

BATTLECORPS

CASE WHITE: BY THE SWORD

Jason Schmetzer

Normandy

Terra

Word of Blake Protectorate

14 March 3068

Cadet Acolyte IV epsilon Thomas Abbott stood through the open hatch of his forty-ton *Watchman* on the sandy bluffs overlooking the Channel. He'd left his neurohelmet on the command couch beneath him. The chill, briny air blowing off the sea reminded him of the salt flats near his home, but the wind there had never been this cold. He shivered and dropped back into the command couch. The five-point restraints embraced him, and he put on the heavy helmet. Movement caught his attention through the *Watchman's* polarized ferroglass canopy.

Azrael.

Abbott shivered again.

Sandhurst Royal Military Academy
Terra
Word of Blake Protectorate
12 March 3068

Thomas Abbott was head of his class. The precentors treated him as such, giving him the extra work due one who excelled. Abbott didn't complain about the extra work; in truth, he needed the extra duties to keep himself busy. Sandhurst was a simple exercise for him. He'd known he would do well before he'd left home. He'd been reading Sun-Tzu and Jaime Wolf before other children were identifying letters. Soldiering was in his blood.

So when the visitor to his Advanced Tactics seminar asked a question he couldn't answer, Abbott felt warm anticipation wash through him. The hooded man leaned against his cane and waited for the cadet's answer.

"Sir, this cadet is not certain, sir," he said.

The hooded man straightened, taking his weight from his cane and then centering the slender steel rod in front of him. "It is a simple matter, cadet," he whispered. In the four hours he'd been lecturing, his voice had never risen above a whisper. "How do you win the no-win situation?" He paused, but spoke again when Abbott did not. "I know you have faced the Lyran La Mancha simulation, cadet. How did you do?"

Abbott suppressed a grin. "This cadet had four kills, sir."

"Yet you failed."

"The simulation is designed to test a cadet's response to failure," Abbott said. "Everyone loses." As soon as he said the words he wished he could draw them back.

"Kai Allard-Liao did not fail," the hooded man said. "Victor Davion did not fail."

Abbott sat up slightly straighter. "I am not Champion of Solaris, sir," he said.

Ethereal chuckles whispered from the hooded man's throat. "No, Cadet Abbott," he said. "You are not." He tapped his cane once against the stone floor, filling the chamber with a ringing echo. "But perhaps soon we shall see how you respond to failure."

Abbott frowned and opened his mouth to speak, to ask how this unnamed man who hid his face from the world knew so much about him. Before he could utter a sound, however, the alert Klaxon screamed to life in every corridor. Cadets lurched to their feet but stood, waiting. The hooded man made a small gesture to the instructor.

“To your alert stations!” Precentor Hicks called. “Move, cadets! Move!”

Abbott joined the flow of gray uniforms moving toward the doorway but was stopped by a steel cane barring his way. The hooded figure leaned in close, close enough that Abbott felt the warmth of the other man’s breath. It smelled of decay, and promised more. Abbott felt his legs stiffen, get ready to run.

“You stay with me, Cadet Abbott,” he said.

BATTLECORPS

Normandy
Terra
Word of Blake Protectorate
13 March 3068

Precentor XIII Edward Revere gripped his hair and wished for a moment he'd declined promotion thirteen years ago. Thirteen years. The number mocked him. He'd done his best to get the 166th Division ready for combat, and his best turned out to not be enough. He lifted his head and looked to the stars, watching the fiery tracks of more and more debris from the orbital battle burning up. It was his only consolation.

At least *his* best hadn't been the only performance not up to snuff.

"Precentor?" His adjutant stood at the edge of the tent's entrance, backlit by the floodlights they'd thrown up to try to make running repairs before morning. Revere scrubbed his hands across his face and stood from the camp stool.

"The scouts are reporting no contacts, Blake Militia or otherwise."

Revere frowned. "Not even the locals?"

"They could all still be in the shelters," the adjutant said. He pointed at the sky. "Maybe they're afraid of that."

"Or they know something we don't," Revere said. "What else?"

"We've got faint radio chatter on Com Guard frequencies to the northeast. Signals thinks it might be the Seventy-Ninth, sir."

"Blake be praised," Revere whispered. "How far?"

"Lithuania at least, sir," he said.

"What's our status?"

