

BATTLECORPS

DOG SOLDIERS

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**Camp Allard
Suburbs of Yang-ku
Nanking
4 February 3068**

The first few days of high alerts and pent up frustration dragged on into weeks of bored complacency as the regiment settled back into old routines. Tension hung in the air like a heavy fog as word of the Word of Blake attacks spread. Rumors of the Lancers' impending redeployment compounded the problem as civilians, angry at the prospect of being abandoned once again, began to protest in the street. The protests grew increasingly angry and violent as the weeks dragged on.

It was early February when Captain Jorgenson summoned Clay to his office. Jorgenson's office was small and sparsely decorated. Located on the third floor of the Battalion Operations building, the single large window gave a good view of the Company's multi-storyed barracks building and the parade grounds beyond. It was early and Clay could see Sergeant Deemer leading Second Platoon on their morning run. The platoon shuffled out the main gate past a garbage truck that backed up to the service entrance at the rear of the barracks. The troops would circle the base on the perimeter road and return through the back gate, stopping at the parade ground to cool down before marching off to chow. Clay hoped to meet with Sergeant Markel in the mess hall to go over the day's training schedule.

Jorgenson stood behind his desk, shuffling through a handful of papers. His expression was grave.

"How bad is it?"

"It's bad, Top." Jorgenson scowled and rubbed his square jaw. "The Blakists have hit Coventry and Donegal. At least we *think* it's the Blakists, but with Skye going crazy who can tell? Something's happening on Luthien, we don't know what. Dracs are saying everything's fine but you know how they are."

Clay harrumphed as he picked up the latest stack of intel reports.

"Deiron's definitely been hit, and the rumors we've been hearing about New Avalon..." Clay's head snapped around at the mention of the Federated Suns' capital. Jorgenson merely nodded.

"Bombarded?"

"And occupied," added Jorgenson.

Clay dropped the file jacket. "We going?"

Jorgenson sighed heavily. Thumbing through a stack of reports, he pulled out a memo and handed it to Clay.

Clay skimmed the memo and slapped it back onto the top of the pile.

"I can't believe this," he said disgustedly. "Hadnall? It doesn't make any sense! How can they go ahead with the redeployment in light of what's happened? Hasek's moving us into position to attack the Confederation while our own house burns down around us! Where's the sense in it?"

"Standard operational procedure, Dave." Jorgenson's dour expression betrayed his true feelings about the planned move. *"Follow your last standing order. Doesn't have to make sense."*

"My ass! We should be kicking the Blakists off New Avalon, not going on some adventure for the sake of some noble's ego!"

"Some folks are of the opinion that the Cappies are working *with* the Blakists, that they helped *start* this whole mess."

"Tell me you don't really believe that!"

Clay pushed up from the corner of the desk and paced circles around the small room, wringing his hands in frustration.

The two had been friends for a number of years. Kurt Jorgenson had started as a recruit when Clay was a drill instructor. Clay had enjoyed watching the young man mold himself into a first rate officer, and he took some satisfaction in knowing he had played some role, however small, in his friend's success. On the parade ground they were all business but here it was a less formal environment where they could speak freely with each other.

"We don't know what's out there, we're totally blind. We abandon Nanking now and we leave the Sarna March wide open!"

Jorgenson stood and moved around the desk. He poured two cups of steaming coffee, offering one to Clay, and took a sip. "You're preaching to the choir, Top, but it's a done deal. The first of the 'Mech battalions boosted this morning. Took the ACAV with them along with one of the fighter wings." He opened another

packet of sugar and stirred the contents into his cup. "The other units are on standby. We'd be gone by now too, if we had the transports." The unit was stripped of its JumpShips years earlier after failing to openly support Katherine Steiner-Davion. They had yet to recover their full complement of vessels.

"At least that's one good thing we have to thank the Ice Princess for," muttered Clay. "So when *do* we go?"

"Don't know yet. They'll tell us at the last minute, you know that. Just make sure they're ready."

