



WARHAMMER
40,000

**THE BATTLE FOR
MARKGRAAF HIVE
JUSTIN D HILL**



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Justin D Hill

‘What the hell is happening?’ Madzen shouted across to Minka as auto-rounds ricocheted off the rocks about them.

Minka threw the straps of the vox-box off her shoulder and threw herself forwards into cover. She had one eye closed. The other lined her sights up with the head of a heretic. ‘They’re trying to kill us,’ she said between gritted teeth as she moved on to the next target and fired again. A double shot, just in case.

‘I guessed that,’ he snarled, his cheek pressed against the stock of his own lasrifle. ‘I meant...’

She didn’t bother to hear what he meant. And when Grogar’s heavy bolter opened up, it filled the subterranean chamber with muzzle flashes, fist-sized bolts and a thunder that drowned Madzen’s explanation.

A few moments earlier they’d stumbled out of an old sewer pipe into this vaulting space, lit throughout by the luminous green mould that covered ceiling and walls. The catacomb had been broken and reshaped by millennia of hive-quakes. The cracked ceiling sagged, the floor slanted steeply to the left, and a filthy pool filled the sunken end, where vast stalactites stabbed down from the ceiling like the fangs of some prehistoric monster. They’d had a brief moment to get their bearings, and then the ambush had been sprung. And now they were fighting desperately for their lives.

Minka fired a quick salvo into the darkness, lasrifle ready at her shoulder.

The heavy bolter roared once more, strobe-lighting dirty bestial faces swarming forwards through the gloom.

The Cadians did not panic. They knelt and fired, and fired once again. They were tight, disciplined, experienced. Like Minka, they’d all learned how to strip and fire a lasrifle before they could read. Fighting was more normal than civilian

life.

If their attackers had been half-trained, the Cadians would all have been dead now. But they were not. They were hive scum. And worse than that. They were *heretic* hive scum who'd turned their face from the light of the Emperor and deserved nothing more than a las-round to the face. It was like a wild force of nature coming up against the indomitable brickwork discipline of Cadia. And the Cadians cut the heretics down in droves.

At last the roar of the heavy bolter subsided and, for a moment, it seemed the attack was over. All Minka could see was twitching piles of dead and wounded. She scanned the chamber then lowered her lasrifle.

'Over there!' Sergeant Gaskar shouted from the middle of the line. In the darkness and confusion she couldn't see where he was pointing to, but at that moment more heretics erupted from the pool water only yards behind her. Spray hit her face and hands as she spun about.

Too late.

The blow hit her in the middle of her back and punched the air from her lungs. It slammed her face against the rockcrete slab and cut her lip as well. There was blood in her mouth as she whirled round and fired wildly.

The heretic was on her, and she knew in an instant that he was bigger and stronger than her. He bundled her face first into the dirt, his filthy and emaciated arms and legs enveloping her like a spider on her back. His black nails were in her mouth, grabbing at her throat, scratching for her eyes. But she was Cadian. She broke his fingers, dislocated his arm, and then dragged herself up to one knee and gutted him with her bayonet.

She put a pair of las-bolts into his belly, as well. Frekker.

The second wave came up out of the water and through a crack in the ground that allowed them to sneak right up to the line of rubble the Cadians were holding. It got tense, then. And close quarters.

Minka could never tell how long a battle lasted. It could be seconds or hours. The bark of the heavy bolter, the brief flashes of las-bolts, the scrape of knife on bone and steel, the shouts and screams of orders and of pain. She killed and killed and killed, and the intensity of the moment seemed to fill time. But at last Sergeant Gaskar put up a hand and shouted, 'Hold!' and Minka rested a shoulder against the fallen roof-beam before her and realised how much her ribs hurt.

The vox-unit lay on the floor, and two yards from that Madzen lay on his back. His throat had been cut from ear-to-ear. His head was pillowed in a pool of his

own gore. She felt sick in her gut. Markgraaf underhive wasn't worth the loss of Cadian lives, especially not Madzen's. Any dead Cadian was a waste. She cursed the braid-wearing frekker who'd dreamed up this mission.

The heretic who'd jumped her was lying a stone's throw away, face down, his back twisted at an unnatural angle. She couldn't see what he'd hit her with, but Throne it hurt. For a moment she relived his attack, felt his fingers on her face, scrabbling for her eyes, in her nostrils, in her mouth. She wanted to kick him again as she pulled her flak-armour plates forwards to see how bad his blow had been. There was no blood. Her fingers felt along the line of her ribs. Nothing broken, she thought, and then let out a long breath.

