

BATTLECORPS

DOG SOLDIERS

Jeff Kautz

***The Underworld
City of Yang-ku
Nanking
9 September 3067***

The testing period was a time of relatively low stress for the trainees of the First MI. They spent their days in air-conditioned classrooms and took their meals in clean, full service mess halls. Testing always wrapped up by late afternoon, leaving the evenings free. The troops could enjoy movies or enlisted personnel clubs on base or go into Yang-ku, as long as they stayed away from certain off limits areas of the city. It was into just such an area that Davis Clay had followed Private Chen.

The Underworld was a crime-infested slum, control over which wrestled between rival Tongs and other undesirables. Its crumbling tenements stood mostly boarded up and the few residents that remained dared not venture out after dark.

Tonight was not Chen's first visit to the neighborhood. In fact, Clay had followed him here twice in the past week, always to the same dingy, brick-front row home surrounded by derelict warehouses. Each time, Chen had come alone, carrying with him a small backpack that was full when he entered the house but, judging by the ease with which he carried it, empty upon his return. He never spent more than two hours in the Underworld, always leaving the base after his fellow soldiers had gone out and returning before they got back. The returning troops would find him reading in his room or fast asleep and therefore never asked what he did to fill the off-hours. Even Clay, who had been suspicious of Chen from their first meeting, had begun to relax his attitude toward the young man in the weeks following the field exercise.

Stories of items, including weapons and ammunition suddenly missing from base inventories had rekindled his suspicion, however, and Clay had begun to observe the young soldier closely. He didn't like what he was seeing.

Clay maneuvered the borrowed groundcar to the curb and stopped fifty meters behind the cab that he had been following, shutting off the engine and the lights. The ever present rain beat a heavy rhythm on the roof as he and Sergeant Roy Benton sat silently observing as the cab pulled up across the street from the run down row house.

Benton, a former bar bouncer, was the squad leader for Second Platoon's weapons section and was in charge of selecting recruits whose test scores showed them to be suitable for handling heavy weapons. Clay had felt comfortable confiding in Benton, a good friend who could be counted on if things got physical. It was for just that eventuality that Clay had brought him along this evening.

The cab stopped on the street opposite the run down row house. Chen got out on the driver's side and reached in behind him to retrieve the backpack. The cab sped off and with a quick glance over each shoulder, Chen sprinted across the street and ducked through the doorway, disappearing into the house. A single light shone through the dingy first floor window shades.

Clay sat in the dark with Benton, watching the house for several long minutes. When they were reasonably sure they had not been observed, the two men reached beneath the seats, each producing a short-barreled shotgun, and left the car. The pair wore civilian clothes with body armor underneath. They concealed the shotguns in the folds of their raincoats and trotted across the street. Separating as they neared the house, Clay flattened himself against the wall outside the front entrance while Benton crept around toward the back.

Clay waited for Benton to confirm he was in position, then spoke a single word into his throat mike. "Go!"

Clay kicked in the flimsy front door, shotgun at the ready, screaming at anyone within the dwelling to get down on the floor. Benton came crashing through the back door and met up with Clay in the front room of the house. Both men stared, dumbstruck, at the scene laid out before them.

There were no gang members, no armed terrorists. There was only an elderly woman with Asian features cowering on a dingy couch, hugging her knees to her chest. A young girl, probably in her early- to mid-teens stood holding a wailing toddler while another young child sat on the bare floor playing with a scrawny puppy. Chen knelt on the floor, eyes wide with surprise and embarrassment. He held his open backpack, out of which spilled a small mountain of soap bars, toilet paper rolls and vacuum-sealed ration packs.

Clay looked across at Benton and motioned the big sergeant to wait in the back room. Embarrassed, he heaped apologies on the old woman and the young girl, and called Chen outside. He led the

private to the groundcar and motioned for the boy to get in the front seat. Seating himself behind the steering wheel, he turned to look Chen in the eyes.

