

BATTLECORPS

MONSTER

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The battle had ended in silence.

He'd stood anchored at the port in the 'Mech bay the entire time, looking through the small—barely twenty centimeter—glass as the DropShips and fighters swirled through space. For the first time he understood what the Master had spoken about. He saw the cleansing of the glorious battle. The silent explosions. The dazzling particle streamers. The DropShip shook from time to time, but he was not worried. Surely the divine servants of Blake's Will could not be defeated by rabble.

And then the DropShip shuddered, and there was a fleeting, brilliant flash of light through the porthole, and then silence.

That had been four days earlier.

The last man had died a day after that. One of the BattleMech technicians, in the bay with him. Shrapnel had torn his throat out when the motor of an overworked scrubber exploded and destroyed its housing. They were all dead now, the crew and the passengers.

Except him.

* * *

The shuttle's hull shuddered as it made contact with the Leopard's skin. After a few tedious moments, the S-7's crew chief stepped away from the hatch and motioned to the infantryman. "There's atmosphere," he said, indicating a bank of green and orange lights on the airlock console. "It's dirty, and cold, but you can breathe it."

Marine Sergeant Oswald—Oz—Stearns nodded and turned back to his squad. The six other marines were outfitted much the same as he was: gray-black fatigues, combat harness, and the thick-bodied tanks of respirators strapped to their backs. Each of them looked at him with the same intense stare. They'd been training for this since the Light Horse left Ziliang.

“Rules of engagement are defensive,” Oz said. “The Major wants this one intact.”

“Then maybe the Major should come and collect it,” Haney said. He racked the charging handle on his Blazer. “Somebody comes at me, I’m burning them down.”

Oz smiled. “Good. That’s the rules. If they move on you, burn ‘em.” The whole team carried lasers, although they had slug-throwers for sidearms. “It’s a Word of Blake ship.” He checked the charge on his Intek. “No chances.”

The shuttle’s crew chief slid the hatch open. The outer airlock door immediately frosted over as the chilled metal drew moisture from the shuttle’s air. Oz tested the action on his sling and nodded to the chief. His sights were leveled at the star-and-broadsword emblem painted on the door. The chief hefted a flat-headed hammer and knocked twice against the door. After a moment, he did it again.

“At least they know we’re coming now,” Haney muttered.

“Damp it,” Oz said. “So far this is a rescue op.” He whetted his upper lip and nodded again to the chief. “Open it.” He checked the stickiness of his magnetic boots, raising one foot, and then the other. Just right. He’d be able to move almost like normal, despite the lack of gravity. It wasn’t a natural movement—raw zero-g grunts learned about muscles they’d never used in their lives—but training made it second nature.

The squad rushed into the Leopard’s small airlock, weapons leveled. The shuttle crew closed the hatches behind them, but they had orders to stay docked in case the squad needed to evacuate in a hurry. A red touchpad on the inner airlock console changed to green as soon as the seals hissed shut behind them. Oz waited a heartbeat, then reached over and pushed it. The inner door slid to the side.

Thick, smoke-filled air filled the small room. Oz’s nose twitched before he could get his mouth open. He fought down a sneeze and the urge to bring the mask of his respirator around from where it hung down his neck. Two steps put him in the corridor outside the airlock. He turned left and went to one knee, rifle leveled. He felt Haney crouch behind him. The others would be facing the other way, with Grossman watching the rear.

“Clear left,” Oz said.

"Clear right," Benitez said.

Oz let his arms slacken. The Intek still pointed down the corridor, but he was concentrating on other things. He closed his eyes and breathed in deeply through his nose. Smoke tickled the back of his throat and clogged his sinuses, but he found something else.

"Piss," he murmured. "And blood. Old blood."

Haney took two steps forward, shining the light attached to his Blazer at the floor. "A deader," he said. Oz stepped closer and knelt again. The woman was wearing gray Blakist fatigues. She'd been killed by something smashing the upper half of her head away. Oz looked up and around. There were panels and protrusions all over the ceiling. Damage, then.