Sergeant Gaskar started the roll call. Grogar. Matrey. Rellan. Leonov. Aleksei. Isran. Artem too, unfortunately. She shouted her own name.

'Anyone else?' Gaskar shouted.

'Madzen's dead,' Minka shouted, and one by one the fallen were named. They'd lost six troopers. Three in the first seconds to auto-rounds and the others in hand-to-hand combat. Minka watched as the medic, Leonov, knelt by the wounded. There'd been ninety-six troopers in Fifth Platoon when they'd entered the underhive five days earlier.

They had stood on the pollution-grey ashen earthworks and looked up at Markgraaf Hive: a teeming termite mound of humanity that rose precipitously into the sky, burning and trailing a banner of smoke.

'They're under siege up there,' her sergeant said, meaning the patrician hive lords of the Richstar family. The sergeant's name was Fronsak. His regiment, the Cadian 2050th, had been amalgamated with Minka's the year before. He was a solid commander, with the professional manner typical of the Cadian officer class, and made it his duty to obey orders, take objectives and to keep them all alive, as much as possible. 'They're fighting a slow retreat up the hive.'

Minka stretched her head back to take in the mountainous bulk of the hive city. The peak of the massive conglomeration was too high to see with the naked eye. Fronsak handed Minka the magnoculars. She looked up, past the layers of smoke and burning, five miles above her head, to where the isolated white pinnacles and buttresses of the hive sparkled with ice. The hive lords couldn't have had more than thirty levels left to go before they were driven from the top of their home.

She handed the magnoculars back and looked about. Lines of Chimeras idled as the rest of the Cadian force disembarked, platoon by platoon. Further off, Hydra

platforms scanned the sky for any counter-attacks, and over the mounds and heaps of slag, she could see lines of local Calinbineer troops filing towards them. They looked weary and stoic, quite unlike the Cadians, who stood about with a business-like readiness.

And over the slag heaps a procession of skitarii accompanied three huge, tracked transporters that made the files of armour seem as small as beetles upon the plain.

Upon the back of each carriage, tended by servitors and fussing tech-priests, lay a vast tube hastily painted in the colours of the Richstars, the family whose various branches seemed to run this whole sector of Imperial space.

‘What are those?’

‘Hellbores,’ Fronsak said.

Minka said nothing. They looked like armoured tubes set with drill-teeth at one end. Each of the monstrous forgings was large enough to fit a platoon inside. A tunnelling transport that ground its way through earth and bedrock, under fortifications and behind the enemy lines. Which meant they would be sent deep into the heretic territory. A suicide mission if ever she’d seen one.

An hour later her platoon had filed up the ramp into the cramped troop compartments inside the Hellbore. They were rammed in. Face-to-face. Shoulder-to-shoulder. No room to drop a grenade, no way to pull a knife. The doors slammed and locked. A grating whine started as the tunnelling mechanism began to turn, and they were all thrown violently forwards as the Hellbore slid from its mountings and started to drill through the topsoil as easily as ploughing through snow.

The difficulty began when its ceramite teeth came up against bedrock and rockcrete foundations. The grinding mechanism screamed. The tube juddered, and they could hear the rumble of hive-quakes set off by the burrowing. From there on the journey stretched for hours, a gut-wrenching ordeal almost as unpleasant as warp transit. There had been sickening lurches, the constant noise and the habitual terror that their transport might break down or fail, or that a hive-quake might crush them all.

The heat and motion made her feel sick. What if we meet rock too tough to grind through? she thought. A cold sweat covered her hands, her forehead, the small of her back. Her stomach lurched. Her mouth was full of saliva. There was no room to vomit, though others did. She swallowed her bile back. It went up her nose. She could not keep it down. She shut her eyes as the stink began to fill the

stifling chamber. She prayed to the Throne, to the Ommissiah, to Saint Hallows, the patron saint of Cadia.

Hellbore indeed, she thought, finally realising how apt the name was.

It was almost a relief when the thing finally jolted to a halt, throwing them all forwards into each other. Lights flashed, a klaxon rang, the assault ramps crashed down and they spilled out into the half-collapsed tunnels of the lowest strata of Markgraaf.

There had been no sign of the enemy, just dripping catacombs that dated from the earliest days of the hive. The broken tunnels and sump-holes forced them to break into small units. It was slow-going into a world that had not seen the light of the sun for thousands of years. At first they used lumens, but everything was covered in a thick, wet mould that gave off a faint green luminescence, and once their eyes grew accustomed to its illumination, they saved their power packs for moments of need such as when consulting their maps.