"Roughly ninety percent strength," the adjutant said. His confidence grew with each word. "None of our aerospace made it through, of course, but we landed more or less intact." He pointed behind him. "The DropShips are preparing to move to shelter."

Revere opened his mouth to speak. Blue-white lightning flashed outside, more brilliant than anything Revere had ever seen on any

world in the Inner Sphere. An instant later a crashing shockwave tore him from his feet and hurled him back into the collapsing tent. A series of concussions slapped at the tough fabric, which in turn slapped at Revere. Blue light and white light and orange light all mixed together in a *mélange* of chaos that tore at Revere's soul. He heard his adjutant screaming as the barrage continued. It seemed to go on forever.

At least a minute.

By the time Revere saw the sky again the ground had quieted, except for the boisterous shouting of a camp in danger. Several of the parked BattleMechs had fallen over. Revere ignored them, instead watching the northeast.

Watched as the lightning stabbed down from the clear sky again, and again, until it was only thunder in the distance and then gone, leaving the shock and silence of the dead.

"The DropShips," he whispered.

An alarm spun up behind him.

MV George McCallister

Terra

Word of Blake Protectorate

13 March 3068

The sky to the northeast quieted but the night air shuddered as the thunder continued. Abbott swallowed and drew his attention back into the compartment. The hooded man stood near a wall, stooped over his cane. He had been whispering inside his hood—communicating with someone, Abbott realized—for some time. The cadet had been admiring the 'Mechs on the sea vessel's broad deck. There was a BattleMech half-shadowed by the larger 'Mechs around it that was his: a *Watchman*. A cadet's 'Mech, to be sure...

But it was *his*.

"The heretic fleet is destroyed," the hooded man said. Abbott jerked in surprise at the voice. It was stronger, louder than it had been. "The 166th Division waits for us at Normandy."

"Normandy, sir?"

The cane tapped once on the deck. "You are aware of its significance, yes?"

"An ancient battle site?"

The cane tapped again. "Indeed. An invasion a thousand years ago. And now we invade again." The hooded man stood straighter, taller than Abbott had yet seen, better than two meters. "And with righteous fury, we will wipe this stain from blessed Terra."

Abbott swallowed. He'd heard the hooded man addressed as precentor. The 'Mechs around his on the deck wore broadswords, but were not painted the standard pristine white. They faded from black at their feet to gray at their heads, highlighted throughout with clear-sky blue. Each had a blood-red "51" painted on its left shoulder and a downward-thrust sword against a red triangle, overset against feathered white wings.

"Sir—" Abbott began.

"You wish to know who we are," the hooded man said. When Abbott nodded, a chuckle slid from beneath the hood. "It is a fair question. The Master has not yet revealed us to the galaxy at large, but our time is rapidly approaching."

He stood taller, more than two meters again, more than two and a half. The white hood fell back from his head. Abbott gasped, unable to restrain himself.

"We are the Fifty-First Shadow, Cadet Abbott." The handsome man speaking had a perfectly bald head, with no trace of stubble. Gray traceries stitched their way across his skull, gathering at his temples. He shook his shoulders to settle the cape more evenly across his broad neck. His eyes—*Blake preserve me*—his eyes peered into the cadet's soul. They were the color of ice—not blue, *ice*—and lit with the zeal of belief. He smiled down at the Sandhurst cadet.

"And I am Azrael, guardian of the Master's sacred Word and of Mother Terra." He raised a fist and clenched it. It was made entirely of gunmetal-gray steel. "And I will crush any who threaten either."

Abbott trembled. He told himself it was the vibration of the ship, and knew it was a lie. He forced himself to meet Azrael's eyes. *He knows.*

Azrael laughed.

**Near Carentan
Normandy
Terra
Word of Blake Protectorate
14 March 3068**

Adept Stanislaus Branch stopped his *Beowulf*, giving his heat sinks an opportunity to disperse the built-up energy of the short battle. He watched Acolyte Harmon's *Battle Hawk* grind the remains of a white-painted Chevalier light tank into the ground. A piece of the turret slithered out from beneath the thirty-ton BattleMech's foot, still bearing the sword-and-globe insignia of TerraSec.

"Ease off, Harmon," he said. "Let your heat come back down."

"Easy meat, Adept!" Harmon called.

"Six on three usually is, Harm," Branch muttered. Where were the frontline divisions? This was the second TerraSec probe they'd destroyed in ten hours. It was like they were coming in piecemeal, letting the One-Six-Six eat them up, instead of consolidating into something large enough to demand the attention of an entire Three (he always thought of it as III).

