

# 18. Battle of the Anvil

The air in the tangled network of ravines grew still, heavy with anticipation. Dawn had painted the highest rock faces far above in fleeting strokes of rose and gold, but down here, in the shadowed depths, a pre-dawn twilight lingered, cool and damp. Water trickled musically down moss-covered cliff faces, pooling in dark, still patches amongst the tumbled boulders and thickets of resilient fern that choked the canyon floors. The scent of wet stone, decaying vegetation, and the faint, clean perfume of some hidden, high-blooming orchid hung in the air, a deceptive tranquility belying the tension that thrummed beneath the surface.

Hiero stood at the mouth of the main ravine, the designated center of their desperate defense. He leaned against the cold, rough bark of a fallen forest giant, its immense trunk forming a natural breastwork across the narrowest point of the defile. His ancient sword-knife was loose in its sheath across his back, the heavy cavalry saber taken from the Unclean ship's armory resting bare across his thighs, its polished surface gleaming dully in the half-light. His crossbow lay beside him, loaded, a bronze-tipped quarrel nestled in its groove. His face, cleaned now of the Blight's grime but still leaner, harder than it had been months ago, was an impassive mask, his dark eyes constantly scanning the approaches, his mind a complex web reaching out, sifting the psychic currents of the surrounding wilderness.

Behind him, deeper within the ravine's protective embrace, Per Edard Maluin stood solid as the rock itself, his great billhook grounded, its polished head reflecting the meager light. Around him clustered the handful of D'alwahn and Metz Guardsmen Mitrash had spared them – barely a dozen, their faces grim, their varied weapons held ready. They were good men, veterans mostly, but Hiero knew they were hopelessly outnumbered, their conventional skills likely useless against the true horrors the Unclean commanded. Their courage, however, was undeniable.

Further back still, sheltered in a shallow cave mouth partially concealed by hanging vines, sat Per Sagenay. The young priest's eyes were closed, his hands resting palms-up on his knees in a meditative posture. Yet Hiero felt the focused power of his mind, a quiet but resilient shield extending outwards, augmenting Hiero's own defenses, monitoring the psychic ether for the first tell-tale dissonance of the approaching enemy. The knowledge he carried, the vast, terrifying legacy of the ancients, remained largely locked away, a slumbering giant within his consciousness, but his innate spiritual strength, his sensitivity, made him an invaluable sentinel.

High above, on the flanking ridges and hidden ledges overlooking the ravine network, the other elements of their strange alliance held their positions. Reyn and Geor Mantan, Masters of the Taig, were invisible ghosts amongst the rocks and trees to the left, their long blowguns silent but ready, their quivers filled with darts tipped in toxins that could induce paralysis, madness, or swift, silent death. They were the masters of the first strike, the silent neutralizers of unwary scouts, the precision instruments of Hiero's unconventional defense.

To the right, commanding the steeper, more broken terrain leading down from the northern ridges, were the Children of the Wind. M'reen, B'uorgh, Ch'uirsh, and Za'reekh moved like fluid shadows amongst the dense foliage, their amber eyes missing nothing, their sharp claws gripping bark and stone with effortless ease. They were poised, quivering with suppressed energy, ready to launch themselves into the fray, to harass, to delay, to channel the enemy assault into the prepared kill zones. M'reen held the pouch containing the Wind of Death, its subtle, fear-inducing variant prepared, a weapon of last resort against the Leemute hordes.

All waited. The silence stretched, broken only by the drip of water, the distant cry of some unidentifiable forest bird, the soft sigh of the morning breeze in the unseen canopy far above. Hiero felt the tension mount, a palpable thing pressing in on them from the east. He extended his own senses further, pushing against the vast, indifferent wilderness.

They come. Gorm's thought, though expected, sent a jolt through Hiero's system. The bear, positioned strategically deeper within the ravine network, covering a potential rearward infiltration route, was their ultimate early warning. Many minds. Anger. Hunger. Shielded Masters... directing. Closer now.

Hiero relayed the warning silently, needlessly, for he felt the others react instantly, the collective tension tightening like a drawn bowstring. He rose slowly, picking up the heavy saber, its weight familiar, comforting. He scanned the mouth of the ravine ahead, where the forest floor sloped gently upwards towards the unseen enemy.

