confuse... the insect-minds. He projected a complex series of mental images - geometric patterns, energy flows, harmonic frequencies. Requires focus. Concentration. All of us.

Hiero grasped the concept instantly. A combined mental effort, projecting a specific frequency, a 'white noise' designed to overwhelm the enemy trackers' delicate senses, mask their individual psychic signatures. It was risky. It would require intense concentration, leaving them vulnerable physically. And it might not work against the adepts themselves. But against these specialized 'mind-hunters'... it was their best, perhaps their only, chance.

He quickly relayed the plan to the others. Maluin grunted acceptance, his faith in Hiero absolute. The Mantans nodded silently, their faces impassive. The Catfolk listened intently, M'reen clarifying the concept for the others, their amber eyes glowing with understanding. Even Segi, sensing the shift in Hiero's mood, seemed to stand a little taller, ready for whatever came.

Now, Hiero commanded, settling himself into a meditative posture, drawing Luchare's remembered strength around him like a cloak. Focus. Blend your thoughts with mine. Project calm. Project... emptiness. Match the frequency Sagenay provides. Hold it. Steady.

Slowly, tentatively at first, then with growing confidence, the disparate minds of the strange alliance merged, focusing their combined will, guided by Sagenay's precise mental instructions drawn from the depths of ancient knowledge. They became a single point of stillness in the vast, humming forest, projecting outwards a carefully modulated frequency of psychic silence, a cloak of resonant emptiness designed to confuse, to misdirect, to blind the hunters of minds.

Hiero felt the enemy probes falter, waver. The focused attention shifted, swept past them, hesitated, then moved on, searching elsewhere. He felt the frustration of the shielded adepts intensify, their cold minds baffled by the sudden blankness, the inexplicable disappearance of their quarry from the psychic landscape.

For how long could they maintain this fragile deception? Hiero didn't know. Minutes? Hours? Long enough, perhaps, to slip through the closing net, to find temporary refuge, to plan their next move in this deadly game of hide-and-seek. He held the focus, pouring his own waning strength into the collective shield, feeling the quiet determination of his allies supporting him, a small island of

defiant consciousness adrift in the hostile immensity of the northern Taig. The price of fear, exacted from the enemy, was their own profound vulnerability. They were hidden, but they were also blind, relying now solely on physical senses and the fragile hope that their ruse would hold.

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