

BATTLECORPS

THE DRAGON OF CAPH

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Contamination Zone

Caph

Word of Blake Protectorate

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The *Black Knight* stumbled as it crossed the shallow stream, but Adept II Epsilon Marcus Boylar clutched his controls and kept the seventy-five ton BattleMech on its feet. Groaning screams of tortured metal shrieked from the damaged actuator in the *Knight*'s left knee. Boylar felt the complex joint seizing; the *Knight*'s stride was becoming lopsided as the right leg outdistanced the left. He had to turn. He had to face him.

He had to die.

He'd never seen a BattleMech like this one before. The computers tagged its mass at seventy tons. It was barrel-chested, predatory. Its long arms—handless—ended in heavy energy weapons that had decimated his Level II. Boylar slowed his *Black Knight* and maneuvered it around an outcropping. Once he stopped moving, the heavy haze of Caph's atmosphere filled the space around him, polluted death to anyone foolish enough to walk around without a breather mask.

He waited. The static on his comm channels was stronger than ever, unfriendly ionizing radiation filling the ground and the air. The Demi-Precentor had sent his unit out to investigate a rumor from the locals. They always had rumors like this one, great avengers who would sweep the world clean of the Blessed Blake's holy servants. Every world that'd joined the Blake Protectorate so far had rumors like this one. They made good training maneuvers for first-year Adepts.

Except that this one was true.

The haze across the stream shivered and parted, and there it was. Painted a flat matte black, except for the vertical crimson blaze of a stylized dragon. A Kuritan, Boylar figured, but who could tell these days. Anyone and everyone with an axe to grind held it against the unbreakable strength of Blake's will. He raised the *Black Knight*'s right arm and the Hellstar PPC mounted there. He fired.

He missed.

The black 'Mech pivoted and took four steps closer to the edge of the water. Both sets of arms came up, as inexorable as the moon-

rise. Boylar cursed, jerked at his controls. His large lasers flashed red warnings at him instead of firing.

The black BattleMech fired, a trio of ruby large lasers that seemed to join into one beam to tear through his damaged knee. The *Black Knight* tipped and fell, smashing Boylar against his restraints and bloodying his lip. He thrust the *Knight*'s left hand out, trying to find purchase to push himself upright.

The crackling scythe of a PPC amputated his left hand at the wrist. The *Black Knight* fell again, crushing the emission bells for his chest-mounted medium lasers. Boylar struggled, thrashing the seventy-five ton BattleMech like a child's toy, trying to right himself. He felt the 'Mech slide, saw water splash against the sides of his canopy.

A shadow fell across his cockpit, and he looked up to see the black 'Mech standing over him.

"Who are you?" he asked over his external speakers. Maybe he could get the other MechWarrior talking and buy himself some time.

"I am Drago," the black 'Mech said. It raised its great clawed foot.

Boylar screamed, one final curse at Blake for betraying him, and then the darkness took him.



Demi-Precentor III Epsilon Alice Haywood watched as the salvage crews worked on the *Black Knight*. They'd already scraped what they could of Boylar together for shipment back to Terra. Haywood watched the sensors of her *Grand Crusader* closely, searching for this wraith that had taken half of her command without warning and without provocation. Two other Word of Blake BattleMechs stood with her, Acolyte Murtaugh's *Jackal* and Acolyte Jensen's *Toyama*. The rest of the Level II, three squads of Purifier battlesuits, were out scouring the landscape, trying to locate a trail to back-track the raider's course.

"Someone killed this 'Mech good, Demi-Precentor," one of the technicians reported. "Two limbs amputated, no head assembly, most of the weapons destroyed. We'll be a long time putting this one back together."

"And killed the pilot," she murmured. "Varth?"

The Purifier commander's reply was immediate. "Tracks to the east, Demi-Precentor. Toward Rehope, perhaps?"

"That's two hundred kilometers," she spat. "Boylar had orders to go barely ten klicks from this spot." She turned her *Grand Crusader* and surveyed the trees and the ridges above them. She gestured with one of the large pulse lasers that replaced the 'Mech's hands.

"Murtaugh. Get up on that hill and have a better look around."