The first sounds came moments later - a distant crashing through the undergrowth, growing steadily louder, punctuated by the guttural snarls and yelps of Leemutes eager for the kill. Then came the heavier tread of booted feet, the clink of metal harness, the low thrum of disciplined, marching hate. Hiero felt the wave of malice wash over the ravine mouth, a tangible psychic pressure that beat against his shields. He felt Sagenay flinch beside him, the young priest's mind momentarily staggering under the impact. Hiero reinforced Sagenay's defenses with his own, projecting calm, steadiness.

The first attackers burst into view, erupting from the tree line opposite the ravine mouth - Hairy Howlers, a wave of matted fur, slavering jaws, and brutish fury. They charged headlong down the slope, brandishing crude clubs and heavy knives, their small, red eyes burning with mindless aggression, their harsh barks echoing off the canyon walls. Behind them came Man-rats, swarming, chittering, their sharp spears glinting, their naked tails lashing. And behind them, moving with disciplined precision, came the Unclean human soldiery, ranks of dark-uniformed figures, their faces grim, their projectile weapons already spitting fire.

Now! Hiero's command flashed mentally.

From the high ground to the left, the Mantans' blowguns sighed. A dozen Howlers in the leading wave stumbled, clawed at their throats, and collapsed, twitching, their barks turning into strangled gurgles. The effect was instantaneous, sowing confusion in the charging ranks.

At the ravine mouth, Maluin roared, a sound that momentarily challenged the Leemute cacophony, and stepped forward, billhook swinging. The first Howlers to reach the bottleneck met a wall of

irresistible force. The heavy blade sheared through limbs and torsos, scattering gore, clearing a space around the big Guardsman. The few D'alwahn and Metz soldiers behind him added their spear thrusts and sword cuts, holding the narrow entrance against the tide.

From the right flank, the catfolk struck. They descended from the cliffs and ridges like falling thunderbolts, a blur of spotted fur and flashing knives. They hit the flank of the main Unclean assault, Za'reekh and Ch'uirsh weaving through the confused Leemute ranks, their long knives finding vulnerable points with deadly precision, hamstringing Howlers, disemboweling Man-rats. B'uorgh, the war-chief, met the charge of a squad of human soldiers head-on, his massive frame absorbing blows that would have felled a lesser creature, his own claws and fangs tearing a path through their disciplined ranks. M'reen directed them, her mind a sharp, clear coordinating force, while simultaneously projecting waves of subtle, disorienting fear towards the Leemute concentrations, amplifying their inherent instability.

Hiero watched the unfolding chaos, his mind stretched thin, coordinating, assessing, searching for the shielded minds of the adepts he knew must be directing this assault. He felt them now, three distinct points of cold intelligence, positioned behind the main wave, observing, controlling. He tried to probe their shields, seeking weakness, but they held firm, layered constructs of disciplined malice. Yet, he could feel their frustration, their surprise at the effectiveness of the defense, their growing anger.

He raised his saber, preparing to join Maluin at the ravine mouth, when a new threat materialized. Above! Sagenay's warning was a sharp mental cry. Hiero looked up. High on the cliff face opposite, figures moved – Unclean archers, armed with powerful crossbows, taking up positions, aiming down into the ravine. Trapped! Caught in a crossfire!

Before Hiero could react, Geor Mantan acted. Seemingly from nowhere, the silent woodsman appeared on a narrow ledge high above the archers. He carried not his blowgun, but a strange, multi-corded sling Hiero hadn't seen before. With a smooth, practiced motion, he whirled the sling, releasing a volley of small, heavy stones. The effect was devastating. The stones struck the cliff face around the archers with incredible force, showering them with razor-sharp fragments of rock, disrupting their aim, forcing them back from the edge. One archer, struck squarely, toppled silently into the ravine below. Geor vanished as quickly as he had appeared.

The respite was brief. The main Unclean assault surged forward again, human soldiers now pushing through the faltering Leemute wave, their projectile weapons spitting venom into the ravine mouth. Maluin roared again, taking a hit on his shoulder pad that spun him half around, but he regained his footing instantly, his billhook still reaping death. Several of the Guardsmen behind him fell. The line wavered.

