

# 22. The Long Dawn

The psychic call pulsed outwards from the wooded ridge, a silent, desperate cry against the backdrop of roaring cannons and clashing steel. Hiero held the focus, pouring the last dregs of his spiritual and mental energy into the projection, augmented by the fierce concentration of M'reen and the raw power of B'uorgh, Za'reekh, and Ch'uirsh. It was an act of faith born of utter necessity, a plea launched into the vast, indifferent silence of the ancient world, hoping against hope for a response from forces unknown, perhaps unknowable. Below them, the battle raged, reaching its terrible crescendo.

He felt, rather than saw, the Metz lines begin to buckle. S'duna's relentless pressure, the sheer weight of Unclean numbers, the terrifying effectiveness of the Leemute shock troops spearheaded by shielded adepts – it was too much. The Abbey steamships, battered and smoking, fought on with grim determination, their cannons still spewing canister and langrage, but their formations were broken, their supporting fire sporadic. The infantry on the shore, caught between the hammer of the main assault and the anvil of the lake, yielded ground grudgingly, contesting every foot, but yielding nonetheless. Maluin, somewhere in that maelstrom, still fought, Hiero sensed his friend's steady, unyielding presence, but it was a solitary rock against an overwhelming tide.

He felt S'duna's mind, cold, triumphant, radiating waves of controlling malice, directing the final push. Victory was within the Unclean Master's grasp. The North lay open, the Abbey defenses shattered, the path cleared for the dark legions to pour forth, extinguishing the last embers of resistance. Hiero closed his eyes, bracing for the inevitable psychic backlash, the triumphant surge of hatred from the victor.

But it didn't come. Instead, something else happened. Something vast, slow, impossibly ancient, stirred. It wasn't a direct response to their call, not a conscious intervention. It felt more like... irritation. Like a slumbering giant disturbed by the persistent buzzing of insects near its ear. Hiero felt it first as a subtle shift in the psychic background noise, a deepening of the Gaeen entity's cold, indifferent awareness he had sensed earlier. But now, it wasn't indifferent. It was... annoyed.

The annoyance focused, not on Hiero's small party, but on the source of the greater disturbance – the raging battle, the chaotic expenditure of psychic energy, the unnatural violence intruding upon its ancient, patient processes. Specifically, it focused on the shielded minds of the Unclean adepts, the nodes of controlling intelligence directing the slaughter, their sharp, discordant mental signatures an irritant in the vast, slow current of the Other Mind's consciousness.

Hiero watched, stunned, through his fading mental link with the battlefield, as the very fabric of reality near the Unclean command center seemed to... distort. The air shimmered, not with heat, but with a chilling coldness. The ground itself, the solid rock and earth, seemed to ripple, to flow like water. Figures near the adepts – human soldiers, Howlers – cried out, their minds suddenly flooding Hiero's awareness with raw, unadulterated terror before being abruptly extinguished. They weren't killed in any conventional sense; they were... unmade, their physical forms dissolving, their

consciousness absorbed into the churning psychic vortex emanating from the annoyed Gaeon entity.

The effect on the Unclean host was instantaneous, catastrophic. The shielded adepts, the command structure, vanished from the psychic plane, their controlling will abruptly silenced, their minds perhaps consumed by the very entity they had sought to manipulate or ally with. Leaderless, terrified by the inexplicable horror unfolding in their midst, the Unclean army shattered. Panic, absolute and mindless, replaced disciplined aggression. Howlers turned on their handlers, Man-rats scrambled over each other in a desperate flight back towards the forest, human soldiers threw down their weapons and fled, their minds broken by forces beyond their comprehension.

Even S'duna... Hiero desperately sought the familiar signature of his arch-nemesis amidst the chaos. He felt it - shielded still, but wavering, receding rapidly eastward, abandoning his shattered army, fleeing the battlefield, prioritizing his own survival above all else. The Master of the Blue Circle, for all his power, was ultimately a coward when confronted by forces truly beyond his control.

On the ridge, Hiero collapsed, the psychic link finally severed, the resonance dampener dissolving as Sagenay slumped beside him, utterly spent but breathing evenly. The Catfolk let out soft, sighing purrs, their bodies trembling with reaction. Maluin appeared moments later, emerging from the forest below, his face incredulous, his billhook unstained.

"By the Saints..." the big man breathed, staring out at the disintegrating Unclean army, the inexplicable cessation of the psychic pressure. "What... what happened, priest?"