"You have some serious explaining to do. I want everything, from the beginning."

Chen bowed his head, for a moment refusing to meet Clay's accusing stare. Realizing that he no longer had an option, he let out a long breath and began to speak.

"I was at Lingyin Temple, but you knew that already." Chen let the revelation float in the air for a moment.

For years, he had taken care to hide his past associations, afraid to speak to anyone about his former life. Here, in the front seat of a car on a rainy night in Yang-ku, confronted by his company first sergeant, Chen felt almost relieved, as if finally able to release his great burden. He held back nothing, the details and admissions flowed from him like water.

"I knew you as well. I recognized you that first day at Gladston Hill. I hoped you wouldn't recognize me. I want to assure you that I had nothing to do with the grenade attack that killed those MPs at the temple that night. Harim was always a fanatic. It was as much a surprise to me as to anyone. I'm sorry for their deaths, and for the injuries I caused your people."

"They all lived, although Corporal Yi walks with a myomer prosthetic."

"Again, I'm sorry. I tried to do as little damage as possible, but I had to keep up appearances. I didn't want the others to suspect me."

Clay prompted the young man to continue, suppressing the urge to cuff him and turn him over to the DMJ without another word.

"Suspect you? Of what, exactly?"

"Of being an informant. I'm the one who tipped off the police that we would be at the temple that night."

"So you wanted to get caught? Why?"

Chen sighed as he dredged up memories he had labored to keep suppressed. "To atone," he said finally.

"I was orphaned at a young age. I ran the streets for years, always in trouble with the law. When I was a teenager I was recruited by

the *Zhangzheng de Guang*. They gave me a sense of purpose, a sense of belonging I hadn't felt in a long time and I believed every word of their rhetoric. When the war started they shipped me here, to Yang-ku and set me up with a job and a cover story. The Lees," he motioned to the house, "they took me in and gave me room and board. I told them I was a stevedore at the drop port. I was really working in a bomb-making facility for the group."

Clay felt the blood drain from his face. The young man had just confessed to being a terrorist, an enemy of the state, but Clay sensed there was more to it.

"The Lees were nice people," he continued. "They fed me and gave me a place to sleep and they didn't ask questions, even when things started to heat up and I was coming and going at all hours. We were running so many ops it was only a matter of time before one of them went bad. When it happened, we lost three of our best operatives, friends of mine. Our cell leader, Bishou, he blamed Mr. Lee, said he had ratted us out. I tried to explain to him that Mr. Lee was innocent and I thought he understood. Then one night I came home and Mr. Lee wasn't there, he had never returned from work. I went by our safe house and found Bishou there." Chen swallowed hard, words caught in his throat.

"Mr. Lee...Mr. Lee's body was hanging from the rafters." Tears welled up in Chen's eyes and he began to tremble.

"He had been tortured to death. Bishou peeled the skin from his body." Chen was weeping by now, his body quaking as he wiped the tears from his face. "I flew into a rage. I beat Bishou... I beat him to death with my own hands. Then I called the police and reported the safe house."

Clay swallowed a gasp. He had led the military contingent that had raided that safe house. He remembered the mangled bodies, air heavy with the sickly smell of blood.

"Mr. Lee was the family's only source of income. They were left with nothing, and it was all because of me...because they had been kind enough to take me in!" Chen bent forward in his seat, head held in his hands, sobbing uncontrollably. "All because of me..."

Clay understood it all now. Chen had worked from the inside to bring down the terrorist cell but it had not been enough. He should have turned himself in that night at Lingyin Temple but instead he had chosen to run, a reaction driven by confusion and fear. In joining the Regiment, he sought to atone for the damage he had

done, to cleanse his soul of the demons that still haunted him. He had kept his guilt bottled up, hidden in a deep place and disguised behind a mask of arrogant impassiveness. Now, stripped of his protective barrier he sat sobbing as the revelations flowed from him in an outpouring of emotion of which Clay would not previously have thought him capable. Despite his contempt for Chen's actions, he could not help but feel pity for the boy.

