

GHOST OF CHRISTMAS PRESENT

By Michael Stackpole

**Ford, Bolan Province
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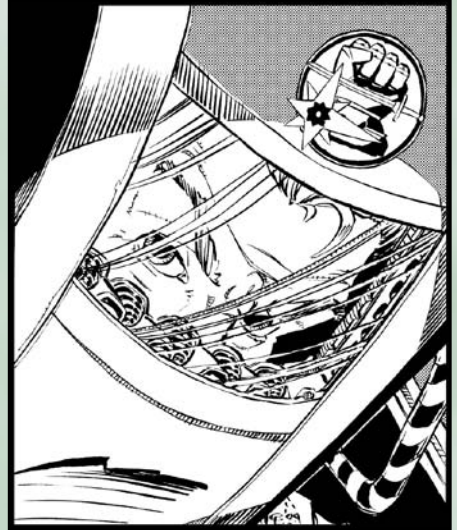
*"T'was the day of Christmas,
And all through the sector,
Not a BattleMech was stirring,
Not even a tractor."*

Cadet Nelson Geist shook his head. "God almighty, Nelson, you're a horrible poet."

He dutifully tried to keep his mind on patrolling, but on Christmas Day that was almost impossible. The Techs had put a tinsel garland around the inside of the windscreen on his *Phoenix Hawk* and had hung red and green balls from instrument panel latches. Had they had the time, he was pretty sure the 'Mech would have gone out painted red with white trim and a big white beard, but it didn't because the Techs wanted to be home with their own families. They had, however, managed to make a huge bow out of red plastic and plant it on the 'Mech's head, which made the machine look a bit festive.

The decorations did make him feel good. As he was going to be entering his final year at the Nagelring—the Lyran Commonwealth's premiere military academy—he had been assigned to winter semester training with Gregg's Long Striders. The Striders had progressed nicely since the 3025 assessment that had listed them as a green unit. When the Fourteenth Lyran Guards were temporarily assigned to Gienah after the 3027 Galahad exercises, Ford became the Striders' domain.

He arrived barely a month before Christmas and he had found the unit cordial but very wary. As a young unit, they were sensitive about having some academy-rat show up and try to tell them how to do things. Nelson knew that wasn't his job, nor was it something he desired to do. He was there to learn and did his best to earn the other warriors' respect.



He figured out almost immediately that an easy way to do that would be to volunteer for the Yule patrol. The day was normally split up into three-hour watches, with one BattleMech being assigned to a different sector. Nelson signed himself up for two patrols back to back and even ended up accepting another. Since his family was hundreds of light years away on Kookoo's Pleasure Pit, he had no one to celebrate with anyway, so taking duty was easy for him.

More important to him, though, was the chance it gave him to log some serious hours in a *Phoenix Hawk*. From the time he was a young boy he had found the very name of that 'Mech magical. He had read countless stories of battles in which the humanoid BattleMechs had performed heroically. The large laser held in the right hand provided long-range firepower, while the medium lasers mounted in each arm were good closer in. The *Phoenix Hawk* had twin 12.5mm machine guns in each arm for keeping infantry and light vehicles suppressed.

The main thing that had intrigued Nelson about the *Phoenix Hawk* was its jump jets, which allowed the machine to make crucial tactical advances and retreats during battles. If not for those jets, Davion *Phoenix Hawks* would have fallen to Liao *Crusaders* at Lee II and the Liao invasion would never have been turned back.

Nelson marched his *Phoenix Hawk* on through Alpha sector. The weather had turned cold and a light dusting of snow covered the whole area. "Christmas card weather," he had remarked to Lt. Lukens when Lukens checked him out on the *Phoenix Hawk*. "When you're at home in front of the fireplace, I'll be out here enjoying the view."

Lukens had not offered to change places with him, which didn't surprise Nelson at all. Even though the *Phoenix Hawk* had been in Lukens' family for two generations—his grandfather had taken it as a prize in the battle for Loric in 2971—Lukens preferred to spend the time at home with his bride of three months. Having seen the Lieutenant's wife, Nelson couldn't fault the man's choice of holiday diversion.