"You think they're all gone?" Haney asked.

"I hope so," Oz said. He stood away from the body and turned his back on it. "Otherwise they should have policed the bodies." He kicked a bit of detritus with his boot, watching it float down the corridor.

"Should we start our sweep, then?" Grossman asked.

Somewhere in the dead ship, a hatch clanged shut. The ringing sound raced down the corridor and echoed in small spaces. Oz spun and knelt, presenting his rifle. The thin glaze of smoke in the air swirled in random patterns, pushed about by the squad's movements.

"Just a door," Haney whispered.

"Yeah," Oz whispered back. He made a circle with right hand and then pointed forward. "But who closed it?" He took a step forward, into the darkness.

* * *

Someone was aboard.

He felt the vibrations in the deck, two sets of two. He pushed off the cargo bin he'd been crouched against and moved into the corridor. It was the starboard airlock, then. He'd been watching the port side. The pain in his head and chest made him wince with each step, but that was old pain, familiar pain. It was his reminder of his devotion to the Master.

Could it be rescue? he wondered. *What if it's not?*

At the end of his right arm, something clicked.

* * *

"What's this at the end of this corridor?" Oz whispered.

"Cargo bays." Haney had a small noteputer out. Deck plans for the *Leopard*-class DropShip glowed at him from its tiny screen. "Unless they've been modified. And then 'Mech bays after that." He toggled the 'puter's screen off and stuffed it back into a pocket.

"Slow and easy," Oz said.

The clank of metal against metal sounded ahead of them. It was a different noise from the previous one. Haney moved to the opposite side of the corridor and knelt. His head was canted to the side, looking down the twin barrels of his Blazer. Oz did the same on his side. Behind them, he knew, Grossman and the others would be watching the other direction.

"Show yourself!" Oz called. "This is Sergeant Stearns, Fourth Marines." He ignored the irritated look from Haney. *Defensive SOP*, he told himself. "You won't get another warning!"

A flicker of movement caught Oz's eye, down near the deck on the inside corner. A flash of reflected light, cut darkly by the smoke, but visible nonetheless. He trained his Intek, his finger taking up half the familiar draw on the trigger.

"It's a panel," Haney said.

Oz squinted. It was a meter-square and bent on one side. Innumerable twins of its covered the bulkheads. Oz watched it bounce gently from the floor, ringing loudly in the dead silence, before continuing on its ballistic course.

"Shit," Oz whispered.

"It's a long time to be alone in the cold," Grossman said. "I think they're all gone."

Oz grunted, still watching the panel. "It's a long time to still be bouncing around," he murmured.

* * *

Unbelievers. Infidels, animals uninitiated to the Master's designs and the wondrous new course of humanity under the Word of Blake's protection.

Frails.

He moved forward slowly, relays in his mind clicking closed. His right arm came up, with only the tip around the corner. He closed his eyes and, ignoring the slashing pain, looked through his fingertip. A half-dozen or so. A squad, then. He smiled. The boarders had sent only a squad.

The fools.

* * *

"We've still got a lot of ground to cover," Oz said, putting on a stern expression in the face of so many grinning troopers. "Let's keep it cool."

"The walls coming for you, Sarge?" Grossman asked. He looked at the other marines, pointing. "Look—" he began.

His chest exploded.

"DOWN!" Oz called, using his knees to drop his body closer to the deck. The autorifle that'd killed Grossman kept up a steady barrage, its muzzle flashes lighting the corridor like a strobe light. Oz twisted backward, trying to get the Intek around. The sling caught on his elbow, jerking the barrel out of line.

Benitez screamed as bullets tugged at her arm, but only for a short while. The stream of slugs tore through her throat and silenced her forever. The force of the hits was enough to sever her head, sending it upward to bounce from the ceiling in a welter of gore.