Each squad had been issued with a rudimentary schematic, a rough impression of the hive, with their objective – the Great Chamber – clearly marked. They picked their way along crazed tunnels that meandered away, some collapsed, others flooded, or cut their way through vast pale slugs of congealed fat and filth from the city above, not knowing if they were drawing closer to the centre of the hive or not.

‘What is this Great Chamber?’ Ansen asked at one point.

‘There’s some kind of contraption apparently. Old mine shaft,’ Fronsak told them. ‘It’s the only place where there’s access to the upper levels.’

Or that was what they all had thought. The heretics clearly had other ways down into the underhive, because within hours it seemed that the Imperial counter-attack had been discovered and heretics were swarming into the underhive like rats. They were a motley band of tattooed gangers and underhive scum, drawn from the deepest pits of the mountain-city, their emaciated bodies burning with the conviction of heresy.

The Cadian thrust turned into a nightmarish city-fight in the collapsed intestines of the underhive. Sergeant Fronsak died on the second day of fighting, and there’d been three more sergeants since as the sump-war became a living hell of heretics and rock falls. Life by life the strength of the Cadian 101st was being whittled away, like a cathedral full of candle flames extinguished one by one. The longer it went on, the more Minka felt that she was part of a dying breed, a lost way of life, a species on the edge of extinction.

Now she crouched in this unknown chamber, her ribs aching from the blow the heretic had dealt her. She looked to Sergeant Gaskar. ‘So,’ she said, ‘which way now?’

Frekked if I know, Gaskar’s expression said. He jumped one of the cracks in the rockcrete floor, skirted the side of the water, pulled out his lumen and used it to pick his way round the edge of the flooded end of the chamber. A fallen metal joist blocked the way between two stalactites. It was embedded in pale drip-lime. He clambered over it, brushed the luminous mould off his hand. It was an unconscious gesture that left a glowing smear across his chest. Perfect target for a sniper to aim at. Gaskar clearly thought the same thing. He cursed and rubbed at the smear with the cuff of his sleeve, scratching his chin as if thinking. ‘Looks like the hivers came this way,’ he said, pointing to the far end of the chamber.

He turned and looked at them. From where she sat, Minka could see what Gaskar saw. The squad needed to rest. They were exhausted. You could read it in their faces.

Gaskar spat and pushed his helmet back from his head. ‘All right. Rellan and Aleksei, stand guard. Everyone else, get some rest.’

Grogar and Matrey set up the heavy bolter in the middle of the chamber while Minka found a hole next to Isran where they could watch the pool. Isran was one of those strange creatures who kept his lean body going on a combination of liquor, stimms and lho. He sat with his lasrifle between his legs, his hands folded over the top end, staring out into the darkness. Minka took a ration pack from her breast pocket. The foil seals were broken. She used her nails to pick the foil from the semi-hydrated slab within and held it out. ‘Want some?’

Isran shook his head. ‘Nah,’ he said, still staring out into the dark.

There was a tremble in the air. She lifted her hand and felt the vibrations come again, stronger this time. Dust drifted down from a crack in the ceiling and freckled the dark water’s surface. She thought for a moment of the vast, oppressive weight of the hive above her head and wished she hadn’t.

The rumble came again, longer now.

‘Think that’s a hive-quake?’ Minka said.

‘Could be,’ Isran said. His tone said there was nothing they could do about it.

The trembling faded. Minka ate some more. It came back a few moments later. It didn’t sound like hive-quake. But there was another sound. ‘What the hell is that?’ she said. It sounded like wet mouths feeding, out there in the shadows.

‘Rats,’ Isran said. Vermin and battlefields went together. It was nothing to be surprised at.

Minka washed the dehydrated food down with a short swig from her battered tin canteen, then dropped the ration pack to the floor. She looked about. Leonov had shut his eyes, but the rest of them were sitting watching, cleaning their weapons, checking their webbing, smoking lhos. Minka shut her eyes and imagined herself anywhere but here. She found her memory taking her back to a Whiteshield camp in the highlands above Kasr Myrak. She had been only fourteen or so, a young Whiteshield with a head full of dreams of fighting for the Imperium of Man. She remembered how her hair had whipped across her face as she watched the dawn breaking over Cadia, how the rising sun had lit the jagged mountain peaks, before cresting the ridge and bathing the world with light. The sun did not give heat at dawn, but it did give hope, and she closed her eyes and remembered that moment now. Cadia. Sunrise. The promise of another day to fight against their foes.

The trembling came again. Isran smiled. ‘Maybe that’s our reinforcements coming.’

