

21. The Turning Tide

The darkness in the Unclean command chamber was absolute, a physical weight pressing against Hiero's eyes after the chaotic flickering and sudden death of the Great Screen. The silence, too, was profound, broken only by the harsh rasp of his own breathing and the frantic pounding of his heart. He had done it. He had silenced the psychic amplifier, blinded the enemy's coordinating intelligence, turned their own intricate technology against them through a desperate gamble of logical paradox. But the victory felt hollow, achieved at the cost of utter exhaustion, leaving him drained, vulnerable, and still trapped deep within the enemy's hidden lair.

He pushed himself away from the now inert screen, the cold metal retaining no trace of the vast, alien consciousness that had pulsed within it moments before. He fumbled for his firepot, his hands shaking slightly, the simple flint and steel a clumsy anchor in this realm of sophisticated, perverted science. A tiny flame sprang to life, casting huge, dancing shadows that writhed on the walls like captured demons, revealing the stark emptiness of the chamber and the faint blue glow still emanating from the mysterious "Threshold Control" panel.

Threshold Control. Emergency Biosphere Protocol. The words echoed in his mind, a tantalizing, terrifying enigma. What threshold? What biosphere? Was this some ultimate fail-safe left by the ancients? A weapon even more potent than the missiles the Great Screen had once commanded? Or something else entirely, tied perhaps to the Gaeian entity, the Other Mind, whose cold presence he still felt like a distant pressure beyond the immediate chaos? He longed to investigate, to unlock its secrets, but the instinct for survival screamed louder. S'duna was near. The battle raged outside. He had to escape.

With a final, lingering glance at the enigmatic panel, Hiero turned and plunged back into the maze of corridors, the small firepot held high, its flickering light a fragile beacon in the oppressive darkness. He moved swiftly now, guided by the mental map gleaned from the dead adept, retracing his steps towards the main access shaft. He kept his mind shielded, yes, but also open, receptive, straining to catch any hint of pursuit, any echo from the battle raging somewhere above and beyond these silent, subterranean levels.

He heard it first as a distant vibration through the stone floor, a low, guttural rumble that grew steadily louder, punctuated by sharp, percussive impacts – the unmistakable sounds of heavy combat. Explosions, the deep boom of the Abbey steamship cannons, the sharper crack of Unclean projectile weapons, and underlying it all, a cacophony of screams, roars, and battle cries, both human and Leemute. The main engagement had been joined. Demero's forces were locked in a death struggle with S'duna's host.

He reached the access shaft. Looking up, he saw only impenetrable darkness. The elevator cage remained stubbornly absent. There was no easy way back to the surface. He scanned the surrounding corridors. Which way? Where were the Catfolk? Had they managed to withdraw after guiding him here?

Hiero! Here! Quick! M'reen's thought, sharp and urgent, cut through the distant battle din. It came not from above, but from a narrow side passage he hadn't noticed before, half-hidden behind a bank of defunct machinery.

He didn't hesitate. Dousing the firepot, he slipped into the passage, moving by feel along the cold, smooth walls. It twisted downwards briefly, then opened into another, larger tunnel, sloping steadily upwards. He sensed the Catfolk ahead, their familiar mental signatures beacons in the darkness. He joined them, falling into their silent, loping run.

Enemy blocked shaft access, M'reen explained mentally as they moved. Adepts above. We found... another way. Old service tunnel. Leads... towards the eastern ridges.

Hiero nodded grimly. S'duna, or his subordinates, were thorough. They had anticipated the possibility of escape through the main shaft. This hidden service tunnel was a stroke of luck, or perhaps, a testament to the Catfolk's uncanny ability to navigate any terrain, exploit any weakness.

They ran for what felt like hours, the upward slope unrelenting, the air growing warmer, thinner, carrying the distant, acrid scent of battle smoke. The tunnel branched, twisted, bypassed vast, echoing chambers filled with silent, dust-shrouded machinery. Hiero marveled at the sheer scale of the buried installation, a testament to the power and paranoia of the ancients.

Finally, light appeared ahead – a faint grey luminescence filtering down from above. The tunnel ended abruptly at the base of a narrow ventilation shaft, reaching vertically upwards towards the unseen surface. Crude metal rungs, ancient and corroded, were set into the shaft wall.

High, B'uorgh sent, peering upwards, his amber eyes reflecting the faint light. Difficult climb.

"No choice," Hiero said aloud, already testing the lowest rung. It held. "M'reen, you first. Then the others. I'll bring up the rear." He needed the Speaker-to-be safe, her potential vital for the future.

The climb was arduous, terrifying. The rungs were slippery with condensation, some loose in their ancient mountings. The shaft seemed impossibly high, the square of grey light far above a distant, mocking promise. Hiero climbed mechanically, his muscles burning, his mind focused solely on the next handhold, the next foothold, pushing away the fatigue, the fear, the dizzying sense of vertigo. Below, the sounds of battle seemed to fade, replaced by the rasp of their own breathing, the scrape of leather on corroded metal.

M'reen reached the top first, disappearing silently over the edge. Then Za'reekh, then Ch'uirsh. B'uorgh followed, his massive frame making the fragile ladder groan in protest. Finally, it was Hiero's turn. He hauled himself over the lip, collapsing onto blessed, solid ground, gasping for breath, the clean, cool air of the upper Taig filling his lungs like a balm.