"Shoot, damn it!" Haney called. His Blazer pulsed, strobing ruby light across Oz's vision. Afterimages shimmered behind his eyelids when he blinked, and his nostrils flared as ozone tickled his sinuses. He tasted it on the back of his tongue and the roof of his mouth. He swallowed hard and triggered the Intek. Like Haney's, his pulse splashed molten metal from the bulkhead panels without hitting their assailant. The autorifle stopped firing. Oz twisted

his head, trying to see around the lip of his helmet. He saw the amber-colored ring of the rifle's barrel where the firing had heated it, but it slipped away down the corridor junction.

"Report!" Oz shouted. He tore his left boot loose from the deck and brought himself around so that he was lying on his stomach on the deck. The Intek's charge light flashed green, but he held his fire. There was nothing to shoot at.

"Grossman and Benitez are gone," Platt said. "No one else hit."

"No target," Haney said. He was crouched along the outside curve of the corridor, Blazer leveled. He hadn't moved since the first burst of fire.

"What'd you see?" Oz said. He didn't look toward the corpses of two of his troopers. There'd be time for that later. Or there wouldn't. Either way, he didn't need to see it. The sound of Grossman's left boot clanging against the deck was enough as the nerves in his body fired aimlessly.

"One shooter," Haney said.

"No one behind us," Platt said. "Just the one."

"That don't mean there aren't more," Haney snapped.

"It doesn't mean there are, either," Oz said. He took a deep breath. "Let's go get him."

As one the squad lurched to their feet and shuffled toward the junction, crowding around it. The clanking of their magnetic boots echoed in the corridor. Behind them, Grossman's foot stopped.

The silence called out from the darkness.

"Boots off," Oz whispered. "Play time's over."

* * *

Two killed, he thought.

The flesh around his gun was seared, but that was pain he was used to. The nerves in his arm raged at him, rebelliously firing at random. The muscles twitched in uncontrollable tics, but he managed to get the magazine seated beneath his elbow. The sound of magnetic boots clumping against the deckplates echoed in the air. He smiled through the pain.

Fools.

* * *

Oz pointed at the ceiling. Platt slung his rifle and slithered up the wall, using his hands and stocking feet to hold himself steady. Looking like a great black bat hanging from there, Platt reached to his harness and pulled free a fat cylinder. He armed the grenade with a twist and lobbed it around the junction. The motion spun him half around, but his grip on the light fixture held him in place.

Oz closed his eyes, opened his mouth, and ducked his right ear to his armored shoulder. The flash-bang erupted in dazzling brilliance and a *crack* that shook the deck. He threw himself around the corner in one motion, leading with the Intek. The others followed suit. His eyes found a target. A single man.

A huge man.

With a gun for an arm.

Oz squeezed the trigger. The Intek skewered the man in the chest, the red beam splashing flesh and blood to steam in an instant. The man roared, throwing his arms up. Oz grinned, opened his mouth to order the others to watch him.

The man pushed himself upright, off the deck, and stabbed his gun-arm toward the marines.

“Jesus Christ,” was all Oz had time to say.

Bracing himself on the remains of a hatch, the giant fired, ripping a stream of bullets past the marines to ricochet and splatter against the bulkhead. Platt screamed, but Oz didn’t have time to look. He grabbed Haney’s harness and pushed backward with his legs, drawing him out of the line of fire. Haney held his finger down on the trigger, but the Blazer pulse splashed molten metal from the bulkheads instead of the giant.

“Jesus Christ,” Oz whispered again.

Platt screamed again as his chest erupted in angry red flowers of blood. His arm twisted in a spasm, jerking his rifle loose. It bounced from the bulkhead ten centimeters from Oz’s head.

“What was that?” Haney asked. His finger twitched convulsively on the trigger, but the power pack was exhausted. The empty

rifle beeped uselessly. Oz watched as he looked down, frowned, and then ejected the magazines. The familiar motion seemed to ground him. "I mean, shit, Oz," he said. "What the hell was that thing?"