Minka reached back for the vox. She’d been lugging this useless box around with her ever since the operator, Hama, got himself killed. It was three days ago that they’d last heard anything from HQ, and that had only been some high-ranking idiot giving orders as if there were any order down here to impose. Almost out of boredom she lifted the receiver and flipped it on. There was nothing but static. She tapped it against the wall. The note of the static remained unchanged.

‘Turn that off, will you!’ Artem hissed.

Every squad had a bastard, and Artem was theirs. Minka ignored him.

‘I said, switch it off.’

‘Frekk you,’ Minka told him.

Then Artem was looming up out of the shadows. His eyes were wide and white. They shone in the sickly light of the chamber. He grabbed the vox handset and slammed it against the broken slab of rockcrete. It was Munitorum issue, designed for rough conditions – the toughest the galaxy could throw at them – and the blow barely scratched it.

She gave him a look that said, *That’s Munitorum equipment, break it at your peril.* But he slammed it against the rock again.

‘Sit down!’ Gaskar told him.

‘Turn the frekking thing off will you!’ he shouted and threw it back at her. ‘It’s useless,’ Artem said. ‘Useless. Understand?’

Minka despised weakness, and she saw how the underhive had broken him.

When he came forward she shoved him back, both hands, the heels of her palms connecting with his sternum. ‘Get a hold of yourself!’ she said, but he kept coming, and the third time she reached for her knife. The sharp, ground steel gleamed pale green in the luminous light.

Minka wasn’t letting a frekk-head like Artem screw about with her. Her hand trembled. Not with fear but with fury. She could feel that surge of strength rising through her. ‘Try me,’ she said as he came for her again.

Suddenly Sergeant Gaskar was between them. He shoved them both back. ‘Stop this now,’ he shouted. ‘Throne! You’re Cadians!’

‘Cadia’s fallen!’ Artem hissed and threw his hand off. ‘Didn’t you hear?’

‘I said sit down, trooper. That is an order.’

Artem hesitated for a moment.

‘I said that’s an *order*.’

Artem turned and sat down. Gaskar turned to Minka.

‘You, too.’

‘Yes, sir,’ she said and smiled as she slumped back against the cavern wall. Isran gave her a sideways look that was hard to read. Minka realised she still had her knife in her hand. It was non-standard issue, a heavy blade that curved in on itself. Colonel Rath had given her one after Cadia. ‘You cannot unsheathe it without giving it blood,’ he said.

Minka had been with Rath throughout the siege of her home kasr. Now it was in her hand, unbloodied. In a casual, almost practised gesture, she ran the blade along the inside of her arm. Just enough to raise a bracelet of blood beads along her skin before slamming it back into the sheath.

She flicked the vox off. The sound of munching grew louder. She sat up and looked about. No one else seemed to have noticed it.

‘Sergeant Gaskar,’ she called. ‘Can you hear that?’

‘What?’

Something was tugging at her foot. She thought it was Isran at first, then remembered the rats. She looked down and saw what looked like a giant maggot fretting at the leather of her boot. It was as long as her forearm, a blind, translucent creature with a dark head and round, munching jaws.

She leaped up in disgust, stamped on the thing, ground her heel on its head. Even Isran stared down. ‘Throne,’ he said, and called out to the others. ‘You should see this!’

Gaskar and Matrey stared at the maggot. Leonov found another one as big as a dog and lit it up with las-bolts. The smell of burnt flesh hung in the air. The

sound of eating mouths grew louder. ‘Oh, Throne,’ Rellan said, his lumen stabbing out into the darkness. ‘There are hundreds of them.’

The floor of the chamber seemed to be moving. ‘Time to move out,’ Sergeant Gaskar announced abruptly. They stood up, slinging their packs onto their backs. Minka hauled the vox up as Gaskar led them down the centre of the chamber. He jumped the crack and started along the middle of the room, keeping well away from where the maggots were feeding on the dead.

They were halfway along the chamber floor when they came across another crack, deeper and darker than the rest. It was nearly two yards wide and exhaled a cold, rancid smell. Gaskar led them across, and when it was Minka’s turn, she put her thumbs through the vox-unit straps, checked her footing and jumped. Isran caught her and hauled her forwards. She turned, about to help Leonov across, when a las-round flared out from across the sump-lake. It hit Matrey in the shoulder, and he grunted with pain. More las-bolts flashed in from the right, and then the left, and in an instant it seemed they were surrounded, half on one side and half on the other.

