

BATTLECORPS

DOG SOLDIERS

Jeff Kautz

Township of Blackrock Falls Tiantang Mountains Nanking 24 March 3068

The line of armored personnel carriers ground slowly up the steep mountain road, tracks grinding ruts into the pavement, before finally coming to a stop outside the gymnasium that was serving as the temporary Battalion headquarters. Private First Class Yun Chen stepped out into the dim sunlight, ducking to avoid banging his head on the low rear hatch frame. The crisp mountain air felt good on his face and in his lungs as he removed his cumbersome helmet and took a moment to stretch and breathe deeply. Around him, the troops of the Second Platoon were all doing likewise, thankful for the chance to stretch their legs after three hours in the back of a cramped APC.

The Battalion had flown in early in the morning, pilots hugging the ground hoping to avoid detection by any enemy aircraft that may be up and about. The Karnov transports had landed in the narrow valley below, as there were no suitable landing zones around Blackrock, and had lingered only long enough for the troops to unload their gear and vehicles before beating a hasty exit. After about an hour of the usual confusion that seemed to pervade any large-scale maneuver, the unit sorted itself out and mounted the APCs for the trip up the mountain, leaving behind a company of combat engineers to enlarge the landing zone.

The trek up the mountain was slow going. Engines strained against the thin air while they weaved through crowds of refugees that choked the narrow road. The civilians were a pitiful lot, some on foot, most packed tightly into vehicles and all loaded down with whatever provisions they could carry. Chen had ridden with his head extending from the upper hatch for a while, but the sight of flatbeds crammed with dead and wounded civilians had driven him back into the troop compartment.

Chen remembered visiting Blackrock Falls as a child. The town that had, in reality, grown to the size of a small city, was one of the first settlements on Nanking, and as such held an abundance of history. The first settlers had come to these mountains seeking fortune in precious metals. What they found was a glassy black ore that became known as Nanking obsidian, and was highly sought after for making fine jewelry.

Chen recalled riding cable cars between mountaintops and taking magrail tours of the mines left over from those early days. He had enjoyed throwing rocks into the waters of the canal that ran along the north edge of town, ending at the falls that gave the town its name. There was a restaurant perched on the side of the mountain where he would dine with his parents. He remembered venturing out onto the high magrail bridge behind that restaurant, holding his father's hand as he looked out across the mist shrouded valley far below. It had been a beautiful town in those innocent days.

That was before the accident at the munitions factory where his parents both worked had made him an orphan. For years, he blamed their deaths on the Davions and their eternal need to feed their war machine. As a young adolescent, Chen's anger at the system manifested itself first in petty street crime—vandalism, shoplifting and the like—but it soon took a darker turn. At fifteen, he ransacked a local post office in an impulsive act of rebellion against authority. No one was hurt but Chen brought attention to himself and, before long, he found himself behind bars. That was when the *Zhangzheng de Guang* stepped in.

The man was impeccably groomed and well-dressed when he showed up at the police precinct with enough money to bail Chen out of jail and enough legal expertise to have the charges against him dropped. Presenting himself only as *Mowang*, he had the appearance of a successful businessman or visiting dignitary in his three-piece suit, a stark contrast to Chen's rags.

Mowang provided Chen with food, a warm bed and fresh clothes. He opened Chen's eyes, taught him to take pride in his heritage, and convinced him that the only way to restore the glory of the old ways was to rid Nanking of the foreign oppressors, by any means necessary. It was a message Chen had been all too eager to accept. He embraced the cause wholeheartedly, and stepped into a shadow world he hadn't known existed.

He met others like himself, troublemakers swept up off the streets of cities and towns all over Nanking and provided with a purpose, a way to focus their destructive energies, an outlet for their anger and frustration. They were making a difference, and it felt right, at least for a while, until innocent people, native citizens just like Chen started to get hurt. For some it was acceptable. After all, any man not actively fighting for the cause was in effect working against it, and was therefore deserving of no pity. They were at war, and in war, there were no innocents. Chen, however, did not

see things that way. There *were* innocents. Ordinary citizens who desired nothing more than to live a normal life, unencumbered by the wars others forced upon them. What was the difference then between Chen's group and the warmongering government they sought to overthrow?

Chen realized that he had become a part of the very same cycle of violence and endless brutality that had ultimately cost him his parents in the first place. It had taken him years to see the truth, to accept the fact that the factory where his parents died would have been in operation no matter what governing body ruled Nanking. Be they Davions, Capellans or otherwise, the weapons would keep flowing, the need would always be there. The only way to eliminate that need was to curtail the human greed that perpetuated it.