A tone sounded in Branch's helmet as his targeting computer acquired a new contact. He found the new icon with practiced ease. His fingers loosened from the triggers as the computer updated the contact to a friendly green icon and tagged it as a vehicle.

"New contacts coming from the coast," Acolyte Parkinson reported. The squat shape of a Beagle scout tank emerged from the hedgerows. "'Mechs and tanks, the scanner says."

Branch turned his *Beowulf* toward the sea. "The scanner says?"

"It locked onto a full Two of 'Mechs, Adept. I didn't stick around to count the lasers."

Branch shook his head, biting back yet another lecture on the purpose of a recon vehicle. The scanners counted for a lot, but doctrine had always been to eyeball the targets. If they'd had a chance to finish the training cycle, Parkinson would have learned that.

And if the Case White fleet hadn't been sabotaged, they'd have eyes in the sky.

If the Word of Blake hadn't taken Terra, none of this would be necessary.

Ifs and maybes would bury him if he let them.

"Let's get eyes-on before we report," Branch said. "Echelon west, people."

The *Beowulf* stalked a few steps before the tone sounded again in his helmet. He looked down, expecting to see the green icons of Acolytes Burton and Li-Tan returning from their own recon runs up the coast.

The icons were red.

**Near Carentan
Normany, Terra
Word of Blake Protectorate
14 March 3068**

The white *Watchman* stood out like a beacon among the identically painted 'Mechs of the Fifty-First. Abbott held his 'Mech ready where Azrael had directed him, watching the 'Mechs and vehicles—there was very little infantry, and all of it armored—of the Shadow Division muster on the bluffs overlooking the beach. Azrael's *Black Knight* stood motionless beside him. The sounds of cannon and particle beams carried across the gentle roar of the surf crashing against the beachhead. There was a rusting obstacle in the water, plainly visible against the well-polished machines of the Shadows.

"Why are you here, Cadet?" Azrael's voice whispered in Abbott's headset.

"To learn, Precentor," he said.

"Azrael will do," the cyborg said. Abbott saw the eyes behind his own every time he closed them, glowing and knowing and creeping through his soul. "And you are correct. To learn, but also to fight."

Abbott tightened his grip on the *Watchman*'s yokes. "I'm ready," he whispered.

"A unit fights in the hedgerows six hundred meters from us," Azrael said. The *Black Knight* pointed to the west. "We will assist." The *Black Knight* took a step and then paused, twisting back to look at him. "If you think yourself ready to fulfill Blake's Will."

He's an ogre, Abbott thought. He pushed the *Watchman* into motion, making sure the PPC and the lasers were hot. *But he can only kill me once*. He stalked his 'Mech past the *Black Knight* and shoved his way through the hedgerow.

"Very good," Azrael murmured.



Branch planted the *Beowulf*'s foot and spun, bringing his pulse laser around and triggering it. The gray-painted *Buccaneer*'s ar-

mor absorbed the hit without visible damage, but the *Beowulf*'s scanners painted another picture. *Another strike or two there and I've got him*, he thought.

"Adept!"

Lurching the *Beowulf* into motion again, Branch found Harmon's one-legged *Battle Hawk* struggling to pull itself along the torn soil. The stump of the Hawk's right calf hammered uselessly on the black dirt, but it was too slow. A *Wolverine* highlighted in blue ran forward and crushed Harmon's right arm into the dirt. Branch growled and brought the *Beowulf* around, still moving quickly, watching the laser's recharge status. It was too slow, too slow.

The *Wolverine* crouched and then, in a feat of piloting Branch would have said was impossible, looked up at him and *leered* before crushing Harmon's cockpit like an overripe melon beneath its club foot. Harmon's incoherent screams died in a sudden squelch of static.

"Back!" Branch called, searching his HUD for friendly icons. Only Parkinson's Beagle was left, scurrying about in full-throttle figure eights while it tried to clear a path through the hedgerow. "Back to Division, Parkinson. They have to be warned!" He swallowed his rage beneath a cold dose of duty and swung his crosshairs away from the killer *Wolverine*. He dialed the targeting computer down, selected a patch of hedge in Parkinson's path, and fired all three lasers.

"I'm through!" Parkinson called as the Beagle disappeared in a whorl of smoke. "Come on, Stan!"