Isran pulled Minka down to the side of the crack, where a roof-fall provided cover. Gaskar shouted bearings to each pair as they started to return fire, and Grogar set the tripod down, kicked the ammo feed to the side and started to shoot.

In a moment the sump-lake surface was wild water, with the boots of charging warriors, stitched shots of heavy bolters and the hissing steam of las-rounds all churning it up. A small figure climbed up between two stalactites. It stood for a moment, hands on the stalactites to either side, silhouetted by the luminous glow, crucified in silhouette. Minka fired and missed. She cursed herself. She had a moment to aim once more and made sure this time. She felt the hum of her lasrifle as the power pack engaged and spat a bolt of blue-white out of the barrel.

The flare filled her vision, and the bolt lit an eye-searing stripe across the pool surface. It up-lit the target’s face for a moment – a shaggy mess of hair, a snarling face that might once have been human – then the las-bolt connected and kinetic energy turned to searing heat.

Minka had seen the puff of steaming flesh many times. The figure fell into the lake with a splash, but where it had stood, three more figures appeared, clambering forwards. And when they were down, there were five behind them.

‘They’re coming up out of the water!’ Isran said.

She nodded and saw the point on the far side of the pool where they were emerging.

They worked together. She was in awe of his ferocious rate of fire. He was calm and methodical, as if he were working his way through the firing range. 'It's easy,' he always said. 'You pick out the highest priority target, kill it, then move on to the next.'

Minka felt a maggot at her boot. She kicked at it and aimed once more. Gaskar was shouting orders. It sounded like Aleksei had been hit as well. Leonov crawled over to him.

'Flesh wound,' Leonov called out. He was scrabbling through his pack for a medikit. Artem was shouting about the worms. Minka was too busy shooting to turn and look at what was behind her.

'They're coming up from the crack!' Gaskar shouted.

Minka risked a look behind her, and at that moment she saw a spinning grenade land near her elbow. Time slowed. She saw that it was Munitorum issue. Plain green drab with stencilled white serial numbers. She knew that it would kill both her and Isran if it went off, and that it would go off within seconds or even milliseconds, so instinctively she screamed a warning as she batted it back into the crack. She had no idea if Isran heard or not. She was ducking when the explosion went off. Shrapnel hit the back of her head and, to her left, a demo charge went off with its sudden distinctive *whoosh!* which brought part of the roof down. The force of the blast threw her down hard enough to knock her face into the rock before her. She couldn't tell if her flak jacket had saved her. Her shoulder ached, her lip was bleeding, there was blood on her chin and on the back of her palm.

A shape loomed over her. Her helmet clanged as metal scraped along it. It connected on her collarbone. She snarled and drove her bayonet into the figure's groin. She fired twice just to make sure, the las-bolts burning deep holes as they buried themselves into her assailant's soft, coiled guts.

She had to twist out of the way to pull the bayonet free. She staggered to her feet and slammed the lasrifle's butt down into the heretic's face, before loading a fresh power pack into the weapon.

To her left she heard Rellan go down. Isran was half-buried in rubble. Throne knew how they'd get out of this fix. Isran was moaning. She wanted to help him, but her focus was forward. So much so that when a hand rested on her shoulder she jolted and spun about, expecting a knife in the kidney or neck. But looking down at her was a Cadian face. An older man. Grey stubble. Lop-sided face. His name-badge read 'Bardski.'

Bardski barely acknowledged her. He didn't stop to talk but knelt beside her

and started to pump las-bolts across the chamber. Through the green glow she could see more Cadians picking their way stealthily forwards. A motley collection of about thirty survivors, pausing every so often to aim and fire. Thank the Emperor, she thought, but then she saw the figure at the back. He wore a dark leather cloak and a peaked hat. She caught Bardski's eye, and he gave her an apologetic look.

'Why the Throne did you have to bring him along?' Minka said. A commissar was all they needed.

Minka helped Isran pull himself out from under the girder that had fallen over him. His left arm was clearly broken. His face was pale. He swallowed back his pain as Minka plunged the needle into his shoulder. 'Morphia,' she said. 'Won't take long to kick in.'

Isran nodded. His eyes wandered, and she thought he might faint. 'Heh,' she said, tapping his cheek. 'You were right. It's our reinforcements.'

Commissar Haan wasted no time in introducing himself to those who were left of Minka's platoon. His face was disfigured by an old burn scar that pulled the side of his mouth back into a fierce snarl, and he seemed almost angry that Minka's squad had got to the cavern before them.