Clay sat for a long time watching the patterns the rain created on the windshield. The rivulets merged and joined, then broke off from each other as each droplet strained to create its own path, only to flow together once again.

Eventually Chen regained control of his emotions and sat upright in his seat, ready to receive his punishment. Finally, Clay spoke.

"You realize that you've disobeyed orders by coming here," he said, less a question than a statement of fact.

"Yes," replied Chen.

"Those items you *removed* from the barracks, they're contraband. You could get in a lot of trouble for that, you understand?"

"Yes, First Sergeant, I understand."

"You've admitted to crimes against the state. Terrorism." He paused. "Murder." Clay's eyes narrowed, disappointment coloring his face.

"I'm prepared to face my punishment, whatever it is, but please promise me not to involve the Lees in all this. They're the victims here."

Clay met Chen's smoky gaze and felt he could read the sincerity bleeding through his expression. His steely eyes seemed softer somehow, unguarded.

"You can't come back here, after tonight. You know that."

Chen swallowed hard, choking back the tears that had begun to wet the corners of his eyes again. "Yes."

Clay pursed his lips. "Alright then. Go in there and tell them to get their things together. I'll send a truck for them in the morning."

Chen was startled. He stared incredulously at Clay, who kept his attention focused on the windshield. "You mean..."

"Yes, yes, now go, dammit, before I recover my senses!"

"Thank you, thank you, First Sergeant," Chen stumbled over his words. He was half out of the car door when Clay grabbed his arm. He turned and met the Sergeant's steely glare.

"Don't make me regret this!"

Chen smiled. "You have my word."

Clay let go of Chen's arm and the boy slipped out into the rain. *His word.* Hopefully, that would be enough.

Trent-Hampton Barracks, Camp Allard
Yang-ku
Nanking
14 November 3067

True to his word, Clay showed up the following morning with a borrowed military transport and a few extra hands, namely Benton and Sergeant Deemer. They had packed the Lee family along with their few meager belongings and moved them onto the base, allowing them to occupy some spare bunks until the trainees moved to their permanent postings on the other side of Camp Allard. When the recruits moved, the Lees went with them. Clay had an unused storage building cleared out and turned into a semi-permanent residence for them.

The Lees, wishing to show their gratitude as well as earn their keep, began assisting with menial tasks from washing the soldier's clothes to tending the grounds around the barracks. They soon won the hearts of the troops, who began to insist on paying them for their efforts. Mrs. Lee accepted the money only reluctantly, and then used much of what she earned to buy food with which she prepared large delicious dinners for the troops on Sunday evenings. Her daughter Lin proved to be an excellent tailor and took on the job of mending and pressing uniforms for the soldiers. Before long, the men and women of Charlie Company began to regard the Lees as family members, even adopting Ping, their once scrawny mutt as their unofficial mascot.

Clay kept his knowledge of Chen's past to himself. He believed in the boy's sincere desire to start anew, to atone. Time would prove, he reckoned, if his decision was right.

Chen and the other recruits were permanently assigned to Charlie Company of the Second Battalion, First Mechanized Infantry. The Regiment. Normally, recruits were spread out among the Regiment's various units, filling slots wherever they were needed. This group, however, was what the Regiment termed a cohort unit, training and traveling together. Clay suspected the proposed change of station might have something to do with the new policy, but he welcomed it just the same. Though it was against his better judgment, he had grown fond of the young soldiers in his time spent with them. As always, however, he cautioned himself against becoming too familiar.

The recruits had hardly had a chance to settle in and meet the other members of their respective squads before shipping out for advanced training. Lasting a minimum of six weeks, advanced training would expand on the basic skills the troops had learned at Gladston Hill and Great Eaves, and qualify each of them in one of several specialty fields.