Nelson focused again on the viewscreen and saw nothing across the long, snow-choked meadow. He had been told that there was really nothing for him to worry about while on patrol. If House Marik was going to mount an assault they would spend four days coming in from the jump point around the sun, so there would be ample warning about the invasion.

"Of course, he could face Anti-Nick and the Elves from Hell," Bronson, his Tech, had chided Lukens. "He'd love to find Cadet Geist here in your *Phoenix Hawk* and all alone."

Tom Lukens shook his head. "Not likely."

Nelson raised an eyebrow. "Anti-Nick?"

Bronson smiled. "Yeah, there's a group of bandits who have, from time to time, gone raiding on Christmas. Response time is low, lots of loot can be had. They're two *Locusts* and a *Jenner* centered up around a *BattleMaster*. A-Nick is the *BattleMaster's* pilot. He speaks in rhyming couplets—a real nutcase. They have mostly raided far to the south, but..."

Lukens waved Bronson's concern away. "Some folks think they'll head north because the Fourteenth Lyran Guards are gone *and* the bank over in Harrison became a Commonwealth depository. They'd be nuts to try anything around the base here."

Nelson smiled. "I'll keep my eyes peeled. If I see them, I'll send out an alarm."

"Good, we'll all be ready to respond. If you see them, stay away from Anti-Nick and just track them. Good intel is better than a dead 'Mech." Lukens gave Nelson a friendly shot in the arm. "Especially when that 'Mech is *my* 'Mech."

"Message received and understood, sir."

Nelson glanced at the heat monitor. It was still down in the cool range, which he expected given the cold outside. He knew that in combat the jump jets, weapons and maneuvering would cause heat to build up quickly. The targeting computer would begin to go. It would also cut his speed and, if it was high enough, could cook off machine gun ammo and even shut down his whole 'Mech.

"Shut down Lt. Lukens' BattleMech, you mean," he mumbled to himself. He keyed the radio in his heavy neurohelmet. "Blitzen here. Sector Alpha is clear."

"North Pole to Blitzen, roger. Having fun out there, Cadet Geist?"

Nelson recognized the voice on the radio. "Bronson, you lose at poker with the CommTechs again? Must have been a hell of a hand to bet the third watch on Christmas on it."

"My full boat sank. Besides, gets me out of the house so my mother-in-law can't tell me I'm a layabout."

Nelson laughed. "So, was Santa good to you?"

"Not bad. I got a new set of actuator wrenches. If Santa gives you the 'Mech you were hoping for, I can fix it."

"No such luck, Bronson. Santa couldn't fit it on his sleigh."

"Next year, kid. You're a good pilot, they'll find you something when you leave the 'Ring."

"Thanks, Bronson. I hope you're right."

"I'm always right, Cadet. You should have let me fix you up with that old hangar door. You could just head up into the mountains and do some snowboarding on that 'Hawk."

"Too much egg-nog isn't good for you, Bronson."

"Hey, there's enough snow out there for it."

"I'm sure the ski tourists will be happy. Me, I'm just working like you. Blitzen out."

Nelson cut the radio link and started down the length of the meadow. At its longest point it led into a hilly valley in the foothills of the Thunderbird Mountains. The valley sides became steep and a hundred meters up from the plain where he marched, dark pine forests grew thickly. Because the region on Kookien's Pleasure Pit where Nelson grew up was arid, he was not used to tall pines and tangled forest depths. They made him uneasy and as the dying sun lengthened the shadows, he began to feel the hair on the back of his neck stand up.

C'mon, Nelson, it's a Christmas Card. Be a good boy, check it out and Santa will reward you. He smiled and shook his head. Unlike many other Cadets at the Nagelring, he had no family 'Mech waiting for him upon graduation. He'd get whatever the Lyran Commonwealth gave him, *if* they assigned him to a line unit. Guys with 'Mechs got those choice slots, whereas the *Dispossessed* or, like him, *unpossessed* warriors got to drive a desk until a machine opened up.

He took another long look at the valley. *It's still clear, Nelson. Nothing here to worry about.* He pushed his fears aside and headed into the valley. *You're in a forty-five ton war machine. Nothing can bother you in this thing.*

Something moved ahead of him and stepped clear of the forest. *Nothing but a bigger BattleMech.* Nelson squinted out through the viewscreen. *That's a BattleMaster!*

Nelson keyed his radio to a short range, wide-beam broadcast. "Please identify yourself. You are on restricted territory."