They were on a wooded ridge, miles east of the main battle, overlooking the sprawling conflict from a safe distance. The sounds reached them clearly now – the continuous roar of cannon fire, the sharper crackle of projectile weapons, the high-pitched screams of dying Leemutes, the deeper shouts of human combatants. Smoke drifted across the landscape, thick columns rising from

burning siege engines and stricken Abbey steamships.

Hiero raised his far-looker, scanning the battlefield, his heart sinking. The initial Metz advantage seemed to be eroding. S'duna's numbers were overwhelming. Fresh waves of Howlers and Man-rats poured from the northern forests, replacing the losses inflicted by the initial bombardment and the cavalry charge Hiero hadn't witnessed. The Abbey steamships, though still fighting fiercely, were taking heavy damage; Hiero saw one list sharply, smoke billowing from its engine room, its cannon falling silent. The lighter arrow barges, vulnerable despite their mantlets, suffered grievously from Unclean crossbow fire and hurled projectiles.

Demero's infantry, anchored on the wooded ridges, held their ground stubbornly, their disciplined volleys cutting swathes through the attacking Leemutes, but they were being slowly, inexorably pushed back, their flanks threatened by Man-rat infiltration through the denser woods. The morse cavalry, Hiero saw with a pang, had been withdrawn, their devastating charge likely blunted by the sheer mass of the enemy, their presence too valuable to waste in a static defensive battle. Where was Maluin? Where were the Mantans?

He swept the far-looker across the chaotic scene, searching for the tell-tale gray robes, the shielded minds, of the Unclean Masters. He found them, inevitably, near the center of the Unclean host - a cluster of figures directing the assault, their minds cold nodes of command amidst the surrounding frenzy. And among them, slightly apart, radiating an aura of power that dwarfed the others, was S'duna.

Even at this distance, even shielded, Hiero felt the implacable will of the Master of the Blue Circle, the architect of his past torment, the driving force behind this devastating invasion. S'duna was close to victory, close to breaking the back of the Northern resistance, close to achieving the dark goals nurtured over millennia of bitter exile.

Despair washed over Hiero, cold and numbing. Had it all been for nothing? The journey south, the discovery, the desperate escape? Had he merely delayed the inevitable? He looked at his companions - the weary but resolute Catfolk, their amber eyes fixed on the distant battle, their bodies coiled like springs. M'reen met his gaze, her thought a sharp, clear question. Now, Hiero? What now?

What now, indeed? He couldn't rejoin the main battle; they were too far, the enemy too numerous. He couldn't retreat; S'duna's victory here would mean the fall of the North, the end of everything they fought for. He felt trapped, helpless, the weight of impending defeat crushing him.

Then, another memory surfaced, unbidden. Solitaire. The ancient entity in its hidden lake. Its parting words, its strange gift. The shield. Not just a physical barrier, but something more, imbued perhaps with a fragment of Solitaire's own vast, enigmatic power. And another memory - the Threshold Control, the Emergency Biosphere Protocol, glimpsed in the dying moments of the Great Screen. What threshold? What protocol? Could it be...?

An idea, wild, desperate, born of utter necessity, began to form. A gamble far greater than any he had taken before. He looked again towards the battlefield, towards the shielded figure of S'duna directing the slaughter. He looked at the sky, clear now above the drifting smoke. He looked at his

companions, their faces turned towards him, waiting.

He made his decision. M'reen, he sent, his thought now sharp, decisive, infused with a desperate hope. You remember the journey? The feel of my mind when Solitaire... helped?

Yes, her response was instant, tinged with remembered awe.

Can you... amplify? Project? Not my thoughts, but... a call? A signal? On a frequency even the Unclean cannot block, cannot understand? A frequency tied to... the deepest life of this world? He projected the concept, the feeling, drawing on his heightened empathy, his connection to the Gaean undercurrents he had sensed.

M'reen hesitated, her mind grappling with the alien concept. Then, slowly, she nodded. Perhaps. With B'uorgh's strength. With... the Speaker's focus. She looked at him, her eyes wide. But what call, Hiero? To whom?

Hiero didn't answer directly. He focused his own will, reaching back, remembering the feel of Solitaire's mind, the immense, calm power, the deep connection to the ancient Earth. He shaped the call, not as words, but as pure intent, a plea for balance, a summons against the encroaching darkness, a desperate appeal to the hidden, slumbering forces that still resided within the wounded planet. He poured his own life force into the projection, amplifying it with the memory of Solitaire's touch, directing it outwards, towards the unseen thresholds, hoping against hope that something, somewhere, might hear, might answer.

He felt M'reen join him, her own considerable psychic strength merging with his, amplifying the call, giving it shape, resonance. He felt B'uorgh add his raw power, felt the younger warriors contribute their fierce focus. A silent, invisible beacon flared outwards from the wooded ridge, a desperate plea launched into the heart of the ancient world, while below them, the battle raged on, seemingly oblivious, marching towards its grim, inevitable conclusion. Hiero held the projection, draining himself utterly, knowing this was their last, perhaps fatal, gamble. The final reckoning was upon them, and its nature remained terrifyingly unknown.

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