Clay placed his hands on the windowsill and stared out at nothing in particular. *Just when things were starting to come together. Now I have to get these people ready to abandon their homes and families to the mercy of God knows what, just when we're needed here most. This is not going to be easy.*

Clay stood at the window trying to think of a way to break the news to his troops. As his gaze swept over the barracks building he sensed something was wrong. The garbage hauler was still parked at the back of the building. They should have moved on by now. Looking closer he noticed the driver's door was slightly ajar and the crew was nowhere in sight.

Clay spun away from the window just as the blast ripped through the morning air. The concussion knocked him to the floor and flung Jorgenson across the room where he collided with a tall filing cabinet before sprawling out across the desk. He shook off the shards of glass that covered him and knelt to help his friend. Clay was buried under a pile of broken glass and window debris, but aside from numerous cuts and bruises, both men were okay.

They made their way downstairs and out into the parking area where they were greeted with a horrific sight. The garbage hauler was gone, disintegrated by the explosion. The rear of the barracks building had partially collapsed, upper stories crushing down on the floors below.

A huge cloud of smoke rose into the sky, providing a beacon for the medic vehicles that were already streaming to the scene. One of the first emergency techs to arrive approached Clay and Jorgenson to administer aid but the two men refused treatment, instead climbing the rubble pile to assist in organizing a search for survivors.

The damage could have been much worse. The barracks had been mostly empty in the area most affected by the blast. Three

soldiers who had come off perimeter guard duty only one hour before died while asleep in their bunks. A civilian custodian was also killed. The unfortunate man had walked to the rear of the building to have a smoke.

Several soldiers had been wounded, some seriously. Most were from Third Platoon, whose platoon sergeant had decided to cut them a break and give them an extra hour of sleep. Despite the low casualty count the attack had still accomplished its objective. The unit morale suffered most, and that type of damage was always hardest to repair.

Liaoning Province

Nanking

10 March 3068

The bomb attack on their barracks was not the only strike at Camp Allard. Early February saw three more bombings at the base, and although casualties had been relatively light, the attacks had exposed the vulnerabilities inherent in stationing large numbers of troops at what was essentially an open post, with civilian workers coming and going pretty much as they pleased. The decision was made to move most of the troops off base while new security measures were put into place, resulting in units being spread throughout the countryside, far from their supporting elements.

First MI had been shipped off to Liaoning Province, over four hundred kilometers from Yang-ku, Nanking's capital. Second Battalion was billeted in and around the small city of Panjin in the middle of a river valley dotted with small farming communities. It was in one of these communities—Clay couldn't remember the name much less pronounce it—where Charlie Company took residence.

The village was really just a collection of about a dozen barns and single-story dwellings arranged at an intersection of three paved roads that wound through the surrounding farm fields.

The climate this far south was temperate even in winter, allowing the locals to grow rice for most of the year. During the mild, dry winter months they grew a myriad of tubers and grains as well as a hardy lemongrass that they used for everything from flavoring beer to thatching roofs. The homes in the valley were modest but well kept, with sloping roofs designed to channel and collect rainwater, since the area had never received the benefit of a public utility system. The water was collected in large decorative urns and fed through a series of cisterns into a group of wells that the residents shared equally. During the four month rainy season the wells would fill to overflowing, providing the village with water for the rest of the year. It was an ingenious system that relied on methods that had been in use for centuries.

As he observed the villagers going about their daily routines, Clay could not help but think back to his family farm on Brockton, where engineers with scientific degrees had tried to use machinery to conquer nature rather than work in harmony with it. In the

end, all the advanced technology in the universe had not been enough to save them.

The troops spent their first week in the village assisting a company of engineers with the construction of a temporary barracks and mess facility. Once the pre-fab buildings were set up and secured, they set about improving their defenses, scarring the otherwise idyllic countryside with bunkers and trench lines.