The *Jackal* dove into the trees and disappeared. Haywood continued to scan the area, noting the heavy tracks made by the *Black Knight*. Scouts had already reported the corpses of the other 'Mechs of Boylar's command, half a kilometer into the woods. All shattered, all the pilots killed. The same claw-footed tracks they found here at the riverbank.

And shards of black armor. Samples of it were on the way to the compound for analysis.

Haywood turned away from the wreck of the *Black Knight*. She closed her eyes and whispered a prayer, trying to get the sensations out of her mind. The officer in her raged at the treatment of her troops, but her soul screamed for the things she'd never be able to feel again. The caress of Boylar's lips. The feel of his skin against hers, hot, sweat-slicked. The way he laughed when she tickled him. A new warmth spread through her, from her heart outward. She ground her teeth, holding back the scream that filled her mind.

She would make them pay. By Blake, she would catch whoever did this and make them pay.

"Demi-Precentor," Murtaugh said. Haywood looked up and saw his *Jackal* skylined on the ridgeline, most of a kilometer away. "There's nothing on the other side of the ridge to indicate a field camp. I can see where the rest of the unit was ambushed, but no sign of their attackers."

Varth cut into the conversation. "There are only signs of one 'Mech down here."

"One BattleMech against six?" Murtaugh said.

"I'm only reading the signs," Varth said.

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"Enough," Haywood said. "I want answers, not arguments."

Jensen moved his *Toyama* across the stream, following the tracks made by the unknown attacker. "Let's just follow these," he said.

"And get ambushed like Boylar?" Murtaugh said. The *Jackal* took a few steps back toward the stream, but then stopped. Haywood watched the thirty-ton 'Mech pivot at the waist, its fat PPC barrel tracking something beyond the ridge.

"I've got a signal," he said.

"Jensen, move," she said. "Get up there and support him." She slammed the throttle against its stops and maneuvered the *Grand Crusader* past the *Black Knight*'s hulk. "We're coming, Murtaugh. Wait for support."

"I'm painting something in the trees," he said. "Just under 750 meters away." He paused. "It's moving this way, Demi-Precentor. No response on IFF."

Haywood shouldered a stand of trees to the ground and shoved head. "Keep an eye on it but do not engage alone." She glanced at her tactical display. "Varth, keep up as best you can."

The *Jackal* retreated a few steps, putting the ridgeline between the unknown and its thinly-armored legs. Haywood knew from experience that Murtaugh would be sweeping with his PPC, trying to get a lock at extreme range. This was the kind of sniping the *Jackal* was built for. She clenched her jaw in frustration, cursing the adepts who'd designed her 'Mech so slow.

"More information, Murtaugh," she said.

"I can't get a solid MAD reading," he reported. "Something heavier than sixty tons, but I can't narrow it down any further." A burst of static belched across the airwaves as he fired the big PPC mounted on the *Jackal*'s shoulder.

"Damn it, Acolyte, I said don't fire!"

"Just trying to slow it down," he said.

"Follow your orders!"

Jensen's *Toyama* was a hundred meters further ahead of Haywood's *Grand Crusader*, a virtue of its greater speed. Varth and his Purifiers bounded along in the *Grand Crusader*'s wake,

taking advantage of the path she was clearing. All of them moved as quickly as possible, trying to get in range.

They were all too late.

"He's painting me!" Murtaugh's voice was higher but there was no trace of panic. "Seven hundred meters!"

Haywood looked up from her path and saw a single ruby laser flash past the *Jackal*. Murtaugh ducked the 'Mech away, like a man would dodge something that passed too close to him. The thirty-ton machine began to crouch. She heard Murtaugh engage his comm system, opening a channel and span of dead air. She saw the ruby flash again, saw it flicker through the air but stop against the *Jackal*'s round chest. She saw the back of the 'Mech explode outward as the large beamers drilled completely through the BattleMech's armor and structure.

She heard Murtaugh scream, and then nothing but dead carrier signal.

"I am Drago," she heard through haze and static. The persistent crackle of Caph's background noise cleared. "Remember me."

Haywood called the remnants of her Level II back to base.



The frosty mug chilled the tips of her fingers, but Haywood didn't let go. She wrapped her fingers tighter around the glass, trying to remember each tingle, each stab, as the blood in her fingertips cooled and traveled up the veins of her hand. She squeezed harder, until her knuckles cramped and she pried the cool claw of her hand from the mug.