"A man," Oz said. He changed power packs on his own rifle and shuffled to his knees. "Just a big man."

"Bullshit," Haney said. "I saw you hit him. Hard, right in the chest. Center mass." He aped Oz's posture, pointing his Blazer. "It's a zombie. Some kind of Blakist zombie."

Oz frowned, but didn't speak. He heard a sound.

* * *

He hurt.

His left hand clutched at the tatters of gnarled flesh on his chest. The nerves were long gone, having died screaming beneath the laser's caress. They left the angry memories of their deaths seared into his brain. Synapses protested, but his mind was used to pain. His fingernails tapped against the ceramic laminae replacing his sternum. His right arm ached.

The flesh around the gun muzzle was seared and smoking, but he couldn't feel the pain. His mind was screaming. His heart was screaming. He pushed off from the wall, brought himself upright. A click disengaged his boots. Two steps put his feet against the wall behind him. The gun was loaded.

He shoved, sending himself down the corridor. Pain blossomed, but this time he embraced it, accepted it. He used it, screaming out his rage and pain and devotion.

* * *

"He sounds pissed," Haney said.

"Back," Oz said, shoving himself back. "Back to the shuttle."

Haney opened his moth, but then closed it with a click of teeth. He grunted, fired. Oz looked to the corridor junction. "Oh, shit."

The giant slammed against the bulkhead, gun already firing. The whiz of slugs passing Oz's head sang in his ears. He brought the

Intek to his shoulder, fired once. He missed. He fired again, but then shouted as a stray round struck the laser. It sparked, flickered once, and went dark.

“Move, damn it!” Haney shouted. He was on his feet, shuffling backwards, keeping his boots in contact with the deck. The twin barrels of his Blazer flashed in tandem. The pulses spent themselves on the bulkhead, on the deck. One struck the giant in the leg, but had no visible effect. He dropped his magazines with a shake to free them in the low gravity. His left hand was filled with a pair of power packs.

Oz drew his sidearm, a Python auto, and leveled it. The heavy boom of its firing was almost swallowed in the stuttering of the giant’s autorifle. Three shots, four, five... all of them struck the giant in the torso. All them struck sparks and disappeared down the corridor; ricochets. He kept firing, firing, not even counting. His slide locked back on an empty chamber.

The giant’s arm came up again, steady.

“Back, goddamn it!” Haney lunged across the corridor and shoved him backward. His Blazer bounced on the deck behind him. Empty ammo pouches flapped on his harness. He reached down, came up with his own Python. It hammered rounds at half-second intervals.

The giant fired.

“No!” Oz shouted, as Haney slumped.

* * *

The pain was too great. His vision was clouding, shrouding the sight of his rounds tracking into the invader’s back. He swallowed a grunt, shifted his aim.

His gun jammed.

He bellowed, slammed the offending limb against the bulkhead. The heated barrel bent, distending his forearm. The pain was lost in the maelstrom that was his cybernetics misfiring. But he had a little control left. It would be enough.

Enough to crush the life from the last Frail.

* * *

Haney whimpered as Oz let go of his harness. His eyes were rolled back in his head, but Oz shoved him away, trying to get clear. His hands clutched at his belt, fingers searching. He had two more magazines for his Python. Somewhere.

The giant swam toward him, left hand outstretched. His eyes were glowing, Oz realized.

"No," Oz whispered. His fingers found the ammo pouch. He broke a fingernail fumbling at the catch. The pain sparkled like glitter across his vision, but he didn't see it. All he saw was the giant. His mouth was moving, but no words were coming out.

The giant's left hand closed around Oz's throat like a hydraulic press. The fingers were hot, scalding, but hard as steel. He hammered the empty pistol's butt against the giant's forearm. It clinked, metal on metal.