Once settled in, the regular military routine began again. The soldiers woke early for physical training, taking long runs along the paddy dikes that crisscrossed the rice fields, before spending the majority of their days practicing patrolling techniques and squad tactics. They set up a firing range to keep up their marksmanship skills. They also dug fighting positions along the roads entering the village, concealing them with camouflage netting and grass mats knitted for them by the villagers.

The troops were free to spend their evenings as they wished as long as they stayed within the boundaries of the village. Aside from a small local pub, the village did not offer much in the way of entertainment. Clay knew that soldiers, when deprived of leisure activities, would quickly become bored and that was when trouble usually started. Bored troops would create their own entertainment, usually at the expense of the civilian population. In an attempt to head off the situation before it started, Clay requested and received permission to lead some evening excursions into Panjin. He also requisitioned some exercise equipment from Camp Allard and the troops built a small workout room, which eventually expanded to include a lounge equipped with tri-vids and holo-games. Life in the village, though mundane, was at least comfortable. For a time.



“Think they’ll come?”

Hannan smirked. He was doing it again. Ask a question, get her to talk. Make her spend her wind. He did it every night around this time, right before they eased into the final turn before the last half klick sprint back to the barracks. The difference was, tonight she was ready for it. The long midnight runs in the crisp air had strengthened her lungs, and she’d been holding back all night. Tonight was the night she would beat him for sure.

She huffed out a breath of vapor, pacing herself before answering. “Wouldn’t you?”

Chen kept a good pace beside her. She ventured a glance in his direction. He wasn't even winded.

"I dunno," he said, squeezing the words out between breaths. "We're not much of a threat."

"Aren't we?" Hannan scoffed, feet pounding a hard rhythm on the blacktop. "Look at the facts. We're one of a handful of RCTs that weren't completely devastated in the war. That fact alone makes us a threat...and a target." After a few more heady breaths she continued, "Add in the fact that we're sitting on a 'Mech factory and I'd say it's not so much a question of if..." she lengthened her stride, cruising through the final turn, "...but when!"

A sudden burst of speed propelled her out in front of Chen. She felt her second wind kick in, lungs cycling the cool air, legs moving freely, separate from conscious thought. She was well out ahead. So far out she could no longer hear Chen's footfalls beside hers. The barracks were in sight up ahead. *She was winning!* And it was easy. Too easy. Something was wrong.

Hannan turned and was surprised to see Chen far behind, standing in the middle of the road looking up at the stars. *A trick? He wants me to look up, lose my concentration so he can sucker me?* No, he was too far back, he would never catch her.

"What is it?" Chen did not reply. Hannan gazed skyward, searching the night sky for some sign of whatever it was...*there!* Tiny pinpricks of light. Not stars, these were closer, brighter.

Dropship flares. Four, five at least. Diamond formation. *Military.*

Hannan turned and found Chen returning her stare. "We'd better wake First Sergeant Clay!"



Aroused from his light slumber, Clay received the news he had been dreading for months. Nanking was under attack.

Jorgenson confirmed it. Unidentified JumpShips had appeared at several pirate points in the system, disgorging several military DropShips that were already on a high-speed burn toward the planet, with the lead elements only hours away. The Regiment was on full alert. Sirens in the cities and throughout the countryside sent residents scurrying to underground shelters, fearing a holocaust similar to the ones that had been unleashed on Outreach and Tharkad.

At their modest base camp, the troops of Charlie Company huddled in their bunkers and waited, watching the night sky and silently praying. It was all they could do.

Liaoning Province

Nanking

15 March 3068

The battle for Nanking, now into its fourth day, had thus far remained conventional. The first targets attacked were communication and command facilities. The dispersion of the Lancer's elements lessened the effects of these attacks but the unit still suffered long blackout periods as command struggled to repair damaged communications assets.

Intelligence was spotty at best. All Captain Jorgenson had been able to find out was that the enemy, identified by their markings and organization as Word of Blake, had combat-dropped 'Mechs onto the plains west of Yang-ku and immediately marched on the capital. An armored battalion had delayed their advance until the Regiment's own 'Mechs could be brought in and a furious battle now raged outside the city, threatening to spill into the streets.