Most of the recruits attended the Mechanized Infantry course where they learned to operate in conjunction with a host of armored and airborne support vehicles. Owing to his excellent marksmanship skills, Chen was hand-picked to attend the Regiment's Stealth Marksmanship course—sniper school.

Hannan was chosen by the instructors at Gladston Hill as Honor Graduate for the training cycle and was given her choice of specialty. She chose, somewhat surprisingly, to attend sniper school alongside Chen. When the pair returned three weeks later, they had set a new course record and, perhaps more importantly, had become best friends. Chen had changed since the night of his confession in *Yang-ku*. He was friendlier, more approachable. The other recruits recognized and welcomed the change, but only Clay knew its origin.

By mid-November, most of the troops had returned to assume their permanent positions within the company, the sole exception being Travis, who was quietly excelling at Combat Lifesaver School. Chen and Hannan remained together, assigned to the Second Squad, Second Rifle Platoon along with Kelley, Miller, Reichel and Flores with whom they had trained at Gladston Hill.

The recruits, now addressed as private, having been promoted upon their graduation from primary training, were welcomed into the squad by Sergeant Deemer, their squad leader, and Corporal Wecker, the squad machine gunner who would serve as their mentor. It was Wecker's job to show them around the barracks and familiarize them with the daily operations of the company.

A sly veteran of the Civil War, the quick-witted Wecker spoke in a short staccato that resembled the report of the machine gun he so loved. Always up for some fun at another's expense, he singled out the short, slightly pudgy Private Miller to be his gunner's assistant, assigned him the responsibility of toting the weapon's maintenance kit and most of the heavy ammunition.

Miller was less than thrilled, but thankful at least that he wasn't saddled with the automatic grenade launcher. That responsibility fell to Flores, a tall, soft-spoken beauty with silky black hair that

she kept tucked under her garrison cap. She had mastered the cumbersome weapon quickly during training, and seemed quite capable of handling the launcher and its heavy load of high explosive projectiles.

The new troops fit in well among Charlie Company's veterans, with whom Clay met privately upon their arrival at Trent-Hampton. He stressed the importance of bringing the new people up to speed quickly, without going so far as to inform them of the impending move. He hated to keep secrets from his people, but Captain Jorgenson had given him implicit instructions.

Without another training cycle to oversee, Clay was able to assume his regular duties as Company first sergeant, responsible for developing the training schedule and handling logistics and supply. "Beans and bullets" was the term used to describe the duties of the first sergeant, whom most of the troops referred to simply as "Top".

Even the rank of first sergeant was more an honorary title, a tradition from the armies of old that the infantry had refused to let fade into obscurity. In truth, the various levels of responsibility handled by non-commissioned officers in the infantry required a greater distinction between ranks than the typical armor platoon or 'Mech lance, who could get by with a greatly simplified command structure.

It was late one evening when Clay finally got a chance to open the door to the office he hadn't seen in six months. Everything was still the same as he left it. Small, neatly organized desk. Walls adorned with a few photos in simple frames, pictures of Clay, posing with comrades he had known over the years. Some were still here, most had moved on and still others were gone forever. He paused for just a moment, remembering all the names and faces, before settling into his leather backed chair and retrieving a note-pad from a desk drawer. *Beans and bullets*, he thought as he set to work on a revised training schedule. *Beans and bullets*.

**Camp Allard
Suburbs of Yang-ku
Nanking
12 December 3067**

The enlisted personnel club was nearly empty, unusual for a weekend. Most of the troops belonging to the First MI were either visiting with friends and family on extended leave or shopping for the coming winter holiday season.

In one corner, a group of off-duty soldiers enjoyed a relaxed game of holo-billiards while hooting and cheering the latest Solaris championship match playing on the corner tri-vid. Across the room, another vid was broadcasting a musical performance by the newest Canopian flavor of the month, a curvy blonde starlet dressed in a skimpy schoolgirl outfit, pouting and gyrating to a beat no one in the room could hear. *It's never about the music anyway*, reflected Clay as he exchanged his empty glass for a fresh one.

