



# NO MAN LEFT BEHIND

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Explosions ripped apart the earth, sending great chunks of rock and soil to rain down on Major Elizabeth Maddox and the quickly retreating Cygnaran soldiers. The warcaster heard a trencher sergeant shout for smoke, and in moments her nostrils were stung by the familiar alchemical smell.

Protectorate troops had ambushed Maddox's small force on routine patrol along the Black River, which defined Cygnar's eastern border. Near as she could figure it, the attackers were part of a larger army marching north to Llael along a well-known resupply route the Cygnaran troops had nicknamed "Menite Alley."

For almost a decade, Cygnar had held back imperialistic conquests, fanatical crusades, and even an empire of dragon-blighted undead from consuming the Iron Kingdoms. While Cygnar allowed the Menites to move supplies unmolested provided its border was respected, the religious fanatics seized every opportunity to harass non-believers. In their twisted worldview, all humanity was under the law of Menoth, the Creator. It was their duty to bring Menoth's judgment by fire and sword. The Cygnarans acknowledged Menoth, but most had abandoned him centuries ago in favor of the god Morrow. To the Menites, such beliefs were an ongoing declaration of war.

*Let's have a look, Buster,* Maddox thought as she used the arcane mental connection she shared with her Ironclad to peer through its eyes. The six-ton warjack's scrappy personality had earned it the nickname, and even now she could feel its eagerness to charge back into the fight.

Maddox's brow furrowed as she saw the Protectorate troops weren't pursuing, only harrying the retreating Cygnarans with the inaccurate long-range rockets of their deliverer units. The Protectorate force outnumbered hers by a decent margin. In addition, the Menites had a pair of Crusader heavy warjacks—and even though this force lacked a warcaster, it included a soldier trained to marshal warjacks verbally. In short, they had her on the ropes. Why stop now?

Returning her attention to the soldiers around her, she performed a quick count of the platoon and felt a cold dread grip her chest. “Who are we missing?” she called out over the battlefield din.

“Calkins, ma’am. Took a crossbow bolt in the ambush.” The voice belonged to Sergeant Owens, and Maddox scanned the platoon for him.

“Killed?” Maddox asked.

“Can’t say for sure.”

Maddox immediately bellowed for her trencher platoon officer. “Lieutenant Hurst!” When he answered, she said, “We lost Private Calkins during our retreat. We need to go back for him.”

The lieutenant shook his head. “Ma’am, the Menites will have us dead to rights if we go back in there!”

Owens spoke again. “I hate to say it, Major, but he’s right. That ambush hit us hard. We’ve got a bunch of wounded and we’re dangerously low on ammo and smoke grenades.”

“I don’t like leaving a man behind, but going back risks the entire platoon,” Hurst added.

Maddox felt the scars beneath her warcaster armor prickle uncomfortably at the thought of the fate awaiting those captured by the Protectorate. A rush of agonizing memories flashed through her mind. She was not about to let one of her men suffer the same ordeal.

She didn’t bother looking at the trenchers’ faces; she knew what was there. Since her escape from the Protectorate temple prison months before, she’d become well accustomed to seeing that look from fellow soldiers: pity, shame, uncertainty. She’d rotted in that cell for nearly *four years*. At first the priests had asked various questions at the end

of their torture implements. She'd gritted her teeth and sweated and screamed and spit, and they'd gotten nothing from her.

Then the interrogations stopped, and eventually she learned that the Caspia-Sul war had ended. She prepared for her release, but it never came. The scrutators had ordered her kept against the need for further interrogation but had never returned. As a warcaster she was too dangerous to simply release, and her jailors instead fed her lies to poison her spirit. *Cygnar knows you are here*, they told her, *and out of shame they do nothing*. Most people would have been broken by the experience. That was, after all, what the priesthood of the Protectorate excelled at—destroying a person's will by fire and pain.

But Elizabeth Maddox was not so easy to break. She had waited, biding her time until the opportunity had presented itself. And when it had come, she had escaped, bringing several other prisoners out with her. She had returned to a hero's welcome, to her face plastered across recruitment posters and newspapers. She was the favored daughter of Caspia thought lost, who had clawed her way out of hell only to serve her beloved Cygnar once more in its fight against the enemies that surrounded it.

The story was less compelling to the men and women she fought beside. War was dangerous enough without having to worry about the stability of your commanding officer. Everyone knew how the Protectorate treated "heretics," and Maddox didn't fault them for questioning how anyone could have come out of it sane. Sometimes she wasn't even sure herself.

Once the initial excitement had died down, she could have gone home to her family farm. Morrow knew she'd earned a little peace in life. But she was raised to be a fighter, tough and loyal and stalwart in duty. She needed to prove, to herself as much as everyone else, that the Menites hadn't broken her. That she was still Beth Maddox. Someday she'd hang up her voltaic sword and go back to the simple life—but until then she had soldiers to save and Menites to kill.

She leveled a steady gaze at her officers. "He's alive, or the Menites would be giving chase right now."

Owens frowned. "Why go to all this trouble to capture a single private?"

"Because to them, breaking even one heretic on the wrack is a step toward ultimate victory." As she spoke, Maddox mentally stoked the arcane

turbine in her warcaster armor, feeling the familiar tingle across her face as the power field spooled up. "I'm not ordering anyone to come with me. But I am *not* leaving anyone behind." She turned and charged toward the Protectorate line, mentally commanding her warjacks to follow close behind and leaving the trenchers gaping. She impelled Buster forward, using its massive iron bulk as a bulwark between her and the incoming rocket fire.