"I am your salvation" the giant gurgled. His eyes were totally black, but glowed faintly red-yellow around the edges. A spider's web of silver crossed his forehead, standing out like veins. "I will bring you the steps of the Blessed Blake, and your sins will be forgiven. So says the Master." The hand around Oz's throat squeezed. "I am His Hand."

Oz let his hand fall, taking the pistol away from the giant's arm. His feet kicked against the bulkhead, centimeters above deck. Red began to creep in at the edges of his vision. He tried to swallow, couldn't.

* * *

He relished the burning sensation in his left wrist. The Frail's struggles were lessening. Soon he'd be dead, another soul sacrificed to the Master's plan. Another servant of the Blessed Blake. He ignored the few spasms in the soldier's body, the thumping kick against his leg.

There was a click.

* * *

The pistol was heavy as a mountain, but Oz fought it up. He latched onto the burning in his arm, the tingling in his fingers. He

brought the Python up, snarling silently at the giant's evil face. It had taken an act of will unlike anything he'd ever done before to seat the magazine.

The muzzle of the Python came to rest against the giant's right eye. Oz saw the realization on the monster's face, knew he had little time.

"Here's your ticket," he mouthed, and squeezed the trigger.

The giant's head exploded. Hydrostatic shock tore the pistol from numb fingers.

* * *

It was a long time later that Oz heard movement behind him. He'd bandaged Haney's wounds as best he could, but he was no medic. And he couldn't bring himself to move too far from the giant's corpse. He couldn't convince himself that it was really dead.

Lights shone from toward the shuttle hatch. Oz pointed the Python. He didn't know how many rounds were in the magazine, but he knew it was his last one. The rest were gone—fired, lost, wherever. What he had in the weapon would have to be enough.

"Stearns!" a voice shouted. "Stearns, report!"

Oz lowered the pistol. It was the captain. He tried to call, to beckon, but he couldn't. He was exhausted. His voice cracked, hoarse, as if he'd been screaming for hours. Maybe he had. He clanked the pistol against the bulkhead.

"Over here!"

Strong hands propped him up while others crowded around Haney. He looked up, trying to focus. It really was the captain. Paul Nealsson shook him gently, holding his chin with one hand.

"Oz," he said. "What happened here? How many were there?"

"Just one," Oz whispered.

"We got a body over here," another marine shouted. "Jesus, a big one!"

"That one," Oz said. His hands were shaking, he saw. He'd let the pistol loose. It clattered against the deck and rebounded.

“Just one,” Nealsson whispered. He looked around, poking orders with his fingers. Oz felt the deck tremble ever so slightly as other marine teams fanned out.

“You sure this thing is dead?”

The voices were getting fainter. Nealsson had his by the shoulder and was dragging him—sliding him, really, what with no gravity to hold him down—away from the corpse. He heard people conversing, snippets of conversation. He tried to keep his eyes open, tried to keep his attention focused down the corridor. But there was so little light...

“What’s that smell?” a marine asked.

“Get back!”

“Son of a bitch! That big bastard is melting!”

“What?”

“Acid or something. Thermite, I don’t know. There’s no heat spike on the infrared, but it’s melting through the deck!” Nealsson’s hand spasmed on Oz’s shoulder. The deck slammed him in the back as the captain pushed him down and knelt beside him, a big Imperial automatic loose in his hand.

“What did you shoot it with?” Nealsson muttered. “Melting?”

“Evac now!” a voice called. “We don’t know what’s in those fumes. It could be poison!”

“So much for being dead,” Nealsson said. He clutched at Oz again and began to shuffle backward. The deck vibrated to the off-kilter thumping of magnetic boots as the marines retreated.

“Aim for its eyes,” Oz whispered. He felt himself being turned, felt the slight prick of the needle as a medic injected him. He smiled faintly as the sedative began to take hold, relaxing his muscles. He would have chuckled, if he’d had the strength and the breath.

“They glow,” he said.