Overcoming his prejudices had been difficult and costly, both to Chen and to those around him. He still harbored no love for House Davion, or for any other great house or ruling body, but his hatred had diminished and he had begun to turn his life around.

Now, gazing east, Chen saw columns of black smoke rising from areas of the city where fighting had already taken place. He felt sure that he had not yet seen an end to war.

He was right.



Shaking off the feeling of mild nausea he always experienced when traveling long distances in the back of an enclosed vehicle, Clay left Sergeant Markel in charge of the platoon and made his way to the gymnasium. He threw open one of the heavy double-doors and was greeted with the familiar sight of organized chaos. Clerks pounded away at workstations set up on small desks. Junior NCOs scurried in all directions carrying clipboards and stacks of paper, trying not to trip over the numerous cables and lines taped to the gym floor while officers shouted over the din.

Clay steered toward a group of NCOs that appeared to be the center of activity and was pleasantly surprised to find Sergeant Lang leaning over the back of a corporal who was furiously banging away at a computer terminal. The two old friends exchanged a warm greeting and shook hands in the rough, strong-gripped style they had grown accustomed to after so many years in the service.

"Couldn't stay away could you?" joked Clay. Noticing the new rank of Staff Sergeant hastily pinned to Lang's collar he added, "What happened, you guys run out of good people to promote?"

Lang's expression turned grave and Clay knew at once he had misspoken.

"I joined the reserve unit back home when word got around about Tharkad," he replied. "We got called up three days ago and trucked up here. Some locals had reported seeing DropShips landing to the east. By the time we got here the city had already been bombed, most of the residents bugged out. Smart. We moved in and ran into what we thought was a recon element. We held 'em for the better part of a day. Then they brought in tanks and heavy weapons. We lost a lot of good people, Top." Lang paused for just a second, his eyes staring off into forever. "A lot of good people."

"Good news is," he recovered, "they haven't moved since. We hurt 'em pretty bad. They may have pulled back. That's what you're here to find out."

The pair was joined then by Lieutenant Breeden and the barrel-chested Sergeant Major Quinn.

Quinn slapped a beefy hand on Lang's shoulder and spoke in his rich brogue. "Lang tell ya about how he saved his whole comp'ny?" Lang looked embarrassed by the comment.

"S'true," continued the crusty old veteran. "After his CO got it, this boy rallied the men. Took out a tank by himself! Not for him, none of 'em woulda made it out alive! He's quite a hero!"

Lang's face reddened as he quickly changed the subject. "What's the poop, sir?"

Breeden had been busily marking away at a noteputer screen that displayed an aerial photograph of the Tiantang Mountains and Blackrock Falls. He placed the noteputer on the desk and laid out the details of the operation to them.

"Recon has positive I.D. on toasterheads in this area here." He pointed with his stylus to a grid on the noteputer map. "They appear to be making preparations for an assault. Regiment overran their drop zones outside Yang-ku yesterday, cutting off supplies to their big 'Mech units that are busy assaulting the capital. They need to take the Kallon factory intact. We are here," he said, pointing out their position in the city. "Blackrock Falls sits right along the magrail line through the valley." With his stylus, Breeden traced

the rail line through Blackrock and into Kallontown, the small city that had sprouted up around the 'Mech factory. "Blackrock is a perfect staging area for an assault on the factory. They'll want to use the magrail to move their troops and supplies so we know they're coming; only question is when and with how much. Our mission is twofold; go in, locate and destroy any Word of Blake forces still within the city and defend Blackrock Falls against attack."

So there it was. Simple on a noteputer screen, maybe not so simple when the fur started flying.

The Leftenant drew more lines on the map screen, indicating the route the APCs would take into the city. "First Platoon will provide security along the right flank. First Sar'nt Clay, you and Second Platoon go up the middle. Third Platoon will reinforce Lang's reservists and move down to secure the canal. We can't let them use that as an avenue of approach. I'll be traveling with Second Platoon along with Sar'Major Quinn. The Old Man rides with First," he added, referring to Captain Jorgenson, the company commander.

"What kind of help can we expect from higher-higher?" asked Plumley, the First Platoon sergeant.

"We were the only regular unit stationed close enough to get here in time, which is why we're here," replied Breeden. "Don't expect any help from Regiment, that way anything we do get will be a bonus." The assembled NCOs breathed a collective sigh of resignation.

"Brief your squad leaders, get your people ready. We move in one hour."

Two hours later the convoy began to move, crawling slowly along the city's perimeter roads. Blackrock Falls occupied a large, flat plain nestled between two high mountain peaks. It was bordered to the south and east by wooded scrub hills and rocky crags and to the north by the canal that had been cut to divert overflow during the spring thaw. As such, there was only a limited amount of building space, causing the city to abruptly start and stop rather than continue into the suburban sprawl common to most cities across known space. The city center was a crowded hub of streets and avenues that quickly became gridlocked on normal business days. The perimeter roads had been built as an alternative to the snarl of downtown traffic.