"Ho ho ho, you'll die in the snow!"

Nelson tapped the side of his neurohelmet. "This is not the time for games. Identify yourself." As he spoke, Nelson dropped his crosshairs on the humanoid 'Mech. *Range is long enough for the large laser to be my best bet.*

"Anti-Nick am I. Prepare to die."

Hmmm, I may be a bad poet, but apparently I'm not the worst poet around. Nelson hit the firing stud on the joystick in his right hand. The pistol-like large laser in the *Phoenix Hawk's* right hand ignited a ruby energy beam that lanced into the *BattleMaster's* chest. A half a ton of aligned crystal steel armor ran in steaming rivulets over the BattleMech's breast. It melted through the snow, raising vapor columns that twisted around the *BattleMaster*.

The *BattleMaster* fired back with the PPC mounted in its right arm. The firing coils glowed an unholy blue seconds before the particle beam shot out. It crackled through the cold air, and despite missing the *Phoenix Hawk*, its hellish heat warmed the 'Mech's cockpit. The azure beam exploded a leafless tree, scattering burning wooden fragments to oppose the dusk.

Move or die, Nelson, he might not miss the next time. He punched both feet down on the jump jet pedals and braced himself. Twin tongues of silver flame boosted the 'Mech into the air. Scanning his holographic display for a landing, he got a good look at the battlefield and his stomach began to fold in on itself. *This is not good at all.*

Down on the ground the pair of *Locusts* that worked with Anti-Nick started running from cover in the woods to his right. Their bobbing gait, caused because of the birdlike configuration of their legs, made them look funny and almost toy-like from his height. *But they aren't toys.* The medium lasers they sported were deadly and they could hem him in and herd him toward their large companion, the way dogs coursed deer to hunters.

He came down as far from the enemy as he could get, which put him on the edge of the upslope woods on the left. "Blitzen here, I have Anti-Nick and his elves."

"Sure, kid. Funny."

"North Pole, I'm not kidding. Sector Alpha, T-bird foothills." Nelson saw his large laser come back into service. *If the Locusts are here, where in hell is that Jenner?*

Out front he saw his 'Mech's shadow start long, then grow short as the *Jenner* jetted up from within the forest. Without conscious thought—thanks to endless drills at the Nagelring—Nelson stepped the *Phoenix Hawk* backward. He painted the *Jenner* with his crosshairs and kept the cross tracking it as the flying 'Mech overshot its target.

No one jumps on my head! Nelson squinted, watching the range finder figures fall. *You're mine now.* Keeping the enemy impaled on his sights, he hit two triggers and a firing stud.

The large laser skewered the *Jenner* with a ruby spike. Armor shards exploded from the ungainly 'Mech's left side. The two medium lasers Nelson had also triggered jabbed their red beams through the gaping hole the larger laser had opened up. Smoke poured from the wound and a secondary explosion spat out chunks of the 'Mech's titanium steel skeleton.

The jump jet mounted on the 'Mech's left side flared and died. The other two jump jets sputtered on for a moment and then died as well, leaving the *Jenner* airborne and slowly rotating to the left. The *Jenner* continued spinning as it accelerated, then it slammed into the ground on its left shoulder. One leg telescoped into the torso, but the left one snapped forward and sheared clean off.

As the left leg bounced away from the wreckage, Nelson blinked and stared at it. *I got it! I got it!* Years of drilling might have given him the skills, but all the simulations in the world couldn't match actual combat. The dryness in his mouth, the twisting in his stomach, the desire to see someone emerge from the wrecked 'Mech—none of that came from war games.

It's not stories anymore, Nelson. This is real and real serious.

Swallowing hard, he keyed his radio. "Bronson, I got the *Jenner*."

"Sure, kid."

A keening whine rattled through the speakers in Nelson's neuro-helmet. "This is no game, my honor you defame. *Phoenix Hawk*, you are mine to kill, which I now vow to do, I will."

"Cadet, if this is your idea of a joke..."