Several smaller enemy detachments had been spotted in outlying areas but their strength and objectives were unclear. It was suspected that these small units would be used to delay the Lancer forces on their way to reinforce those troops that were engaged near the capital. Jorgenson's orders had remained "hold in place and await further instructions."

The troops of Second Platoon were filing into the tiny mess hall for evening chow when the intercom crackled with the news that they were on full alert and ordered to their fighting positions immediately. The troops let out a collective groan. These types of alerts had happened numerous times since the fighting began and seemingly always during chow, thus far producing no results other than wasted food and hungry, grumbling soldiers. Still, the hall cleared out in minutes, plates and glasses left on the tables to be cleaned up later.

Night was swiftly overtaking the landscape as the soldiers hurried to their fighting positions, stopping by the arms lockers to grab weapons and draw ammunition. They had practiced quick deployments many times since the alerts began and the troops easily found their way to their assigned positions, even in the low light conditions.

The night was chilly and a light frost had begun to form along the tops of the paddy dikes. The sky was moonless and darkening,

with only the purplish glow of the sun's last rays on the horizon providing any warmth or illumination. Soon even this was gone, leaving the troopers to shiver in their dirt holes under a blackened sky. They waited for hours in nervous anticipation, staring down the barrels of their rifles, palms sweating despite the chill air, bodies growing restless, tired and cold. Eventually, they began to relax.

At around twenty-one hundred hours, the kitchen orderlies came by and passed out meal packets, a nice gesture but one that hardly took the place of the hot food that had been denied them. Travis expressed disgust at no one in particular when he opened his packet to find he had received a breakfast meal consisting of dry, greenish eggs in a clump, shot through with greasy sausage links. It was the most dreaded concoction in the AFFC inventory. Reichel snickered, but took pity on Travis and handed him a brick of freeze dried fruit from his own meal.

Kelley knelt down in her foxhole and pressed a button on her watch, illuminating the face. She swept a stray strand of blonde hair from her face and tucked it up under the lip of her helmet. Four hours they had spent in the damp holes. She was cold, the knees and butt of her uniform pants soaked through with moisture from the ground. Surely, the alert would be called off soon and they would be allowed to go back to the barracks and get some sleep.

At that moment, the radio crackled to life. Sergeant Deemer moved from trooper to trooper, passing the word that an enemy recon element had been spotted on the east side of the village, the sector guarded by First Platoon. Already, the sounds of firing were drifting over Second Platoon's positions. The troops grew silent and pulled their weapons in tightly to their shoulders. The only sound aside from the quiet squelching of the radio was the loud beating of their hearts.

The radio crackled again as the forward observation team broke squelch to report movement on the road that Clay had detected an instant before. Four vehicles with blacked out headlights were crawling toward Second Platoon's line. They were traveling slowly, and as they grew closer, Clay made them out to be a Chevalier light tank in the lead, followed by a light SRM carrier and two wheeled APCs. *No hovers, that's good*, he thought. That meant the enemy vehicles were confined to the narrow road unless they wanted to take the chance on becoming mired in the sticky mud of the paddy field. *That SRM carrier could be trouble though. We can't afford to let it get a shot off.*

Armed with a brace of short-range missile launchers, the SRM carrier could blanket a wide area with deadly high explosives. They would have to take it out quickly. Clay passed the word down the line to hold fire until the order was given, and then to concentrate on the carrier. He trusted Benton to do the same on his side of the line.

Benton's anti-armor weapons were deployed in a concave semi-circle that spanned the road at the entrance to the village. The village was elevated slightly to prevent flooding during the rainy season, and the soldiers had taken advantage of the terrain, positioning themselves along the rise in the ground. The exceptions were Chen, who had chosen a spot in the loft of a barn, and two members of Benton's squad who waited in flood ditches on either side of the road. Armed with mines to which they had attached thin steel cables, their job was to stop or at least delay the first vehicle in the column, hopefully blocking the enemy's advance along the road.