An hour into the trek, the convoy stopped again, drivers adopting defensive posture by pulling their vehicles off to opposite sides of the road and leaving the engines to idle. Popping his head up through the topside egress hatch, Clay could see officers with maps and noteputers conferring near the front of the column. Another thirty minutes passed before the officers decided to turn the column around and head back in the direction they had just come from.

Hunched over in the red-lit interior of the vehicle, Clay tried to keep track of the number of turns and their direction to try to determine where they were going but he soon found himself completely disoriented. The route had looked simple on the noteputer screen.

He checked the condition of the other troops in the vehicle. Chen, Hannan and the wiry Sergeant Deemer dozed, their heads lolling with the motion of the carrier. They enjoyed the impossible sleep of the infantryman, who could usually nod off just about anywhere and frequently did so. Others, mostly the newer troopers who had never ridden in such a vehicle before, looked to be on the verge of retching from the constant bumping and churning, not to mention the heat of engines and bodies that was not at all conquered by weak streams of cold air from the vehicle's so-called climate control system. Medic Travis looked especially sick, his complexion a pale green even in the harsh red illumination. Wecker snickered at Travis' plight while offering to share a freeze-formed nutrient bar. Travis squeezed his eyes shut and groaned.

Clay was riding with Second Squad, headed up by the very capable Sergeant Deemer. Breeden and Quinn were with First Squad in the lead track while Benton's heavy weapons detachment followed behind. It was mid-afternoon before the column finally split and the vehicles began making their way into the town.

The ride in was smooth at first but soon became a jostling, churning affair that woke those who had been sleeping. Clay eased his body past the gunner's station and poked his head into the driver's compartment to get a better look. On the driver's periscope displays, Clay could make out the detail of the ruined landscape around. They were grinding through a rubbed intersection with three- and four-story buildings on either side.

"This area got hit pretty bad," the driver offered, raising his voice above the whining engine. "Air strikes I think."

"Ours or theirs?" asked Clay. The driver merely shrugged.

Clay noticed the burned out remains of a light tank among those of several civilian vehicles. This must be where Lang's boys ran into trouble. The lightly armored APCs would be sitting ducks if the enemy still had troops in the area.

"Get ready to stop up here," Clay said, tapping the driver on the shoulder. "I'm going to raise the L.T." Clay keyed his throat mike but received only static. Ahead, the lead track continued on, grinding steadily forward.



Inside the lead track, Sergeant Major Quinn cradled his beloved shotgun between his knees as the carrier bucked and bounced over the rough ground. On his left, seated just behind the turret gunner's basket, Lieutenant Breeden chattered into the radio handset, voice pitched to carry above the din of the droning engine. He argued with Captain Jorgenson about routes and timetables and whatever else. The back and forth had continued throughout the whole ride so far, preventing Quinn from sleeping and giving him the beginnings of a real case o' the ass, as he was fond of saying. Just when he was about to tell the Lieutenant where he could put that handset, the grizzled veteran noticed the gunner begin to depress his foot pedals, electric motors whirring as the basket swiveled from left to right. As if he was looking for something.

Quinn squeezed past Breeden in order to get a look at the driver's three-sixty display screens. He tapped the driver on the helmet and motioned for him to slow down the carrier. Not one to usurp his commander, Quinn tugged on Breeden's sleeve in an attempt to get the young officer's attention. Breeden seemed not to notice and continued to talk loudly into the handset.

"Sir," attempted Quinn. "SIR," he repeated, his voice louder and more urgent as the track continued to crawl forward. "Sir, we gotta stop! We're puttin' our head in a snake hole here!"

Breeden, by now alerted to the situation, turned to give the driver the order to stop when the track lurched violently under a booming impact. Breeden flew backward, face and arms a bloody mess. The driver's compartment was on fire. The turret gunner's feet slipped from the pedals and hung limply from the basket. Oily black smoke quickly filled the troop compartment choking the panicking soldiers and stinging their eyes. Several more heavy impacts on both sides shook the vehicle and sent troopers sprawling to the

floor in a heap of tangled limbs and equipment. Shrapnel ricocheted around inside the enclosed space, tearing through clothing and flesh. Men screamed and cried out for help. They were dying.

Quinn knew if he couldn't lower the rear egress hatch they would all be burned alive. He reached through the blackness, groping for the emergency lever at the back of the troop compartment but tripped over something, probably a body, and went down on his knees. Pushing himself up from the tangle of limbs, he groped out in the dark, feeling his way along the metal wall of the carrier until his hand found the lever. Without a moment to spare, he pulled.



