

19. The Long Dawn

The silence that descended upon the rocky defile was profound, almost shocking after the cacophony of battle. The harsh clang of metal, the guttural snarls of Howlers, the sharp crack of projectile weapons, the chilling psychic screams of dying adepts – all had ceased, leaving behind only the gentle drip of water from mossy ledges, the faint sigh of the morning breeze through the high pine canopy, and the ragged, gasping breaths of the survivors. The air hung thick and heavy, tasting of ozone, spent powder, blood, and the indescribable, foul musk of slain Leemutes and the lingering psychic residue of Unclean malice.

Hiero stood leaning heavily on his saber, the ancient blade smeared with gore, his chest heaving, sweat plastering his tangled black hair to his forehead. Around him lay the grim tableau of victory: the grotesque corpses of Howlers and Man-rats sprawled amongst the boulders, the darker forms of human soldiers twisted in death, and the shattered remnants of the two gray-robed adepts near the ravine mouth. The Glith, a distant memory now from the mesa top skirmish, felt like a prelude compared to this concentrated savagery. They had held the anvil. They had broken S'duna's flanking probe. But the cost, measured in exhaustion and the near-certainty of swift retribution, was immense.

He surveyed his small company, assessing their state with a commander's practiced eye. Maluin stood nearby, methodically cleaning his great billhook on a clump of moss, his broad face streaked with grime and enemy blood, his breathing still labored but his stance solid, unwavering. The big Guardsman had taken blows, Hiero knew, glancing at the dents and scores on his worn leather armor, but seemed essentially unharmed, his massive frame built to endure.

The Mantan twins were tending to their own. Geor sat propped against a rock, his face pale, his teeth clenched against the pain from his hamstringed leg. Reyn worked with silent efficiency, applying a poultice of crushed leaves and binding the wound tightly with strips of leather cut from his own tunic. Their faces remained impassive, masks carved from ancient wood, betraying nothing of their suffering or their thoughts, yet Hiero sensed their shared pain, their stoic acceptance, their unwavering readiness for whatever came next. They were children of the Taig, accepting its harsh terms without complaint.

The Catfolk gathered around the still form of B'uorgh. The great war-chief lay where he had fallen, struck down defending the second adept Hiero had engaged. For a terrifying moment, Hiero thought him dead. Then, M'reen looked up, her amber eyes meeting Hiero's, her mental projection a wave of relief mixed with anxiety. He lives. Stunned only. A glancing blow from the Master's weapon-thought. Strong... but clumsy. She bent again, her slender fingers probing gently, her touch surprisingly delicate as she examined the massive, furred skull. Za'reekh and Ch'uirsh crouched nearby, low growls rumbling in their chests, their lithe bodies tense, scanning the surrounding shadows, ready to defend their fallen leader.

And Sagenay... Hiero turned towards the shallow cave where he had left the young priest. Sagenay sat slumped against the rock wall, his face ashen, a thin trickle of blood dried beneath his nose. His eyes were open but unfocused, staring into distances Hiero could only guess at. The psychic effort of projecting the wave of peace, followed by the backlash from the enraged adepts, had drained him utterly, leaving him hovering on the edge of consciousness. Yet, Hiero felt the core of the priest's spirit remained intact, shielded, resilient. He carried his burden, the universe of ancient knowledge, still locked away, waiting.

"Report," Hiero said aloud, his voice hoarse. He needed normalcy, the familiar routine of command, to anchor himself against the swirling currents of exhaustion and the lingering psychic echoes of the battle.

Maluin straightened up, wiping his billhook clean. "Held 'em, General. Broke their charge. Lost three good lads from the Guard detail," his voice roughened, "and maybe four D'alwahns. Hard to tell in that last melee. Mantans took out the sentries clean. Catfolk did... what catfolk do." He nodded towards the lithe figures tending B'uorgh. "Took some scratches, but gave better'n they got. Geor's leg needs proper tending, though. He won't be running far."

"And the enemy?"

"Scattered. Running east mostly, back the way they came. Left maybe fifty, sixty dead here. More Howlers than humans. Didn't see any more adepts after you... dealt... with those two." Maluin spared a brief, respectful glance at the shattered gray forms. "Don't think they expected us to stand, let alone hit back so hard."

Hiero nodded. S'duna had likely underestimated them, relying on the perceived fragility of human minds against concentrated psychic assault, counting on the Glith and the Leemute shock troops to overwhelm their physical defenses. A costly error. But S'duna would learn. He would adapt. The next attack, Hiero knew, would be different, perhaps subtler, more insidious.

He walked over to Sagenay, kneeling beside the young priest. "Cart? Can you hear me?"

Sagenay's eyes slowly focused, recognizing Hiero. A faint smile touched his lips. "Per Hiero... We held?"