"Anything but, Bronson. Get me some help, will you?" Nelson stilled the shivers running through him. "I don't like the odds here."

"They'll be worse if you get the Leutenant's 'Mech hammered." Tension flooded through Bronson's voice. "Putting out the call. ETA twenty minutes. Think you can last that long?"

Down below him, in the valley, the two *Locusts* moved off and headed in toward Harrison and the bank. While he took some heart in the idea that he would only have to face one BattleMech, the fact that it was a *BattleMaster* killed any hope. The *BattleMaster* outmassed him by forty tons, had three times as many medium lasers as he did *and* had short-range missiles in addition to its particle projector cannon. He didn't even want to think about the differences in armor between the two 'Mechs.

"Maybe I can, but I'm betting your new spanners will get a great workout fixing this 'Mech if I do." He took a deep breath, then nodded. "The *Locusts* are headed for the bank. Stop them, will you?"

"Screw the bank, kid, or do you still have your Christmas Club account there?"

"Something like that. Do it, Bronson."

"Roger that."

Nelson tried to figure out if he had any advantages as he started his *Phoenix Hawk* back into the woods. He knew the cover would help conceal him, making him harder to hit. The *BattleMaster's* line of attack was uphill, which would also help. He had a sneaking suspicion, given their first exchange, that he was a better shot, but the *BattleMaster's* array of weapons gave Nick more chances to get lucky.

He searched his mind for all the technical data he'd memorized, searching for anything that might help him. *The PPC has a minimum effective range. Maybe I can use that...* Nelson peered out through the picket-line of trees between him and the meadow. *If we go toe to toe, I'm done.*

The *BattleMaster's* long confident strides through the meadow did nothing to set visions of sugar-plums dancing in Nelson's head. Snow shot up and out from in front of its massive feet, dusted the 'Mech and settled in clouds on the its backtrail. As nasty as he knew the machine to be, the light frosting of snow and the way it moved made it seem grand and almost benign. He couldn't help but admire the machine.

Then the *BattleMaster* made a sharp parade turn left and headed straight in at him.

"Spoiling for a fight, on what should be a silent night!" Nelson shuddered as he realized he was talking like his foe, then started tracking him with the crosshairs. "If you're going to give me the shots, I'm going to take them." At range he triggered the large laser and prayed for a Christmas present.

The ruby beam nailed the center of the 'Mech's chest. Sheets of armor, half-fluid and glowing warmly, spun away into the dim twilight. Nelson looked in vain for the same sort of critical opening his large laser had made in the *Jenner*, but he saw none. *That thing's got a lot more armor for me to burn through!*

The *BattleMaster*'s PPC came up and swung in his direction. The azure fork of pseudo-lightning it spat out threaded its way through the trees and savaged the *Phoenix Hawk*'s left arm. Armor shards clattered off the cockpit canopy and ricocheted into the darkness. Nelson's damage monitor reported the armor had been stripped clean off that limb. *One more shot there and the whole arm is gone, along with a medium laser and a machine gun. That would pretty much ruin my day.*

The *BattleMaster* charged forward, coming in at the *Phoenix Hawk* at full speed. The fourteen-meter tall war machine battered trees aside, snapping their trunks as if they were tinder. Showers of snow poured down, reducing the *BattleMaster* to a grey shadow in a blizzard, but a shadow that always came closer, relentless and implacable.

It seemed for a moment to Nelson that Anti-Nick wanted to physically grapple with him and tear his 'Mech apart. Aside from the fact that Leutnant Lukens would have frowned on having his 'Mech broken that way, Nelson had no intention of letting that happen. In that sort of fight, his chances of survival would have been the same in or out of the 'Mech, so discretion definitely seemed the better part of valor.

He's a bad shot and... Nelson slowly grinned. *He's a worse tactician.*

As the assault 'Mech closed, Nelson stomped down on the jump jets. He launched his 'Mech skyward, but pulled his feet off the pedals almost instantly, abbreviating his flight. He grounded the *Phoenix Hawk* behind the *BattleMaster* and turned, giving him a clean shot at the *BattleMaster*'s pristine back armor. *I'll just die if I miss at this range.*

The large laser's beam slashed a huge gash in the *BattleMaster's* rear armor but failed to breach it. The twin medium lasers followed up on that damage, widening the gash and vaporizing armor. The reddish beams filled the center of the assault 'Mech with fire and Nelson saw internal structures melt in the backglow. He waited for secondary explosions or even a little shudder, showing he'd done serious damage, but got nothing.