Hiero couldn't answer immediately. He lay on the cool moss, feeling the steady thrum of his own heartbeat, the clean air filling his lungs, the immense relief washing over him in waves. He looked at Sagenay, saw the faint smile on the young priest's lips. He looked at M'reen, her amber eyes meeting his with a shared understanding that needed no words. They hadn't summoned an ally. They had simply... annoyed a god. A dark, ancient, alien god, perhaps, but one whose irritation had inadvertently saved them all.

It took time to piece together the full picture. Reports filtered back from the battlefield as the Metz forces cautiously advanced, mopping up scattered pockets of resistance, securing the vast quantities of abandoned Unclean weaponry and supplies. The victory was absolute, overwhelming, yet achieved at a terrifying cost, not just in lives, but in the dawning awareness of the true scale of the forces shaping their world.

Sagenay recovered slowly, the vast knowledge within him gradually integrating with his own consciousness. Working with Demero's scholars and the newly arrived computers, he began the monumental task of unlocking the secrets of the past, deciphering the protocols for planetary restoration, analyzing the fragmentary data on the Gaeon entity. The path ahead, they realized, was not merely one of rebuilding civilization, but of understanding and perhaps, eventually, healing the deep wounds inflicted upon the Earth itself, both by humanity's past folly and by the ancient, alien consciousness stirring beneath its crust.

Hiero, relinquishing formal command back to Demero and the Abbey Council, found his own role shifting. He was no longer solely a Killman, nor purely a priest. The loss of his offensive mental powers, combined with the awakening of his deeper empathy, guided him towards a new path – one of diplomacy, understanding, bridge-building. He traveled extensively in the years that followed, north to the Otwah League, establishing closer ties, sharing the knowledge gleaned from Sagenay. He journeyed west, seeking out the elusive Dam People, strengthening the fragile alliance forged by Charoo, learning more of their ancient wisdom, their unique relationship with the natural world. He even maintained contact, through carefully shielded mental channels, with Gorm and the Wise Ones of the bear folk, exchanging knowledge, building trust between species long separated by fear and misunderstanding.

His greatest journey, however, was the one back south, to D'alwah. King Danyale IX, recovered and ruling wisely with the counsel of Mitrash and loyal nobles like Hamili, welcomed Hiero not just as a prince-consort, but as a vital link to the North, a symbol of the new, unified resistance against any future darkness. Hiero worked alongside Luchare, helping rebuild her fractured kingdom, fostering education, challenging ancient prejudices, slowly, patiently guiding D'alwah towards a future more aligned with the egalitarian principles of the Metz Republic, yet respectful of its own unique traditions. Their love, forged in battle, tempered by loss, deepened into a partnership that became the bedrock of D'alwah's slow recovery.

Children came – a son, inheriting Hiero's dark eyes and quiet strength, a daughter with Luchare's fierce spirit and regal bearing. They grew up in a world still perilous, still shadowed by the memory of the Unclean and the unsettling awareness of the slumbering Gaeon entity, yet a world filled with cautious hope, burgeoning alliances, and the slow, patient work of healing.

Hiero never fully regained his lost mental powers. The scars remained. But he learned to wield his heightened empathy, his deep connection to the life force, with increasing skill and wisdom. He became a listener, a mediator, a guardian not just of humanity, but of the fragile balance of all life on their wounded planet. He often sought solitude, walking the high ridges overlooking the Lantik Sea, his faithful Klotz ambling patiently beside him, his thoughts reaching out, touching the minds of bird and beast, feeling the slow pulse of the ancient Earth beneath his feet.

The Other Mind remained, a dormant but potent presence deep within the planet's core. S'duna, though stripped of his army and his command structure, still lurked somewhere in the vast northern wilderness, a festering source of potential evil. The struggle was not over; perhaps it never truly would be.

Yet, standing on the sun-warmed cliffs, the sea wind in his hair, Luchare's hand warm in his, Hiero felt not despair, but a quiet, enduring sense of purpose. They had faced the darkness, plumbed the depths, confronted ancient horrors and their own deepest fears. They had lost much, sacrificed greatly. But they had endured. They had learned. They had forged new alliances, rediscovered ancient knowledge, reaffirmed their connection to the life they fought to protect. The world was vast, mysterious, often terrifying, but it was also beautiful, resilient, filled with unexpected wonders and the enduring promise of renewal.

The Long Dawn had broken, not in a single, blinding flash, but gradually, tentatively, like the first pale light filtering through the high canopy of the Taig. It was a dawn filled with challenges,

uncertainties, the echoes of past sorrows. But it was dawn nonetheless. And Hiero Desteen, warrior, priest, prince, husband, father, guardian, turned his face towards the light, ready to walk the long path ahead, his resolve as steady and enduring as the ancient mountains themselves.

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