

BIRTH OF THE BATTLEMECH

On February 5, 2439, the future of warfare changed forever: the BattleMech saw its first baptism of fire. For sixteen long years, the Terran Hegemony kept this vastly superior new technology under wraps.

But it could not last.

In 2455, House Steiner gained plans for a BattleMech; House Davion received them in 2457; House Kurita in 2461; House Marik and Liao both in 2462: the universe would never be the same.

But cold, hard dates don't tell the whole story. Who were the men and women behind these pivotal events? What drove them? And what price did they pay to ensure the survival of their factions by giving their all to grasp the keystone of military technology for the next half-millennia

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Exploring the birth of the BattleMech across the Inner Sphere



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BREAK-AWAY

(Proliferation, Part I)

By Ilsa J. Bick



BATTLECORPS



"Naw, naw, we got that beat. Battle of Tybalt, Amanda and me did this break-away thing. Snuggled up real close. Meter, maybe. But, see, when you get painted, you look like one guy on GCI, right? So we're going speed of heat, and then just outside visual, Amanda slid out and did this roll, pulled real hard into a split-S, ninety degrees, and she's booming, peeling angels, and I'm playing the music so the Capellans lose the bubble. Then when I yell 'Go' she does this righteous bat turn. Thing of beauty: One-eighty roll, wings-level pull-out, hooking into their bellies, and then I'm loading angels, and the Capellans are loading angels, and they're so busy looking up at me, they never see her coming from below until she rips them a new asshole. Wingman vaporized and the lead bails, but no nylon letdown we could see, poor bastard.

"Anyway, yeah, break-away. Crazy damn stunt. Never work twice.

"But you know? You live for that kind of shit."

—Colonel Charles Kincaid, as overheard in the Double Ugly, Terra

October 19, 2435

Signal Mountain, Terra

December 22, 2438: 2030 hours

Hackett took sixty seconds to die, ten more than the colonel expected, and he bled like stink: twin ropes of dark blood spattering on icy rock, like water gurgling on concrete. Hackett's eyes went glassy and as his knees buckled, the colonel stayed with him, playing a wash of yellow light from his flash over Hackett's face: the star in the spotlight of a terminal drama. Wisps of blood steam curled in delicate fingers, misting the chill night air. Hackett's mouth was open, gawping like a fish as he tried to breathe, but the cut was deep and had sliced his trachea in two. A saving grace: he would suffocate long before he drowned or his body drained of blood. He would lose consciousness even before that. Then, Hackett toppled face-first and very hard. A dark red pool bloomed, spreading like dark machine oil chugging from an overturned bottle. Then the flow of blood dwindled as Hackett's heart failed. Stopped.

The colonel released a slow breath that coalesced in a miasma, a kind of giving up of the ghost. His knife hand – the right – was tacky, and he caught the scent of wet rust, like the bed of an old wagon left in the rain. The knife was a standard-issue HAF KA-BAR, black on black, with a straight edge seventeen centimeters long, and oily with blood. He cleaned his hands and then spent five minutes on the knife, cleaning and then applying a thin film of boot oil to the blade. When he was done, he slipped the knife into a sheath riding his right hip and secured the thumb break over the black leather grip. His fingers lingered over incised initials on the KA-BAR's bolt butt: C. K.

Squatting, he searched Hackett. The man didn't have much, but this was standard for a Level-C SERE exercise: Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape. He took the major's rations, a jackknife. Didn't need the axe or the major's KA-BAR. Instead, he peeled back the collar of Hackett's parka and then his BDU tunic, thermal and olive tee. His flash picked up a glint of chain. The chain was blood-slicked, but Hackett's identifier tags were a metallic blue, like the color of aluminum exposed to a flame. Unzipping the parka, the colonel jerked the tags from Hackett's neck then dropped them into a radio-opaque pouch that nestled against his own thermal tee to keep the tags warm. The metal chinked.

Thumbing off his flashlight, he fitted a pair of night vision goggles over his eyes. He'd made excellent time these last few days

but had kilometers to go before he slept. He raised his left wrist, depressed the stem of something that looked like a wristwatch but wasn't. In an instant, there was the glow of red digits. He tapped in a command and received more numbers, a bearing.

So he set out, slipping in and out of shadow, here and then as quickly gone: the avatar of a gathering storm.



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PROMETHEUS UNBOUND

(Proliferation, Part II)

By Herbert A. Beas II



Terran Hegemony BattleMech Complex
Hesperus II
Lyran Commonwealth
1903 hrs TST, 7 February 2455

Thuh-whump!

Ever since accepting this mission, even before five months of intensive training, the dreams—the nightmares—had haunted Colonel Simon Kelswa nearly every night.

Thuh-whump!

They played out like some horribly scripted holovid. The hyper-realism of the dreams—with vivid colors, echoing noises, even the icy chill of the wind—all magnified in his mind. Enhanced. Fused with importance. Ensnaring his thoughts while at the same time telling him they were not real. Not real at all.

Thuh-whump!

But this time, the colors were half-cloaked in shadows. The echoes came from the distant rumble of explosions and wailing sirens. The wind carried heat, fire, smoke, a stench of burning chemicals.

Thuh-whump!

But now the thumping was real. Far more real than even the holovid intel reports he saw years before. Real enough to shake the earth and rattle windows. Now, in the midst of a burning complex, the memory of those first images faded, replaced by the mind-blanking numbness that anchored Simon to a patch of rubble-strewn pavement. Stranding him in the midst of massive buildings wreathed in fire and smoke.

The monsters were coming!

Even Simon's nightmares failed to compare. The pounding, clanking symphony of death heralded an avatar of metal, one that he had hoped never to see this close, even when he accepted this assignment.

Thuh-whump! Thuh-whump!

Each footfall of the lead monster shook the earth, raising a cloud of dust from the ground all around him. Larger bits of de-

bris danced to the rhythm. The sound reverberated across the manmade canyon of office buildings, stopping Simon's heart with every world-crushing impact. Over the din, he was dimly aware of someone shouting at him, calling out his name in angry, urgent tones.

But it was too late.

The monsters were upon them.

Thuh-whump!

With one more bone-rattling footfall, the first monstrosity of metal, its desert-mottled hide harshly outlined in orange light, finally rounded the corner. Backlit by licking flames and flickering streetlamps, with its legs and lower torso wreathed in a low-hanging cloud of gray-black smoke, it looked for all the world like a titanic wind devil, emerging from the Inferno itself.

Simon's eyes, dry and stinging, bulged at the sight. Of their own volition, his lungs drew in another gulp of searing Hesperan air through clenched teeth, mindless of the choking taste of scorched metals and ozone.

The monster's shoulders brushed past three-story office buildings and warehouses as casually as a man strolling through a crowded parking lot. Its head, a bulb of metal atop a mountain of armor, presented a round portal of infinite ferroglass blackness for a face, an eye that swept across the grounds as it turned.

That eye of gleaming darkness, seeking prey, froze Simon in place like a Tharkan gazelle in the headlamps of an oncoming hovercruiser.

It sees me!



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