The *BattleMaster* never even made an attempt at turning around to face him. The two rear-facing lasers oriented on the *Phoenix Hawk* and returned fire. One bubbled away armor on the *Phoenix Hawk's* right thigh, reducing its protection by a third. The other beam drilled into the *Phoenix Hawk's* left breast and carved a crescent scar into its armor.

Heat swirled up through the cockpit and sweat beaded on Nelson's exposed flesh. Between jumping and triggering three weapons, he'd pushed the heat up to sixty percent of maximum capacity. His crosshairs started tracking poorly and he knew that his movement had been cut down. *If I don't get out of here, though, I'll have more problems than roasting to death.*

As the *BattleMaster* started to come around, Nelson hit the jump jets and launched himself skyward. Despite the added heat rushing up into his cockpit, he pushed the burn and sailed over the *BattleMaster's* head and on into the woods. He cut the jets and braced himself for a rough landing.

He came down hard. Trees snapped in half and toppled over, but somehow he managed to keep the 'Mech upright. The snow that had laden the tree branches sheeted down over him, but he knew it would give him no cover. The heat did begin to head back down into green ranges, which meant he had his mobility back. *And I'm going to have to use that as best I can.*

The whole situation resolved itself very quickly and easily in his mind. He was playing for time. If his reinforcements intercepted the *Locusts*, Anti-Nick would break things off and retreat. Survival was the key and the further along he could draw the *BattleMaster*, the greater the chances that the reinforcements would put an end to him once and for all.

There was no question in Nelson's mind that he was playing a very dangerous game. Reaching out with his left hand, he punched up a geographical survey map of the area on his auxiliary monitor and his sensors painted the oncoming *BattleMaster* onto it. Nelson kicked the *Phoenix Hawk* into motion, drawing his enemy away from Harrison and up into the mountains.

They entered into an absurd cat and mouse contest. Nelson risked the PPC by staying at longer ranges, but that kept him free of damage from the missiles and smaller weapons. His large laser did light up the woods, burning holes through the pine canopy. Rarely hit his foe, but often enough he lit a tree on fire. *If nothing else it will be easy for them to find us.*

The *BattleMaster* kept coming and as the minutes piled one on another, Nelson began to believe he might actually survive. He tried to call out to Bronson, but the mountains broke up radio transmissions. This he really didn't mind because it also meant his foe couldn't inflict couplets on him. He had to wonder about his foe and his odd Christmas tradition of shooting and looting to celebrate the holiday. *It must make sense to him.*

Nelson realized he didn't want to know *how* it made sense.

He continued to duck and dodge and retreat halfway up into the mountains when he discovered he'd made a tactical error. His retreat had taken him into a narrow draw with sheer sides. While one jump could carry him to a plateau on the south side, another would not be enough to get him out. He was also certain the *BattleMaster's* pilot wasn't going to let him jump behind him again for another shot at his back. By the time he discovered his mistake, he was too far in to get back out, and the *BattleMaster* appeared to seal the entrance and his fate.

"You can't run. You can't hide. Now this battle, we'll decide." The *BattleMaster* advanced slowly, coming straight up the middle of the draw. "Bad you're not. Take your best shot."

A million thoughts flashed through Nelson's mind. He could shoot, and might get lucky, but the odds were against it. Memories of exercises, of winter drills on Tharkad, of watching children play in snow and even the long treks he'd taken on skis across glaciers came to him. *If I had that hangar door, I might be able to snowboard right past that monster, just the way kids used to escape parents on holiday.*

Something sparked in the back of his mind, so he hit the jump jets and soared to the plateau. He landed and turned around, his 'Mech's left shoulder striking the rock wall behind him. Nelson looked down, and began to track his crosshair toward the *BattleMaster*, which had resumed its advance. *Clean shot. So tempting, but this isn't a day to give into temptation.*

"Nice escape try, but why? Even so high, you're just going to die."