"It's a new myth," Adept Pearson said.

"He's no myth," Jensen said. The acolyte sat across from his adept, beside the ROM adept. His own mug of ale was untouched, slowly sweating a ring of condensation around the base of the mug in the napkin. They were in a pub in Dallas, a mining outpost fifty klicks from Aswan. The locals were avoiding them, which wasn't surprising. The locals always avoided them.

"What I'm saying is," Pearson continued, "no one's heard of this guy any farther back than a year or so." He looked at the two epsi-

Ions. "Most of these rumors, they're decades, even centuries old. This one's recent. Brand new, in fact."

"So you're saying it's true, too," Haywood whispered.

The last time she'd been in Dallas, it had been with Boylar. They'd come here to be away from the II for a while. Just the two of them. They'd taken rooms in this very pub, she realized. She hadn't been paying attention before, but Boylar had gone downstairs for a cigar, afterwards. She smelled the same inky scent now.

"We already knew it was true, damn it," Jensen said. He snatched his ale from the table and downed half of it. Driblets ran down either side of his mouth, and he wiped them away with the sleeves of his robes. "Blake's Blood, man, you saw what he did to Boylar and Murtaugh."

"Actually," Pearson said, frowning at the dark spot forming on Jensen's stomach, "I didn't see."

"They're dead," Haywood said, before Jensen could speak.

"Then there really is a Dragon of Caph."

Haywood drew her personal communicator from a pocket in the folds of her robe. She laid it on the table and activated the tiny storage cache. Drago's boast whispered across the booth. Pearson stared at it like a child would stare at a toy.

"Drago. Dragon. It's true," Pearson said. His face lit up. "You realize, Demi-Precentor, that you've just disproved a myth!" He laid his hands flat on the table and laughed across them. "This is exactly why we're creating our Protectorate, don't you see? To bring enlightenment to the people!" Jensen stared at him. "What?"

Before he could reply the door to the pub opened and one of Haywood's infantry acolytes entered. The gray-clad trooper paused only long enough to locate his commander before he walked up and presented her with a noteputer.

"Adept Varth's compliments, Demi-Precentor," he said, and walked away.

Haywood slid the noteputer around and activated the screen. She recognized the alphanumeric codes as being from Murtaugh's battle ROMs. She pressed a key and played a pre-recorded section until it froze. An angular, black-painted BattleMech was centered on the screen, glimpsed between two stands of scrubby trees. The

image jittered with the ungainly seediness of high magnification, but it was enough for Haywood to see the 'Mech clearly.

"A *Nova Cat*," she murmured.

"A Clanner?" Jensen asked. "Here?"

"At least his OmniMech," she said. Pearson leaned over the table, trying to see the image.

"How interesting!" he said. "We've long postulated the Clans would cause their own myths in the coming years. Tides of change, and all that. Maybe this will be the first proof that this theory is correct."

Haywood looked up slowly. She blinked, long enough to erase the image of Boylar's killer from her eyes, and opened them to see the young, animated face of Adept Pearson. She blanked the noteputer screen and cleared her throat.

"What branch are you in?" she asked when the ROM agent looked up.

"Mu branch," he said.

"What division?"

Pearson glanced from Haywood to Jensen and back. "Anthropological Extrapolations," he said. "Adept Gerard's division."

Jensen chuckled under his breath. He shouldered Pearson out of the way and stood. Pearson slid back into the booth, but Haywood stood as well. He looked up at her.

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

Haywood clutched the noteputer to her chest. "Blake's will," she said. "This Clanner has killed His servants. We will find him, and deliver Blake's true justice."

"You'll what?"

Jensen slapped the slender ROM agent on the back of the head. "We're going to kill the bastard," he said. He turned and started for the door without looking to see if Haywood would follow or stay.

"You were right, Adept," she said, staring at nothing. "We're going to disprove a myth." She dropped a C-bill on the table to cover the tab. "We're going to slay the Dragon."



Haywood marched her *Grand Crusader* to the exact place where Murtaugh had died and stopped. If she looked down, she could see her BattleMechs' wide feet covering the scorch marks where the technicians had cut up the *Jackal* for scrap. The wiry grass, somehow immune to the filth corrupting the ecosystem here, was singed but still springy. She brought her comm system online and set it to broadcast in the clear.