"Right behind you," he muttered, and turned away from the gap. The two Word of Blake BattleMechs moved together to face him, moving like nothing Branch had ever seen. He raised the *Beowulf*'s arms over his head, then slowly brought them down, leveling the barrels at the *Buccaneer*. Static screeched and then cleared.

"Surrender," a flat voice said. It sounded like a voice synthesizer to Branch. "You cannot escape, and Blake forgives all who return to him."

The icons for his weapons flickered ready. The targeting computer chirped for a second and then warbled with a steady tone. Branch closed his mouth and breathed slowly in through his nose. He thought of his home, of the sea, of the salty taste of the air in the back of his throat. He thought of his family. He thought of his son.

"Blessed be the Father," he whispered. He fired, all three lasers, and hit the *Buccaneer* in the same place as before. He watched the medium 'Mech fall like a puppet with cut strings, saw a white *Watchman* burst through the hedgerow. He looked at the *Wolverine*.

It moved.

And, right before the end, he smelled the sea.



Abbott had never seen a *Beowulf* in the flesh, so to speak. He'd studied the design at Sandhurst, even fought it in the simulator. The thrashing corpse of the gyro-shot *Buccaneer* attested to the pilot's skill. But as he broke through the hedgerow, shouldering aside the trees that helped the hedge grow high enough to shield a 'Mech, all he saw was the *Wolverine*.

The Shadow Division 'Mech bounced forward on a short hop using its jump jets and landed on the run. The piloting instructor at Sandhurst, Precentor Ames, had pounded the impossibility of what Abbott had just seen into the cadet's head in simulation after simulation. The *Wolverine* skidded to the right and then jerked, throwing itself at the *Beowulf*. The blocky fist came around, caving in the *Beowulf*'s head even as the *Wolverine*'s torso-mounted weapons shredded its armor.

"Blake's Blood," Abbott whispered.

"And the Master's touch," Azrael said. The *Black Knight* stepped through the gap the *Watchman* had made, widening it. It stopped beside the *Buccaneer* even as the medium 'Mech continued its hopeless attempts to rise.

"That's not possible," Abbott whispered. The flush of excitement he'd felt during the seminar was gone, replaced by a gnawing frozen fear. Other 'Mechs of the Fifty-First crowded around, forming a circle around the fallen 'Mech. Behind them muffled secondary explosions wracked the corpse of the *Beowulf* where it lay. "You can't make a 'Mech do that."

"Manei Domini do not believe in impossible," Azrael said. His 'Mech shifted its weight, bringing the right-arm mounted heavy PPC to bear on the fallen Shadow. "Nor in failure." There was a flash, a dash of static through Abbott's headset, and then the *Buccaneer* was still.

"You killed him!"

"He was already dead," another voice put in. The *Watchman*'s HUD flashed a highlight around the *Wolverine* to identify the sender. "He wouldn't have been the same, not without a gyro."

Abbott frowned. "But that was just his 'Mech."

"Now it will be someone else's," Azrael said. There was a sound too fast and faint for Abbott to catch, and the other gray-painted 'Mechs spread out and moved west. The *Black Knight* was the last to move, waiting next to the *Watchman*.

"Do you begin to understand?"

Abbott was staring at the burned-out head cavity of the *Buccaneer*. "Understand?"

"Why you are here?"

Abbott blinked and looked at Azrael's 'Mech. The Fifty-First's insignia was prominent on the *Black Knight*'s chest. "This is not what we're taught at Sandhurst," he said. *Where is the Word of Blake insignia?*

The *Black Knight* began walking. Abbott pushed the *Watchman* into its wake, but his eyes went back to the fallen *Buccaneer* in his three-sixty vision strip. The other 'Mechs had already shoved paths through the hedgerow. He had to step over the burned-out corpse of a Beagle scout tank in the next clearing.

"The Sphere is about to change," Azrael said. "The new fighting is only the beginning. We will bring about the Third Transfer, and the Master's vision will lead all of humanity into a blessed future." The *Black Knight* broke into a run. *It looks like it's limping*, Abbott thought. *As if it needs a cane like its master.* "But first we have to show the unbelievers the error of their ways."

"By the book?" Abbott asked, pushing the *Watchman*'s throttle forward to follow.

"By the sword."

Near Cherbourg

Normandy, Terra

Word of Blake Protectorate

15 March 3068

The bandage was seeping again.

