

17. The Anvil

The Taig, vast and indifferent, swallowed them whole. They moved through its shadowed depths not as conquerors, nor even as explorers, but as fugitives wrapped in a fragile, self-woven cloak of psychic silence. The forest floor, a deep carpet of millennia of fallen needles and decaying leaves, muffled their footfalls, yet every snap of a twig, every dislodged stone, seemed unnaturally loud against the profound quiet imposed by their concentrated mental effort. The air, cool and damp beneath the high, interlocking canopy, carried the rich, complex scents of pine resin, wet earth, fungal growth, and the distant, elusive musk of unseen forest dwellers. But for Hiero and his companions, these sensations were muted, filtered through the immense, wearying strain of maintaining the resonance dampener.

It was an act of collective will, guided by the fragmented, ancient knowledge flickering within Per Sagenay's burdened mind. A constant projection, a harmonized frequency of mental 'white noise' designed to blind the specialized Unclean trackers, the hunters of minds they knew pursued them. Hiero, acting as the focal point, felt the effort like a physical weight pressing down on his skull, a dull ache behind his eyes that never truly subsided. He felt the contributing energies of the others – Maluin's steady, disciplined projection, the Mantans' quiet, earth-bound focus, the Catfolk's fierce, almost feral intensity, and Sagenay's own luminous, if strained, contribution, anchoring the complex frequency drawn from pre-Death science. It was exhausting, this constant, vigilant projection of emptiness, this enforced silence in the normally vibrant channels of the mind. Sleep offered little respite; even in dreams, a part of their consciousness remained tethered to the task, maintaining the shield, listening for the tell-tale dissonance of enemy probes.

Yet, it held. Several times during the long day's march northward and eastward, Hiero felt the subtle pressure of seeking minds brush against their psychic camouflage – hesitant probes, confused sweeps, unable to gain purchase, unable to pinpoint their location. He sensed the frustration growing in their pursuers, the baffled anger of the adepts directing the hunt. The 'insect-minds', the specialized trackers Sagenay had identified, seemed utterly confounded, their delicate senses overwhelmed by the psychic static. They were hidden, invisible on the mental plane, but the effort cost them dearly in energy, in focus, in the simple ability to fully perceive their surroundings.

Their physical senses became paramount. Reyn and Geor Mantan moved like ghosts far ahead, their eyes and ears straining to interpret the forest's subtle language, reading meaning in a disturbed patch of moss, a broken branch, the sudden alarm call of a jay. They found the fresher tracks of the main Unclean host easily now – a broad swathe of passage cut through the undergrowth, marked by the prints of booted feet, the splayed claws of Howlers, the dragging marks of the heavy siege engines. S'duna's army moved with relentless speed, heedless of stealth, confident in its power and numbers, carving a direct path westward towards the heart of the Metz Republic.

“They angle north slightly,” Reyn reported during a brief, tense halt, sketching lines in the damp earth with a twig. “Following the higher ground. Avoiding the worst of the low swamps we crossed yesterday.” His voice was a low rasp, rarely used. “Faster than expected. Two days march behind, perhaps less.”

Hiero nodded grimly, studying the crude map. S’duna was pushing hard, sacrificing caution for speed, aiming perhaps to strike at the unprepared Otwah levies before they could fully muster, or to reach the shores of the Inland Sea and secure a route for naval reinforcement. “We cannot outrun them indefinitely,” he said, his voice low. “And this mental shield... Sagenay?”

The young priest looked up, his eyes clouded with fatigue, yet his mind felt surprisingly steady when Hiero touched it. The strain increases, Per Hiero. But the knowledge... fragments become clearer. The dampener is effective, but inefficient. It draws... attention... on other levels. He projected a feeling of vast, cold indifference – the Gaean entity. It notices the resonance. It does not interfere, but... it observes.

A chill deeper than the forest air touched Hiero. They were hiding from the Unclean, only to potentially attract the notice of something far worse. “Can we sustain it?”

For a time, Sagenay replied. But the cost grows. And detection by the adepts becomes more likely as our own focus weakens.

“We need defensible ground,” Maluin stated bluntly, hefting his billhook. “A place to turn, make a stand. This running... it wears us down, gives them the advantage.”

Hiero knew the big Guardsman was right. Their current strategy was one of temporary evasion, not sustainable survival. They needed to choose their ground, dictate the terms of the inevitable engagement, however unfavorable those terms might be. But where? In this endless expanse of colossal trees and tangled undergrowth, finding a natural fortress suitable for their small, mixed force seemed an impossible task.