Nelson shook his head. "Why the poetry? It's horrible."

Mock surprise ran through Nick's voice. "I thought it was festive. And it's not that bad."

"Yes, it is. Just like your aim."

"Let's hear you do better."

"Hear, no." Nelson shifted his aim point and raised the 'Mech's large laser. "See, you bet."

Nelson triggered the weapon and slashed the beam right to left, up through the darkness. Its verdant light illuminated the low grey clouds so heavily laden with snow. It pierced them and vanished, vaporized snowflakes drifting back up to condense again and fall.

"How cute, how quaint, a signal light. But there will be no help for you tonight." The *BattleMaster's* PPC came up and the charging coils began to glow. "On that ledge, you have an edge, but one hit and it's a long fall."

"I may fall, but not tonight." Nelson brought the *Phoenix Hawk* down into a crouch and inched back, letting the ledge shield as much of him as possible. The *BattleMaster* stepped back, lengthening the range, but improving his angle. Nelson would survive Nick's poor marksmanship for one or two bursts, then Nick would get the idea of slashing away at the rock. Once that was undercut, Nelson and the *Hawk* would come down in a 'Mech avalanche.

Fortunately, Nick never got the chance to figure out what he had to do to bring Nelson down. Even in his cockpit, with the wind howling and snow swirling, the low rumble came to Nelson. It grew, becoming equal parts tactile and auditory. It took a couple seconds more for Nick to get its full effect, sheltered as he was down in the draw.

And by the time he did, time had run out for him.

Having grown up in an arid region that never had much of a winter, Nelson Geist had had a lot of things to learn about winter and snow. Tharkad had plenty of both, and instructors at the Nagelring went to great pains to guarantee their cadets weren't going to fall prey to stupid things. He learned about frostbite and winter survival. He learned how to ski, both downhill and cross-country, and how to snowshoe. He even learned how to climb mountains in the winter and learned about the special dangers of generous snowfalls.

His large laser had cut through the clouds and burned into the mass of snow much higher up in the mountains. New snow over old created a fragile structure supporting a lot of weight. When the laser melted into that layer of old snow, the structure collapsed and with it came a lot of snow.

The avalanche picked up speed as it descended, sweeping rocks and trees along with it. The *BattleMaster* might well have been one of the largest land war machines ever created by the hand of man, but compared to the titanic forces of nature, it was something of a toy. Snow poured down into the draw in a frozen white flood. It slammed into the 'Mech's back, pitching it forward and face down. A rock the size of a small hovercar bounced up and off, then snow just buried Nick.

The snow kept coming, filling the draw. Nelson hit the jets as the snow lapped up at the ledge, but was able to land back down there easily. The snow came up to the 'Hawk's knees and was packed so solidly he had to kick his way clear to move forward. He sank down to mid-calf with each subsequent step, so he didn't venture very far.

He switched his scanners over to MagRes and got a clean picture of the *BattleMaster* laying face down, as if it were floating. *Floating at the bottom of a pool.* He dropped the crosshairs on the thing's head and keyed his radio.

"You're only going to be getting out of there with help. Surrender and I burn you a tunnel to climb out. If you don't, I burn that tunnel through the cockpit. Answering me in rhyme is the same as not surrendering."

Nick's voice came back faint and weak. "If I surrender, you'll be taking my 'Mech away, won't you?"

"You've been raiding and ruining Christmases for years, and you want me to be sympathetic over your being dispossessed?"

"That would be a no?"

"How right you are, yes sirree!" Nelson smiled. "Your 'Mech's going to belong to me."

"My poetry wasn't that bad."

"Yes, it was." Nelson frowned. "You coming out, or do I radio the base and tell them to requisition a body-bag and a new *BattleMaster* cockpit?"

"Tell them to bring blankets. And brandy." Resignation flooded through Nick's voice. "I'm going to want a lot of brandy."

"You've got it. You made the wise choice." Nelson fought and kept the laughter out of his voice. By the rules of combat, that *BattleMaster* would be his, which meant he'd get a good assignment in the LCAF. *With a 'Mech like that, anything is possible.*

"Oh, and Nick?"

"Yeah?"

"Merry Christmas."

The End