Clay watched as the column crept closer and closer, turrets tracking from side to side. The enemy was now within one hundred fifty meters of their positions. He knew that although the cold, damp ground would help to mask their heat signatures, they could not hope to remain undetected for much longer. He was about to give the order to fire when the lead vehicle exploded in a blinding flash. The miners had done their work remarkably well and as the night lit up with flashes of gunfire, he could make out the two crouching soldiers running toward the safety of their lines.

At once the night sky lit up, crisscrossed with burning tracer and smoke contrails. Smoke billowed from the Chevalier's hatches. The crew leapt from the vehicle only to be cut down in a hail of fire. The APCs had stopped only long enough to disgorge their complement of infantry, and were backing away down the road. Benton's gunners tried to target the SRM carrier with their machine guns and heavy gyrojet rifles but the vehicle had pulled up close behind the burning Chevalier and become lost in the smoke.

A round from a VLAW, no doubt meant for the carrier, instead overshot and impacted against the front glacis plate of the lead APC. The lightly armored vehicle shuddered under the impact and stopped. Another round, this time precisely aimed, finished it off, penetrating the vulnerable side armor and igniting its stored fuel. Fire quickly consumed the vehicle, bathing the road and surrounding fields in an orange glow.

The Blakist infantry fanned out and took cover behind the paddy dikes. They tried to advance but were met with a fusillade of fire

from the dug-in rifle squads. Benton's mortar teams, positioned behind the row of buildings that bordered the rice fields, began dropping round after round onto the heads of the enemy.

Whether in retaliation or perhaps just firing blindly, the SRM carrier let off a full barrage which sailed into the village, demolishing a small equipment shed and sending geysers of earth skyward. Clay knew it would not take long for the crew to find the range and begin wreaking havoc and death on his troops. They had to take out that carrier!



A stray round punched through the thin wall of the barn and tore into the rafters, showering Chen with dust and wood chips. Undaunted, he trained his sniper rifle on an enemy trooper and fired. The man pitched over backward and did not rise. He set his crosshairs on another enemy; this one looked to be issuing orders. The man turned his head as Chen pulled the trigger, causing the heavy round to smash through the side of his helmet. The soldier jerked upright, then fell limp and collapsed across the paddy dike.

The barn in which Chen had chosen to position himself had no openings on the side that faced out over the rice paddies. He had knocked a few small holes in the wall that gave him good fields of fire but would be difficult to detect from outside, especially at night. He spent hours hefting sandbags one by one up the rickety ladder until he had enough to create a throne-like revetment out of which he could fire. It was placed back some distance from his firing ports and this, coupled with the weapon's large flash suppressor should make it virtually impossible for the enemy to spot the source of his fire. Still, it would not be long before the Blakists figured out that they were being sniped, and the barn, being the tallest building in the village, was far too obvious for them to overlook. Chen would soon be forced to abandon his position, but not just yet.

Sighting along the dike behind which most of the enemy troops were pinned, Chen noticed the swaying of a radio antenna. He fired a shot into the dike in an attempt to spook the operator into moving, but to no avail. Further down the enemy line, he noticed a pair of troopers struggling to set up a tripod mounted machine gun. He picked off the gunner, the light from the burning vehicles revealing a spray of blood issuing from the man's throat. He next targeted the gun itself, drilling a round into the receiver that ren-

dered it useless. The second crewman gave up the weapon and dove behind the dike wall.

Tracking left to cover the road, Chen saw a sight that made his blood run cold. The SRM carrier had traversed its turret and aimed its missile tubes straight at his hiding place. The thin walls of the barn would offer no protection against the deadly rain of high explosive rockets and there was no time to run. Chen hunkered down and silently prayed.