Drawing upon her inner well of arcane power, Maddox sent runes about her Firefly as she cast a spell to increase its storm blaster's effective range. She took a moment to view the battlefield through the light warjack's eyes, guiding its next shot. Satisfaction filled her as she watched the blast of discharged lightning from the Firefly's weapon strike an Exemplar knight directly in the chest, turning him into a blackened husk. Tendrils of lightning arced into several of his fellows, electrocuting them as the voltaic energies grounded themselves in the earth.

Maddox switched her view to the eyes of her Lancer, which she'd sent running up to guard her left flank, trusting its heavy shield to protect it from the worst of the Protectorate fire. Its approach gave the Menites an immediate threat to occupy them. The arc node atop the warjack's torso hummed and sparked with energy as Maddox used it to channel a powerful electrical blast well beyond her normal range. Blue-white lightning blazed as the spell exploded through a cluster of Flameguard soldiers, their tower shields useless against the arcane attack.

With the smoke momentarily concealing the Cygnarans from the enemy, Maddox turned her attention to the pair of Crusaders. Even under the control of a 'jack marshal instead of a warcaster, the two heavy warjacks posed the greatest threat on the field. If they weren't eliminated quickly, her small force could all too easily be overwhelmed by the mass of ranked infantry.

Maddox took her dual-purpose weapon Tempest in hand. It was currently set for ranged combat, its blade divided to reveal a lightning coil at its center, fed with energy from a storm chamber. She released the lower grip and slid it along a ratcheted groove to lock into place as the cross guard. This snapped together the prongs that ran along the top and bottom of the weapon, swallowing the lightning coil to create a sword crackling with electricity. She gripped Tempest by its long hilt and advanced as she urged her 'jacks into the fray.

Mentally directing her Firefly and Lancer, Maddox kept her primary focus on Buster as the big blue 'jack barreled into the twin Crusaders with the power of a freight train. Its powerful servos whining, Buster brought the quake hammer in its left hand down to smash into the closer Crusader. The sound of the impact pealed across the battlefield. The Ironclad's quake hammer was designed to do much more than inflict physical damage, though. Mechanical activation plates mounted within the head and set to trigger on impact released stored power to send earth-shaking force against anything in the vicinity of the weapon. The resulting aftershock caused both Crusaders to stagger and fall just as Maddox and the Firefly reached the melee.

Runes blazed about her as she unleashed her most potent magical ability, drawing upon her inner rage to bestow kinetic force to her battlegroup's strikes. While Buster and her Firefly finished off the downed Protectorate warjacks, Maddox continued on, toward the Flameguard preceptor.

She ignored the Menite's tower shield and simply brought her blade down in a single arc, leveraging the might of the mechanical weapon along with her own power to cleave through both steel and soldier. She then pressed forward into the main bulk of the enemy. The Menites still outnumbered her force, and she was determined to keep their attention on her. Sparks spat as Protectorate weapons glanced off her armor's power field, the sheer number of blows finally causing it to falter. Dangerously exposed, she continued to fight on with a fury, cutting down Menites with precise blows from her weapon as she split her attention and power among her warjacks.

Maddox watched helplessly through the eyes of her Lancer as the light warjack was overwhelmed by coordinated blows from Flameguard spears and the blessed blades of several heavily armored Exemplars. Before she felt the tenacious machine's heartfire extinguish, she directed its last strike to impale the knight that dealt it the killing blow.

She grimaced as she felt a Flameguard spear pierce her left greave and the superheated spearhead scorch her leg. Her riposte took the offending Flameguard through the neck before she summoned another burst of arcane lightning to electrocute several more Menites in a flash of blue-white light. Despite this, Maddox felt the additional press of Protectorate troops upon her now that they were free of the Lancer's distraction, and she could sense victory slipping away. She was being overwhelmed by sheer numbers.

Suddenly the crack of rifle fire erupted to her left, and she saw several of the foremost Protectorate troops fall, their white robes blooming red. She heard Sergeant Owens' voice as he came up beside her and ran a Menite through with his bayonet.

"Glad to see you haven't finished the fight yet, Major!" he shouted. "The rest of the company woulda never let us live it down if we sat on our asses while you got Calkins back all on your own."

Maddox allowed herself a small smile as she saw the platoon fall in around her to engage the disordered enemy. Buster vented a howl-like burst of steam as it finished off the remaining Crusader and strode into the knot of Menites surrounding her. Beset now on multiple sides, the remaining Protectorate forces lost their will and broke. Morale was often more important than numbers, and their commanding officers were down.

It didn't take long following the battle for the trenchers to find their missing soldier. To Maddox's relief, the private was in a supply cart near the rear of the Protectorate line, bound and weak from blood loss but alive. The crossbow bolt was still firmly embedded in one shoulder.

When his comrades moved to cut him free, the man peered at them with glazed eyes. "What took you lot . . . so long? Thought I was gonna have to fight my way out . . ."

Sergeant Owens nodded toward Maddox. "Talk to the major. We'd be shining our boots right now, free of your sorry skin, if it weren't for her."

The woozy soldier looked to Maddox and raised his hand to give an appreciative salute. She returned it smartly, more certain than ever she had made the right call. No matter what the odds, Maddox vowed, she would always be there to make the difference for her men.