Sagenay! Now! Hiero projected, desperation lending strength to his thought.

He felt the young priest gather himself, felt the surge of focused spiritual power emanating from the cave mouth behind him. It wasn't an attack, not a shield, but something else entirely – a wave of profound peace, of utter stillness, washing outwards, momentarily overwhelming the rage and hatred driving the attackers. It was an Elevener technique, Hiero realized dimly, a power derived

not from conflict, but from deep communion with the life force itself.

The effect on the attackers was bizarre, unsettling. The charging soldiers faltered, confusion replacing the killing lust in their eyes. The Howlers whimpered, cowering. The Man-rats froze, chattering nervously. Even the shielded adepts seemed momentarily disoriented, their cold focus disrupted by this wave of utterly alien emotion.

It lasted only seconds. The inherent violence of the Unclean reasserted itself. The adepts lashed out mentally, shattering Sagenay's fragile projection. The young priest cried out, slumping back against the cave wall, blood trickling from his nose. But those seconds had been enough.

Catfolk! Charge! Maluin! Forward! Hiero roared aloud, leaping forward himself, saber flashing.

The counter-attack hit the momentarily disorganized enemy like a thunderclap. The catfolk surged from the right flank, a wave of unstoppable fury, their knives finding throats, hamstringing Leemutes, tearing through the ranks of the human soldiers. Maluin and his remaining Guardsmen charged from the ravine mouth, billhook and swords rising and falling, carving a path of bloody destruction. Hiero was in the midst of it, his ancient saber singing, his Killman training taking over, every movement precise, economical, lethal.

He fought his way towards the shielded adepts, sensing their cold minds struggling to regain control, trying to rally their shattered forces. He dispatched a hulking Howler with a thrust under the ribs, sidestepped the lunge of a Man-rat, cutting its spear arm, kicked it away. He saw Reyn Mantan appear beside him, silent as death, his axe falling, silencing a human officer.

He reached the first adept, a tall figure in gray robes, his pale face contorted with hatred, a crystal rod raised. Hiero ignored the inevitable psychic lash, trusting his shield, focusing solely on the physical. His saber swept down, shearing through the inadequate guard, biting deep into the adept's shoulder. The figure screamed, staggered back. Before Hiero could strike again, B'uorgh was there, the war-chief's massive paw striking like a piledriver, crushing the adept's skull.

Two remained. They stood back-to-back now, their shields reinforcing each other, lashing out with waves of mental force that made Hiero stagger, his vision blurring. He felt Maluin falter nearby, felt the catfolk recoil from the psychic onslaught. This was the core of the resistance, the command node. Break this, and the army might shatter.

He gathered his own waning psychic strength, the heightened empathy now a weapon. He didn't attack their shields directly. Instead, he focused on the link between them, the subtle flow of energy that coordinated their defense. He projected disruption, chaos, amplifying the battlefield's terror, feeding it back into their connection. He felt the link waver, distort.

Now! he screamed, both aloud and mentally.

Maluin surged forward, ignoring the psychic pain, his billhook whistling down. Simultaneously, M'reen launched herself from the side, a golden streak of pure feline fury, her long knife aimed at the second adept's exposed flank.

One adept turned, distracted by M'reen's impossible speed. Maluin's blow took the other high on the head, shattering the shield, cleaving the skull. M'reen's knife found its mark, sinking deep into the second adept's side. The creature shrieked, lashing out blindly with psychic force, then collapsed.

Silence fell, broken only by the harsh gasping of the survivors, the whimpering of wounded Leemutes, the distant crackle of residual psychic energy. The main assault had been broken. The Unclean forces, leaderless, demoralized, deprived of the adepts' controlling will, began to falter, melt away, streaming back towards the east, leaving their dead and dying scattered across the blood-soaked floor of the ravine mouth.

Hiero stood leaning on his saber, surveying the carnage, the adrenaline slowly ebbing, leaving behind a profound exhaustion. They had held the anvil. They had paid the price of fear, both their own and the enemy's. But the hammer blows would surely continue. S'duna had been bloodied, but not defeated. The mustering in the North continued, and the fate of Kanda still hung precariously in the balance.

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