Suddenly, the carrier rocked backward and skewed to the right as Benton's gunners finally acquired their target. Round after round of armor piercing shaped charge blasted the carrier, their rocket motors trailing white ribbons of smoke. A massive explosion engulfed the carrier as its stored ammunition detonated, gutting the vehicle and sending its turret sailing out into the muddy field.

Their vehicles decimated, the enemy infantry chose to withdraw rather than take further punishment. Benton's mortars continued to pound them until they were out of sight.

The battle was over. The untested troops of Second Platoon, many of whom had graduated recruit training just months earlier, had met the enemy and prevailed. Clay was thankful for the dark night, which he was sure had contributed to their victory. Darkness helped to dehumanize the enemy. Firing at shadows was easy. Seeing your enemy face to face in the cold, unforgiving light of day was another matter entirely. Clay hoped his soldiers would never have to learn the difference.

After remaining in their positions for some time to guard against the possibility of a counterattack, First and Second squads moved out to search for enemy survivors with Benton's people providing security. As Private Reichel moved past the smoldering vehicles, he came upon an enemy soldier, a tank crewman, who was crawling along the road, obviously wounded.

"Medic! Hey, we got a live one here!" Reichel approached the man and began to call out to him when the Blakist rolled onto his back and leveled a blazer pistol at him. The pistol whined and a double whip of fiery energy stabbed into Reichel's chest, burning clean through and spraying the road behind him with droplets of scorched blood and tissue.

Every Lancer in range poured fire into the Blakist, ripping him to shreds, but it came too late for Reichel. The ceramic mesh body armor worn by all Federated Suns regular infantry was effective

against slug weapons and some lasers but offered no protection against a weapon as lethal as a blazer at such close range.

Reichel collapsed to his knees, face frozen in wide-eyed disbelief, flames licking from the vicious wound, before pitching forward in a smoldering heap.

Medic Travis was on the scene quickly but there was nothing he could do. Beam weapons did horrible things to the inside of the human body. Even a glancing shot to a vital area could boil the blood and cause superheated organs to explode, resulting in massive internal trauma that was beyond anyone's ability to heal.

The members of the squad gathered around the grisly scene. Some, like Travis wept outright while others wore hardened looks, their faces carved out of stone. Kelley, choking on bile, knelt by the side of the road and heaved. Hannan turned away and moved along the road, firing into the bodies of fallen enemy soldiers. Chen's face was outwardly impassive, death was nothing new to him, but looking closely, Clay noticed his smoldering eyes and knew the fire behind them had grown several degrees hotter.

The squad gathered up Reichel's body in a poncho and carried him back to the encampment. He had been their first casualty of this war. Clay doubted he would be the last.



The platoon remained in position for the remainder of the night, expecting more Blakist attacks, though none came. They emerged after dawn, and it was only when the sun had risen fully that they surveyed the devastation wrought by the previous night's battle.

Burnt out vehicle hulks littered the road, metal pinging as it cooled. Corpses of dead enemy soldiers were scattered in the fields and among the charred vehicles. Mortar and rocket rounds had dug great furrows into the paddy fields, blowing down the dikes and tearing up large swatches of carefully cultivated vegetation. The buildings on the edge of the village showed the scars left by hundreds of rounds that had pockmarked their walls. The air was poisoned with the sickening smell of death.

Clay was greatly saddened by the destruction and the effect it would have on the villagers. They would rebuild, he knew, but the village would never again be the place of tranquil innocence it once was.

Later that afternoon, a platoon of heavy tanks rolled into the village, their treads gouging jagged ruts in the cobblestone streets, adding to the previous night's destruction. Their commander, a Lieutenant Perry, met with Jorgenson, explaining that his unit was part of an armored battalion that was taking over the defense of Liaoning Province.

The First MI was needed elsewhere, and the troops of Charlie Company waved goodbye to the villagers and mounted the tracked APCs that would ferry them to a military airfield where they would spend the next few days waiting for transport to the front lines. The battle at Liaoning had been a mere skirmish. The real war was yet to come.