"I seek the *Nova Cat*," she said. She raised the *Grand Crusader*'s arm and fired a burst from the left-mounted large pulse laser. The green bolts, scintillatingly bright even in the daytime sky, flashed across the treetops for kilometers. "Is he too cowardly to face me?" She fired the right laser, and repeated herself.

And did it all again.

And again.

The sun was sinking in the sky when a reply crackled across the tortured airwaves. "I am Drago," he announced.

Haywood watched her display, waiting for her powerful communications array to pinpoint the bandit's position. A Clan-made OmniMech should stand out even on Caph, she knew. But there was nothing.

"Face me," she said. She lowered the *Grand Crusader*'s arms, letting the lasers cool.

"I am facing you," Drago said. His signal was weak, distorted by the constant background interference. "And your other BattleMech. And your infantry."

She looked at the cluster of blue icons on her display, all behind and below her, halfway down the ridge. "You have killed many more than we," she said. "Surely you don't fear the few of us."

"We're moving up," Jensen said. His signal was distorted, as if he were far away, instead of barely two hundred meters. She turned the *Grand Crusader*, to watch the rest of her forces move up. A flicker of motion on her tactical display caught her attention.

"Blake's Blood," she whispered.

A black-painted *Nova Cat* clambered from a hidden passageway in the ridge wall barely a hundred meters from Jensen's position.

The Omni shook its bulbous shoulders free of clinging vines and scabrous dust and twisted at the waist. The heavy barrels of its PPCs came up.

“Jensen!” she screamed, too late.

“Mech!” an infantryman shouted.

Drago fired.

Twin Clan-made PPCs spewed high-energy lightning into the side of Jensen’s *Toyama*. In the six hundred years since BattleMechs were invented Mankind had created few weapons more deadly than the Clan PPC, and the destruction they wrought on the *Toyama* was proof of this yet again. Both ravening streams seemingly ate into the armor over the seventy-five-ton ‘Mech’s chest, spreading traceries of static across its entire torso, before diving into the rents and touching off the ammunition for the big missile rack embedded there. The entire upper half of the ‘Mech disappeared in an explosion.

Haywood, still screaming, fired. Her lasers took the *Nova Cat* in the belly, melting and fusing armor. Black paint blistered and peeled back, exposing primer-gray metal and then scorch marks. Her missiles exploded across the Omni’s shoulders, tearing at yet more armor. Her scanners, close enough to punch through the interference, painted a multicolored picture of the spectral OmniMech.

The *Nova Cat* was stripped, still battered from its fight with the rest of the unit.

“Varth!” she called. “Charge it. It’s damaged! We can take it!”

“But Jensen—” Varth said.

“Damn you, get your men *moving!*”

The *Nova Cat* staggered out of the cloud of debris kicked up by the missile barrage and charged down the hill, away from Haywood and the Purifiers. She started the *Grand Crusader* down the treacherous slope, letting the ‘Mech’s wide feet and eighty tons of mass create a path for her. Her cockpit shivered as the missiles recycled. A ping announced the lasers’ readiness.

She made it four steps before the missiles finished loading. Haywood dragged her reticle over the *Nova Cat*’s back and pulled her triggers, loosing forty more missiles after the Omni.

One flight missed wide, obliterating a stand of scrubby, gangrenous trees.

The other scattered explosions across Drago's back, wrecking the nearly-pristine paint there and shoving it several steps forward. The *Nova Cat* slowed, turned, and twisted around to face her. The three-barrel arm came up and red light flashed.

All three of the powerful beams slashed at her torso armor, one on her left side and the other two dead center. She had a moment's worry for the delicate extra-light engine beneath the tough armor, but it held up well enough. She raised the *Grand Crusader*'s arms, but the *Nova Cat* moved out of her lasers' effective range.

"Varth!" she shouted.

"He's faster than we are," the infantry Adept said. "We're trying to close."

"Faster than me, too," she murmured. Without Jensen, Drago was faster than all of the remaining Blakist forces. She had to find a way to turn him around. She had to slow him down, keep him in range. She had to make him angry.

"Run, *dezgra*," she called, taking a chance. "Run back to your mother."

The *Nova Cat* stopped.

"Get ready," she told Varth.