Minka could see at least five different units within his warband. Mostly Cadians; a couple of local Calibineers, their velvet jackets smeared with mud and mould; and a lone Valhallan Ice Warrior in a greatcoat and fur cap. The coat looked two sizes too big, like he'd taken it from a dead body, and his face was gaunt.

The commissar looked over his ragtag collection of troopers as a butcher would inspect his knife. 'Any sign of the Great Chamber?'

'None, sir,' Gaskar said. 'The hivers came from the water. And from up this crack here.'

The commissar looked down into the darkness and seemed not to find what he was looking for. He looked across the pool. 'I don't see where.'

'They came up out of the water. There must be a sump-hole there.'

The commissar seemed to like this. 'Right,' he said. 'That must be the way up.'

Gaskar didn't wait for the order. 'Cadians, forward!' he called out, and stepped down into the water, pushing the floating bodies aside, feeling his way as he waded knee-deep towards the other side of the chamber.

One by one the troopers followed, strung out with their lasrifles raised high through the dragon-maw of stalactites. Gaskar shone his lumen down into the

water. 'I can't see anything,' he said. The spear of white light panned back and forth, looking for an opening among the sunken rocks.

Commissar Haan pushed forwards. 'It's there somewhere.' He took the lumen himself, but couldn't find anything. At last, he said, 'You, soldier. Give me your lasrifle.'

'Me, sir?' Artem said, blinking as the lumen shone in his face.

'Yes,' the commissar said, turning the light down into the water again. As he did so something flicked through the beam. It was the tail of a maggot, twitching itself through the water.

'What is that?' Commissar Haan said.

'Hive maggots,' Sergeant Gaskar said. 'This room seems to be full of them.'

Commissar Haan pulled out his bolt pistol, used the lumen to locate the maggot's body. It was a yard long and thick as a man's waist, wriggling as it tried to push itself through the water. He fired a single bolt-round into the water. The spray hit them all. No one could tell if he'd killed the maggot or not.

'I can feel one,' someone said behind Minka. 'Throne! It just bit me.'

Minka could feel unseen creatures brush past their legs. Two maggots surfaced next to her. She drew her knife and slashed at them, but even cut in half they continued to writhe. She could feel discomfort start to turn to panic as another man was bitten.

'I said into the water!' the commissar ordered.

Artem's hand started shaking. 'But the maggots...' he started.

Commissar Haan's face showed disgust. 'The God-Emperor of Mankind does not care about hive maggots!'

The leather-coated figure stepped up beside him. Minka knew what was coming. She'd seen it before. Heard the moment recounted many times around campfires and during long warp transits. Seen men lift up their fingers, pistol-style to the side of the head and say the words 'In the name of the God-Emperor!'

She felt that it could have been any of them. Anyone could be standing there now with the cold barrel of a bolt pistol resting against their skin. 'Into the water, trooper,' the commissar ordered.

Artem closed his eyes and the sight transfixed Minka for a moment. She willed him to move. Willed him not to let his life end like this. At least for Cadia, she thought. For the shock troopers.

But then the bolt pistol fired: a bright flash of light and a moment later the report. The shot floored Artem sideways like a hammer to the head. Minka felt

cold dread. This was how it would end, she thought, as the commissar turned towards her.

‘You!’ he snapped.

Minka could not move.

‘Yes, sir!’ It was the man beside her who spoke. The Valhallan. She turned in astonishment as he pulled off his greatcoat and his cap and let them drop. She felt a moment’s shame as the Valhallan plunged into the water and the commissar used the lumen to follow his course. But then the man exploded out of the depths and the commissar caught hold of his webbing and dragged him up. The largest maggot they had seen was hanging off his shoulder. Its body was pulsing as it tightened its grip, dark gobbets of blood moving down into its gut.

Minka slashed with her knife. The first blow ripped the maggot’s belly open, the second cut it in half, but still the head clung on, and even as she dragged at it, the mouth-part would not come free. Suddenly the chamber shook. It was the dull roar she’d heard before, but now it was raging, and loud, and closing.

The whole company stopped and stared behind them. They looked back in disbelief as a lone figure entered the chamber and straightened to its full height. It seemed to fill the vaulting space. It was a giant – eight feet of power-armoured horror – with glowing red eyes that turned towards them and focused on them.

The thing was wrapped in chains; skulls hung from its loincloth, and impaled on the brass spikes that rose from its pauldrons were the decapitated heads of Imperial Guardsmen – Cadians, by the look of it – from which fresh goutts of gore still dripped. The monster stalked forwards, exuding pure evil.