Tipping back the mug of Yangtze Pale Ale—he preferred the brand to the more popular Timbiqui Dark—he felt the cool beverage massage his throat but there was no savoring the taste, at least not this early in the evening. Like many others, Clay often found himself in a state of melancholy sadness during the holidays. He had hoped that the beer would help wash away his loneliness. Still, his gaze drifted over the rim of his glass to the pay visi-phone on the wall.

I should call her, he thought for the hundredth time, but still he sat, staring at the half-empty glass, watching the foamy suds retreat down the sides to become one with the golden liquid.

In the service for over half his life, Clay enlisted at age seventeen and shipped out for recruit training the day after graduation from secondary school. His fascination with all things military had begun long before that time however.

Born on Brockton, he had grown up an only child in a backwater farming community so isolated it seemed as if time had stopped there centuries before while the rest of the universe had simply moved on and forgotten, just like his father.

Early settlers had experimented with terraforming, but the valuable irrigation machines had become problematic and their

delicate inner workings were beyond anyone's ability to understand, much less repair. Clay and his mother struggled to work the land that was steadily returning to the dust it had once been, their farm providing barely enough to sustain them and the few animals needed to pull the plows.

With no money for vid players and almost no contact with outsiders, young Davis was forced to find other sources of amusement to occupy the few hours not consumed by studies or household chores. While most of his classmates would drive into the nearest large towns to drink and carouse, Clay would walk to the local library.

A privately funded place that was one of only a handful left in the whole of the Inner Sphere, save those maintained by the Great Houses, that kept an inventory of actual paper volumes, the library was his only refuge, and he its sole customer. On Sundays, Clay would wander the narrow aisles, plucking the books from their dusty shelves and immerse himself in tales that took place far beyond his meager existence.

His favorites were always the war stories. From historical reference books to fictionalized accounts of battles dating back to the beginning of recorded history, he would sit until dark soaking up the written words like a sponge. The heroes of those stories became his heroes, his only real role models, and their enemies were his own. He longed to tread in their footsteps, to travel among the stars they had traveled, and to make the same kind of contributions they had made.

Before long, he had read almost every volume twice, reveling in the courageous affairs of noble Mechwarriors and dashing space captains. The stories that touched him deepest, however, were those accounts involving simple foot soldiers. Men who volunteered for the most dangerous duty, who overcame the harshest environments with no machinery or technological wonders to protect them and faced the enemy head on, eye to eye with only the strength of will and the courage of their hearts. To the young Davis Clay, these men embodied what soldiery was all about, and he could hardly wait to count himself among their number.

It was May of 3038 when he kissed his mother goodbye for the final time before boarding the hoverbus that would begin his journey among the stars. In the years that followed he would serve in a half dozen units on more than a dozen worlds but he would never return to his birthplace.

He would see his first combat during the disastrous War of 3039. It was during the retreat from An Ting that he would receive word of his mother's passing. She had died of natural causes, or so the coroner's report had said, but Clay knew she had simply toiled her way to an early, lonely grave and, in his mind, there was nothing natural about that. Afterward there had been no reason for him to go back. He had found his true home in the Armed Forces of the Federated Commonwealth, and he threw himself wholeheartedly into her service, rising through the ranks steadily, needing for nothing and desiring no family save for the men and women under his command. It was late 3060 when Trinity walked into his life and changed him forever.

Trinity Elizabeth Hines had been studying physical therapy at Nanking University's Yang-ku campus in the fall of that year. To supplement her studies she had taken a job as a nurse's aid on the sprawling military base that served as a home to thousands of soldiers serving with the First FedCom. The unit had taken a severe beating during the Marik-Liao offensive of 3057 and was trying to rebuild itself through hard training. It was during a particularly grueling training exercise that Clay suffered a dislocated shoulder requiring treatment. He first met Trinity in the examination room while sitting shirtless on an exam table with his right arm swollen and hanging at an odd angle to his body. He remembered thinking how beautiful she looked, despite her formless pale green scrub uniform. She had remarked about how much pain he must have been in but he hardly noticed; her mere presence in the room had removed all sensations of pain from his mind and replaced them with emotions he had never before experienced. They spoke only briefly that day, she had been called away, but they made a date to go out and their relationship blossomed over the next few months.