The missile launchers pinged their readiness, but Haywood waited, watching the *Nova Cat*. If he turned, she wanted a clear shot at the savaged armor on its front side. If he continued to run, she wanted to move to the small landing below her for a better firing position. Her fingers twitched on the triggers, but she held back.

"In range," Varth said.

The *Nova Cat* turned just as a cluster of slender ruby lasers erupted out of the woods. The Purifiers, secure in their mimetic camouflage, fired and fired again, sweeping in to strike at the *Nova Cat*'s weakened armor. Each of their lasers carried only a fraction of the power of the 'Mech-mounted versions, but there were many of them.

The *Nova Cat* charged forward, lasers flashing. The squads of Purifiers scattered, but at that short range the *Nova Cat*'s scanners must have picked them out of the background. The laser

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flashed again and again, until finally she heard Varth calling for anyone to respond over the open channel. She fired her missiles, watched them scatter harmlessly behind the OmniMech. The lasers flashed again, all three beams, and Varth's screams were cut off in a wash of static.

Haywood charged forward, pushing her ungainly BattleMech as fast as it would go. She watched the range drop: three hundred meters, two hundred. Her lasers tore at the armor over the *Nova Cat*'s arm and chest. She watched green coolant from shattered heat sinks spill out onto the tortured landscape. Her eyes widened. She flicked her HUD to infrared.

The *Nova Cat* glowed with unholy light.

Haywood loosed another barrage of missiles and watched them spiral in, exploding and tearing at the weakened protection over the *Nova Cat*'s heart. A diamond-bright spear appeared on the infrared display—she'd nicked the fusion engine's shielding. She grinned, squeezed the triggers, sending another wave of green laser light into the wounded 'Mech. Another splash of coolant littered the ground, wilting the springy grass as it fell. Heat rose in waves from the battered machine, but it advanced. The two big barrels of the PPCs rose. They aligned themselves with Haywood's cockpit. Sparks danced among the overheated capacitors. Haywood saw them surge.

The *Grand Crusader* fell.

Haywood's head slammed against the console, her neurohelmet slipping loose. She hung from her restraints, watching the one broken buckle that had let her head loose swinging below her. Slowly she reached out and manhandled the *Grand Crusader* onto its back. The neurohelmet fell back against its frame and she tightened the straps. She had to get up.

It took her two tries, but she staggered the eighty-ton 'Mech to its feet. The *Nova Cat* hadn't moved, hadn't even lowered its weapons. Haywood frowned, squinted, tried to focus. The HUD had slipped back to vislight. She toggled for infrared. The *Nova Cat* was an inferno.

It had shut down.

A shout of triumph echoed in her cockpit. She raised the *Grand Crusader*'s left arm and triggered the large pulse laser there. Nothing happened. She squeezed the trigger again, her eyes searching her console. Still nothing.

A red wireframe schematic blinked at her. The laser had been damaged when she rolled the big 'Mech over. She snarled a curse and started the *Grand Crusader* moving. The right arm weapons she held in reserve.

"Silly child," she broadcast. "Even first-years know to watch their heat curve."

There was no response.

"I don't know what you're doing here. I don't know how you got here." She stopped the assault 'Mech, barely three meters away from the frozen *Nova Cat*. "I don't care." She raised the *Grand Crusader*'s useless left arm and pushed the *Nova Cat* down. The powerful PPC-arm snapped off as the seventy-ton OmniMech collapsed. Haywood guided the *Grand Crusader* forward, putting the 'Mechs large right foot on the *Nova Cat*'s angular chest, and leaned forward.

"Blake knows you can fight," she said. "Maybe where you come from that's all you need." She ground the *Grand Crusader*'s heel down, shattering armor and driving the armored heel into the massive gyro. It exploded, shooting shards across the small clearing.

"On Caph," she said, switching to her external speakers, "you need something more. Here, and in the rest of the Protectorate, you need a will." She pushed down again, shattering the supports for the *Nova Cat*'s compact fusion engine. It collapsed, automatically damping itself. The 'Mech was dead. She raised the *Grand Crusader*'s right arm, aimed carefully. She wondered if this was how Boylar must have looked, just before Drago killed him at the stream. Had he looked at the barrel of a weapon, as Drago did?

"Blake's will be done," she said, and fired.