Each leg was a column of plated might; each footfall was the crunch of ceramite on shattered rockcrete. It paced to where they had fought the last engagement and crossed the two-yard crack in a single stride. One great boot splashed down into the water. Only then did it engage the weapon that it held, a giant chainaxe that made the whole chamber shake. It was the roar she had heard as she’d eaten. It was the sound of doom. Of murder. Of unrelenting frenzy.

And then the axe fell silent. ‘Throne help us,’ Gaskar said as the figure took another giant step closer. Minka took an involuntary step backwards. She had a brief awareness of the Valhallan struggling to find his footing as it approached. It had the manner of a jungle cat coming across a wounded gazelle. It savoured the expectation of slaughter.

Commissar Haan rallied them. ‘In the name of the Emperor!’ And somehow Grogar spun the heavy bolter round, and shots hammered the air about the giant. The beleaguered soldiers of the Astra Militarum fired in a blinding fusillade.

Las-bolts flared out and many of them hit, but nothing stopped it. Not bolt-rounds. Not las-bolts. Not hive maggots. The single warrior was like a tank rolling towards them. It did not slow or pause, nor did it accelerate. It triggered the chainaxe again just as it reached their lines.

It cut the next Cadian into two unequal halves, and stoved in the ribcage of another with a massive armoured fist. Commissar Haan held his ground, but it didn't help him. His bolt pistol barked, the rounds pinging off the ruddy armour as he went for a weak spot. He did not find one. The gory blades of the chainaxe whined as their attacker swung, and the pitch of its engine went up a note as the ceramite teeth snagged on skull – but then it was through, and the chainaxe opened the commissar's torso up from neck to sternum, like a zipper on a camo suit. The commissar splashed down to his knees, and he paused for the briefest of moments as if praying in front of the Golden Throne, before slamming ruined face first into the bloody water.

The remaining men panicked. It made no difference. There was nowhere to flee to.

Isran shouted something about Cadia before he died to a blow of the chainaxe, which sprayed shreds of flesh and flak armour, bone and blood, webbing and human hair across those remaining.

Leonov's head tumbled before her as her blade scraped uselessly across the ceramite, and snagged in the piping of a knee joint. The vast creature pistol-whipped Bardski. The casual blow dislocating his skull from the vertebrae of his neck and showering his teeth across the chamber. Matrey went low, hoping to stab through the thing's groin-armour, but he died as its power-armoured knee connected with his face and broke his neck with a sharp snap.

Terror held Minka in its cupped palm as the denizen of hell turned towards her. It seemed to fill the chamber, four-foot broad shoulders and visored mask turning as one to focus on her with the eyes of a predator. She took another step back, and another, and stumbled as the ground beneath her gave way.

The liquid was shockingly cold on her scalp and neck. Something squirmed past her face. She felt the rough surface of a maggot's mouth brush past her ear and kicked furiously down. She kept expecting to hit the bottom but she fell a yard or more. She kicked up for air as the chainaxe roared down at the place where she had just been. Water erupted from its spinning teeth as she sucked in a breath and ducked down once more, pulling herself deeper. Something caught her ankle. She wanted to scream but she couldn't waste the breath. She felt for the edges of the rock. They cut and stung, but she did not care.

A maggot's smooth, bulging body pressed against her face. Her hands scrabbled forwards, searching for an opening. As she went deeper she could not tell what was a passageway and what was a contour of the rock. She found what she thought was an opening but butted up against stone. She backed up, found another and hit a wall of slime that might have been a maggot nest, and had to retreat again.

She had to exhale. The need went from insistent to a compulsion. But if she did she knew she would die. She had to go down. The heretics had done it. They must have come this way, and if they could do this, then by the Golden Throne, she could as well.

At last she found a way forward, but it was too narrow. She let the vox-unit go, but felt her shoulder pads catch on either side. She tore at her webbing. She could feel her lungs bursting within her chest. She fought so violently she cut her hand on the sharp rocks. There was something behind her. She felt her feet being grabbed and let her scream out in bubbles, and sucked in a lungful of filthy water that made her choke and gasp. She couldn't go forwards. Couldn't go back. She kicked free, but her lungs were full of filth.

She wrenched at the clips that held her armour in place. She got one arm free, then the other, and suddenly a hand was on her, dragging her up.

Minka found herself lying on a stone floor. She wheezed and coughed for what seemed like an eternity as vomit and filth came out of her nose and mouth.

At last, she opened her eyes and sucked in the sweetest breath she had ever inhaled. Wiping the water from her face, she blinked, trying to see where she was.

'Are you all right?' a voice said.

She blinked again as she pushed herself up to her knees. She couldn't make out who was talking to her. 'Who is that?' she said.