Revere wiped at the burgundy blood and the brackish yellow pus and tightened the strip again, wincing at the pain as he cut off the circulation in his lower left leg. The camp stool fell over when he took his weight off it. He stared at it for a long while, amazed at its disobedience.

“Sir?” Adept Warren stepped into the tent through the torn opening. He held a hand against the gash in his side, but his face was calm. “They’re coming again, Precentor.” He took Revere’s hand and helped the division commander stand and move outside. He could see the field very well from this spot, a slight bluff at the edge of the cleared fields.

He saw the bodies of his troops, spread like grain across the fields of Normandy, gathered like chaff under the scythes of the mysterious gray-and-blue ‘Mechs and tanks. He saw the *Black Knight* that had gutted his *Gunslinger*. He’d seen it in his dreams, during his small hour of rest, and saw it now, at the forefront of the advance, the small white *Watchman* tucked into its side like a child, following where it led. *Who are you, that you follow so close?*

“What strengths?”

“Everyone able to move or shoot is ready, Precentor,” Warren said. He pointed out several clusters of ‘Mechs and tanks surrounding the small warren of hunkered down infantry. So few, and so battered—all that was left of a complete Com Guard division.

“A day,” Revere whispered.

“Sir?”

“I killed them all in a day, Adept,” Revere said. “Branch and Dexter and the rest. All of them, the boys and the girls and even the veterans who should have known better. I killed them, because I brought them home to this Hell, where demons roost and Blake himself is absent from the world.” He spat the last, dissatisfied with the melodrama but unable to more clearly articulate the rage in his breast.

"It's not your fault, sir," Warren said.

"Watch," Revere ordered.

The leading gray-painted 'Mechs bounded forward, faster—*Christ in Heaven, so fast*—than any BattleMech was ever built to be. They moved like infantrymen, running crouched over, hunched, letting the first long-range shots of the One-Six-Six survivors fall where they may. An *Initiate* on the left flank fired first, sprinting in close and incinerating a battered *Nexus* with a single blast. Revere felt his chest seize, making it impossible to breathe, as the rest of the shadowy 'Mechs closed the gap.

"Blake's blood," Warren whispered. It was over that quickly.

Revere found his breath. "Blake's blood is spent, Adept," he said. "Every drop, watering the fields of Normandy like they were planted with Kentaran illweed." He shuddered and clutched the younger man's shoulder. "Tell them we surrender."

"They've ignored it before," Warren reminded him.

"Tell them again." He hobbled away, ignoring the fresh blood trickling down his calf.



Abbott looked around the small circle.

The Com Guard precentor was injured and bleeding from the leg. He used a rifle with a bent barrel as a crutch. His uniform was dirty—he was dirty—but more than that, he was haggard, exhausted. An adept in similar shape stood nearby, where he could catch the older man if he fell.

"He's beaten," Abbott whispered.

"Precentor Revere," Azrael said. He was stooped again, as Abbott had first seen him at Sandhurst. He'd pulled his hood up and stood leaning on his steel cane. His iron fist was hidden inside a long sleeve. "Welcome to Terra."

"I expect my survivors to be treated honorably," the Com Guard officer said. There was no fire in his voice.

"They'll be treated as we decide," Azrael said. He had brought no one else with him, only Abbott. They stood on the last battle-

field, surrounded by shattered men and machines. "As we treat any who dare attack the cradle of humanity."

"We tried to surrender," the adept said.

"You attacked us," Azrael said. "You attacked blessed Terra." The steel fist came out, shining in the blood-red light of twilight. "You attacked *me*."

Revere beckoned his officer back to his side, but turned slightly to face Abbott. "The *Watchman*," he said.

"Acolyte Thomas Abbott," he said. "Cadet-Acolyte."

Revere smiled faintly. "And what did you learn today, Cadet?"

Abbott had been dreading the question, expecting it from Azrael since the last battle. He'd killed a 'Mech, a Com Guard *Whitworth*, all on his own. The Shadows hadn't helped him. He was a MechWarrior.

"I learned," he said slowly, "that on Terra, Blake's will is law." He looked to Azrael, but the monster was silent. "I learned that Blake's servants are victorious." He straightened slightly and looked again at Revere. "I learned that my cause is just." *And that even monsters fight for Blake.*

Revere closed his eyes and shook his head.

And then he was gone.