Then came Operation Stiletto, the unit's unsanctioned foray into the Chaos March that was still taboo to mention aloud. Even though it was an all-volunteer mission, Clay felt obligated to go. Trinity accepted his decision but she did not truly understand; she never could. He returned the following year, only to be swallowed up in the Civil War along with the rest of the Inner Sphere. The war saw Clay and his unit trekking all over Nanking with scarcely any break that left enough time for he and Trinity, and most of his off hours were spent seeing to the needs of his troops. Again, Trinity made the necessary sacrifices.

Organized resistance on Nanking effectively ended in April of 3063, but Capellan sponsored terrorists still operated across the

planet and the First FedCom was called upon to hunt them down. The unit again asked for volunteers, and once again, Clay answered the call.

He hoped she would wait for him and truth be told she had, but the weeks grew into months and he continued to place himself into harms way, moving to wherever the Regiment needed him, heedless of how badly *she* needed him at home. After far too many lonely nights spent worrying and wondering, she had had enough. Devotion to duty had won out over love. Trinity felt foolish for believing she could ever change that. When, after a year's time, he finally returned, Clay found their small apartment empty. She was gone.

Almost five years had passed since then. They had rarely spoken, yet she haunted Clay's thoughts more and more each day. Holidays just made it worse.

He set his empty glass on the bar and glanced again at the phone. *Maybe after one more...*

“Hey, turn this up!”

Excited voices from the corner alerted Clay. He turned to see what the fuss was about as the bartender increased the volume on the tri-vid. The Solaris fights were being interrupted for a special news bulletin and the screen now showed a rattled reporter on a hill overlooking a city. A city in flames.

The vid was time stamped December 8, 3067. Ash swirled in the wind that buffeted the camera and the reporter, tossing his hair and clothes as he began to speak.

“...Raymond Najif from INN reporting to you from Tharkad. What you see below me... this conflagration, is what remains of the capital of the Lyran Alliance.” There was a collective gasp at the mention of the city’s name. Tharkad City.

“Three days ago, just days after the Inner Sphere received word of the dissolution of the new Star League, WarShips identified as belonging to the Word of Blake appeared in orbit and launched an unprovoked attack against the city. Early witness reports point to the use of nuclear weapons, delivered by what appears to have been an orbital bombardment.”

By now everyone in the club had gravitated to the tri-vid viewer to watch the report. They were visibly shaken, jaws agape, unable to speak. Their faces spoke silent disbelief at the scene before them.

"There are currently no firm casualty figures to report, but they are expected to be..." the reported swallowed, choking on the words, "...in the hundreds of thousands. Looking at the scene below me, I can't help but wonder if that's not a conservative estimate."

The camera panned back, the shot widening on a scene pulled straight from a hellish nightmare. Gone were the ivory spires and gleaming towers gripped in perpetual winter that one usually associated with one of the most beautiful cities in the Inner Sphere. What remained was a smoking, shapeless ruin.

Pool cues and beer glasses lay on the floor where they had fallen. The group gathered around the tri-vid stood motionless, in a state of total shock. None of them had imagined anything like this in their lifetime.

Some in the small crowd began to sob; others ground their teeth and cursed. One man, a young infantryman by the look of him, directed his misplaced anger at the nearest physical object, smashing his pool cue against the billiard table.

The door to the club flew open, letting in a cold rush of night air. Two burly military policemen filled the doorway.

"All leaves are hereby canceled! All troops confined to base until further notice! Officers and senior NCOs are to report Regimental headquarters by twenty-one hundred hours!"