"We held," Hiero confirmed, grasping the priest's shoulder gently. "Thanks to you. That wave of... stillness... it broke their focus, gave us the opening we needed."

"An old Elevener technique," Sagenay murmured, his voice barely a whisper. "Projecting... harmony... Difficult against such... discordance." He winced, closing his eyes again. "The backlash... strong..."

"Rest now, Per Sagenay. Conserve your strength. We move soon." Hiero rose, turning to the others. "Gather what supplies we can salvage - water skins, rations, quarrels, darts. Tend the wounded. We leave within the hour."

The hour stretched into two as they worked swiftly, efficiently. The dead were searched, yielding little beyond basic weaponry and meagre supplies. The Mantans retrieved their precious darts, carefully cleaning and storing them. M'reen fashioned a crude but effective splint for Geor's leg, binding it with tough vines. B'uorgh recovered slowly, shaking his massive head, clearly disgruntled at having been stunned so easily. Maluin organized the salvaged supplies, his practical mind assessing their needs.

Hiero used the time to reach out again with his mind, casting a wide, cautious net. The immediate vicinity was clear. The remnants of the Unclean flanking force were indeed retreating eastward, their thoughts a jumble of fear, anger, and confusion. He felt no coordinating intelligence among them now; the surviving officers were simply trying to regain control, pull their shattered units together. But further east, perhaps half a day's march away, he felt the main host, S'duna's central army. It had paused its westward advance. S'duna knew. The Master of the Blue Circle knew his flanking probe had failed, knew his quarry possessed unexpected teeth. Hiero felt the cold, calculating mind assessing the new situation, formulating revised plans. The respite would be brief.

He needed to know the position of the main Metz forces. Reaching out northward now, pushing his senses across the leagues, he searched for the familiar mental signatures of the Abbey commanders, the disciplined thought-patterns of the Frontier Guard regiments. It took time, the distance considerable, the intervening forest a muffling blanket. But finally, he found them. A concentration of Abbey minds, shielded now against his probe, but undeniably present, perhaps three days' march north-northeast. Demero's army was moving south, slower than S'duna, hampered by its own logistical train, but advancing steadily, converging towards this sector. The rendezvous point Hiero had vaguely aimed for was still viable.

Three days, he calculated swiftly. Three days march for them, burdened with wounded. S'duna was closer, perhaps two days away at his current pace, maybe less if he force-marched. Could they reach the main army before S'duna intercepted them? It would be desperately close.

He recalled his scattered company. "We move north," he announced, pointing towards a barely visible game trail leading away from the ravine network. "Our main force is three days march ahead. S'duna is closer, behind us and to the east. He will try to cut us off. We must move fast, avoid contact if possible." He looked at Geor Mantan, then at the still-weak Sagenay. "We carry our wounded. Maluin, assign bearers. Catfolk, Mantans - you take point and rearguard. Extreme vigilance. No unnecessary risks."

They set off, a small, weary band carrying their wounded, melting back into the green twilight of the Taig. Hiero took the lead beside Reyn Mantan, Segi pacing silently behind them, Sagenay now riding strapped into the saddle. Maluin and the Guardsmen formed the central core, bearing Geor Mantan on a makeshift litter. The four Catfolk flowed around them, B'uorgh and M'reen scouting ahead and flank, Za'reekh and Ch'uirsh guarding their rear.

The forest seemed quieter now, emptier. Perhaps the massive psychic disturbance of the battle had driven away the normal inhabitants. Or perhaps, Hiero thought grimly, something else was now hunting here. He felt the cold pressure of S'duna's mind like a physical weight on the back of his neck, felt the distant sweep of the Unclean probes searching, always searching.

They marched through the remainder of the day and deep into the night, stopping only for brief rests, forcing the pace. Geor Mantan bore his pain stoically. Sagenay drifted in and out of consciousness, his mind a fragile shield against the surrounding psychic noise. Hiero pushed himself, drove the others, knowing that every league gained brought them closer to safety, closer to the main army, closer to the confrontation that must inevitably come.

As the first light of the next day – the long dawn after the battle at the anvil – began to filter through the high canopy, Reyn Mantan signaled a halt again. He pointed ahead. Through a gap in the trees, miles away across a broad, rolling expanse of more open woodland, Hiero saw it. A flicker of movement. Then another. A column, marching westward. Too disciplined for Leemutes. Too numerous for a mere patrol. He raised his far-looker, his heart pounding. Dark uniforms. Familiar banners, bearing the Sword and Cross of the Abbey. Demero's vanguard. They had made it. They had crossed the threshold. But the relief was tempered by the cold certainty that S'duna could not be far behind. The race was not yet won. The crucible awaited them all.

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