'Me.'

'Who the frekk is me?'

'Grogar,' the voice said.

She cleared her eyes and looked at the heavy bolter gunner in disbelief. She was full of questions but they could wait. None of that mattered. They were here and they were alive.

'Where are we?' Minka said.

Grogar pulled his lumen from its pouch. He wiped the casing dry, and gave her a look to say, *Let's see if this works.*

It did. The light flickered for a moment, then held true. He turned the beam upwards. In the circle of light, they could see a vaulted ceiling, mouldy plaster shapes crumbling away and, here and there, the glimmer of gold.

In niches in the wall there were statues. Somewhere nearby they could hear running water.

‘Is this the Great Chamber?’ Minka said, her feet squelching within her sodden boots.

‘No,’ he said slowly. ‘It can’t be. It was supposed to be a way up into the hive.’

They emptied water from their footwear, then Minka led Grogar over the fallen masonry to the nearest statue, which was about thirty feet across the tiled floor. It stood in a niche carved with interlocking aquilas. The figure stood on a bronze pedestal, thick now with verdigris, half-buried in dust and dirt and rubble.

It looked like it had once held a spear, but the spear had gone, and the other arm was broken off at the elbow. Despite the mould and the dust, it was unmistakably the figure of a female saint. Minka looked for an inscription. She could not find one, but she felt an immediate closeness with the helmed figure. She reached up and put her hand on the saint’s leg and flinched for a moment.

‘Do you feel that?’ she said to Grogar.

He put out his hand and touched the statue as well. ‘It’s warm!’ he said.

‘I don’t think any heretics have come here. They would have defaced it.’ She closed her eyes and let the warmth in the statue calm her. Conviction that she would not die here filled her. This must have been a chapel once. Whatever it had been, there was a power here still that the heretics avoided.

Grogar looked about. ‘This is some hole we’ve found ourselves in. Just the two of us. No las. No vox.’

Minka had seen tighter scrapes than this. ‘You weren’t on Cadia,’ she said. ‘I mean, at the end.’

‘No,’ he admitted. ‘I wasn’t.’ The big man’s cheeks coloured. The 2050th had been recalled to Cadia, but they’d been held up in the warp, and never made it. They felt guilty and resentful that they had not been there, to see Cadia fall.

‘I was,’ Minka said. She remembered the flight from her home and how, despite the terror and the horror and the loss, there was hardly a trooper who had not seen angels protecting them, or showing them the way.

When you were in a hole as deep and dark as this one, faith was the one thing that kept you alive.

‘Do you remember Cadia?’ she said urgently. ‘I mean, can you picture the place still, in your mind?’

Grogar pulled a face. 'Not really. I mean, I was only fifteen when I left...' He trailed off. 'It's been twenty years. I've seen so many other planets, they all start to blur.'

Minka was intense. 'Try and remember,' she said. She reached out and touched the statue. 'Picture yourself on the Caducades. Or picture the first time you saw Kasr Tyrok.'

Grogar pulled a face but she was insistent.

'Do it!' she ordered.

He shut his eyes, and she put his hand back to the statue and held it in place. Then she shut her own eyes. 'Think of Cadia. Can you see it?'

Minka could. The recollection of her home world was so powerful it almost made her weep. She pressed her eyes together and could smell the distinct salt-air smell of the rocky beaches along the Caducades coastline. She could feel the wind on her face, could feel herself clambering up the rocks to the top of the island, to listen to the moan of wind in the honeycomb of the pylon that stood there. She could see the searchlights of Kasr Tyrok, the flights of Thunderbolts heading into the sunset, and hear the klaxon sounding as the night watch began.

She did not know how long they stood there. The sensation of warmth grew, then receded. When it had gone entirely Minka felt almost deflated. But then she noticed something had changed. 'My clothes are dry,' she said. She took his hand and put it on her sleeve.

Grogar looked at her, and then looked down at his own Cadian drab combat suit. Only his boots were still wet. His jacket, trousers, flak armour were crusted with dry salt. He started to laugh. 'I'll be damned,' he said, but he was a simple-minded warrior and this was beyond his understanding.

But Minka understood. It was a miracle or a sign. Of that she was sure. She slapped his arm. 'Defeat is not an option. We have to get out of here. Don't you understand? This is the hour of utmost darkness. But we're Cadians. We survived. And the Imperium needs us.'

He nodded slowly, only just grasping what she meant. But one thing was easy enough to comprehend: this was the hour of darkness, and the Imperium needed them more than ever.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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