The answer, when it came, originated from the most unexpected quarter. Memory, M’reen sent, her thought suddenly sharp, focused, cutting through Hiero’s own weary deliberations. An old place. A place of... challenge. From B’uorgh’s youth.

Hiero focused on the war-chief’s mind, surprised. B’uorgh? What memory? The big catman’s thoughts were usually a straightforward mix of pragmatic caution, fierce loyalty, and hunting instincts. Now, Hiero felt a flicker of something deeper, older – a memory, sharp and clear, of a specific location not far from their current position. A place of steep ravines, tangled rockfalls, and narrow defiles. A place where a young B’uorgh, undergoing the solitary trials that forged Catfolk warriors, had been cornered, tested, forced to fight for his life against... something the memory shied away from, something leaving behind only an echo of remembered terror and hard-won survival.

Show me, Hiero commanded gently.

The mental image coalesced, overlaid with B'uorgh's instinctive knowledge of the terrain. A complex network of narrow canyons, carved by ancient watercourses through a broad ridge of harder rock that rose unexpectedly from the forest floor. Steep walls offered limited access. Easily defended choke points. Multiple escape routes through hidden fissures and high passes, known perhaps only to the catfolk themselves. It was... perfect. An anvil upon which they might break S'duna's charge, or at least, delay it significantly.

"Maluin, Mantans," Hiero said aloud, renewed purpose hardening his voice. "B'uorgh knows a place. A network of ravines, defensible ground. Two leagues north of here. We make for it now. Reyn, Geor, find the swiftest path. M'reen, B'uorgh, coordinate flank security. Sagenay, maintain the dampener as long as possible, but conserve your strength. We will need your other talents soon."

The change in objective infused the weary company with new energy. They moved now not as fugitives, but as soldiers maneuvering towards a chosen battlefield. The Mantans led them unerringly through the twilight forest, their pace quickening. The Catfolk flowed through the trees on either side, silent, alert. Maluin moved beside Hiero and the hopper, his billhook held ready, his face set in lines of grim satisfaction. Even Sagenay seemed to rally, the vacancy receding slightly from his eyes, replaced by a flicker of focused concentration.

Hiero risked another probe towards the pursuing host. They were closer now, perhaps less than half a day's march behind. He felt the cold, probing intelligence of the adepts sweeping the forest ahead of them, searching, always searching. And he felt S'duna's mind, a vortex of shielded power and implacable will, driving his army forward. The Master of the Blue Circle was confident, anticipating a final, decisive confrontation. Let him come, Hiero thought grimly. Let him come to the anvil.

As the first pale light of the next dawn filtered through the high canopy, they reached their destination. The place was as B'uorgh's memory had depicted: a tangled massif of rock rising abruptly from the forest floor, split by narrow, deep ravines choked with boulders and dense undergrowth. Sheer cliffs, draped in vines and moss, offered natural defenses. Hidden springs trickled down rock faces, promising water. It was a natural fortress, a place designed by geology for ambush and desperate resistance.

"Here," Hiero declared, swinging down from Segi, his eyes scanning the terrain, assessing firing positions, planning fields of fire. "We make our stand here." He felt Sagenay drop the resonance dampener, the sudden cessation of the mental effort leaving Hiero's own mind feeling raw, exposed, but also strangely liberated. The psychic silence was broken. They were visible again, vulnerable. But they were also ready.

He felt the instant reaction from the east - a surge of focused awareness, surprise, then cold, triumphant recognition from the Unclean adepts. They had found their quarry. S'duna's mind flared, a wave of palpable hatred and command washing over the forest. The hunt was over. The final convergence was at hand.

Deploy, Hiero sent to his commanders, his own mind now clear, sharp, focused. Mantans, high ground, left flank. Cover the main approach ravine. Use your poisons sparingly until the main assault. Catfolk, right flank and upper ridges. Harass, delay, channel them towards the center. Use the Wind if necessary, but only on Leemutes, only if pressed. Maluin, you hold the center ravine mouth with me and the Guard remnants. He didn't need to specify the handful of loyal D'alwahns and Metz Guardsmen Mitrash had assigned him; they would follow Maluin implicitly. Sagenay, his thought softened slightly, find cover near the rear. Shield yourself first. Then... do what you can. Lend strength where needed. Watch for the adepts.

He drew his sword-knife, the familiar weight settling into his hand. He looked at his strange, desperate band - the grim Metz warrior, the serene priest, the silent woodsmen, the fierce catfolk. They were few, impossibly outnumbered, facing the disciplined legions and dark sorcery of the Unclean. Yet, as he met their diverse eyes, he saw not fear, but a shared resolve, a willingness to stand, to fight, here, on this ground, against the encroaching darkness. The anvil was set. Now, let the hammer fall.

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