Watching from the trailing APC, Clay desperately keyed his throat mike and the semi-portable radio set trying to raise Lieutenant Breeden. Helplessly he looked on as the lead track crept out into the wide intersection, then abruptly stopped as multiple missiles slammed into the vehicle. *Get out*, he prayed as more missiles plastered the sides, joined by heavy machine guns and at least one man-pack PPC. *Get out, goddammit!*

Clay watched, transfixed, as the rear compartment door began to come down but stopped partway, jammed in its twisted frame. Another series of impacts caved in the track's right side and blew the top hatches off, sending sheets of flame out through the semi-opened rear door. First Squad was gone. Eleven men, dead in as many seconds.



The slap of bullets thudding against the hull sides snapped Clay back to reality.

"GO! GO! GO!" he screamed at his troops, physically pushing the nearest of them toward the lowering rear ramp.

The squad disembarked rapidly, splitting to cover both sides of the carrier. The turret gunner lay down a steady stream of fire from his dual miniguns, hosing suspected enemy positions in the buildings to the right. The third vehicle had pulled up to the left after disgorging Benton's squad and was providing a covering barrage on that side.

Missiles began impacting around the vehicles, plowing into the road surface and hurling deadly chunks of ferrocrete into the air. Machine gun and PPC fire raked over the squad's position in the rubble, seeking flesh. After a quick head count, Clay ordered the carriers to back off and began to maneuver his people out of the kill zone. The vehicles reversed slowly, their gunners continuing to pour deadly rivers of lead toward the enemy. A voice crackled in Clay's ear. "PPC on the right," warned the track gunner as he marked the target location with a stream of armor piercing rounds. Clay thanked the gunner and moved the squad to a covered position behind the burned out Blakist tank.

"Enemy man-pack in a pit, ten meters two o'clock," he called out to the squad. "Grenades ready!" Clay fetched a grenade from a pouch on his combat vest and pulled the pin while all the troopers nearby did the same. "Now!"



A shower of grenades fell amidst the Blakist gun crew, who were busy trading shots with the APCs. One zealot was cut to ribbons by one of the minigunners as he leapt from the pit in a bid to escape the grenades. The rest were shredded by the ensuing round of detonations, their bodies ripped to pieces and tossed into the air. Seconds later, the members of Second Squad overran the gun pit, screaming and howling amid the smoke and flying shrapnel, the thirst for vengeance for their comrades fueling their bloodlust.

Bullets and beams tore at the earth around the gun pit. Clay's troopers flattened against the ground, seeking whatever cover they could find.

"Fire your weapons!" Clay bellowed as he pitched a smoke grenade out into the square between the squad and the Blakist gunners. "We need to move or we're dead!"

Hannan leapt into the pit beside the PPC and pried the dead gunner's hands from the firing mechanism. Swiveling the gore encrusted weapon on its mount, she squeezed the triggers to find that the weapon had survived the grenade volley intact. Watching the charge meter rise rapidly back to green, she yelled for her comrades to hit the dirt and loosed a horrendous beam of man-made lightning in the direction of the Word of Blake positions in a building across the way. White smoke began to billow from Clay's grenade, partially obscuring the squad. Deemer directed Hannan

to keep firing while Chen, acting on his own initiative, led an improvised fire team consisting of himself, Flores and Miller into the ground floor of a shattered office building on their right.

The three troopers half stumbled into the room through blasted out windows and doorways. A Blakist soldier poked his head into the doorway to an adjoining room and promptly lost it as Flores began cycling round after high explosive round through her automatic grenade launcher. Firing the cumbersome weapon from the hip, she sent a stream of projectiles burrowing through the thin wall to wreak death and destruction in the space beyond.

As Flores knelt to reload, Chen and Miller leapt through the ruined doorway to sweep the devastated room, savaging any Blakist they could see through the smoke.

Flores caught up with the pair, whose adrenalin-fueled momentum had carried them all the way through the ground floor of the building. The three stopped, exhausted, and watched with devilish delight as Hannan once again razed the building across the street, the cerulean whip pulverizing ferrocement and melting steel, sending a waterfall of debris cascading onto the ruined street. The coruscating beam licked the window frames and burrowed deep into the structure's interior, touching off a huge explosion that filled the entire ground floor with fire.

Must have hit an ammo dump or a natural gas line, thought Chen, as the building seemed to belch fire and acrid smoke before buckling and finally collapsing in on itself and crashing into the street. An enormous, roiling dust cloud enveloped the intersection, carrying with it flying debris of all sorts. The men and women of Second Squad stood in its midst, too tired, angry and defiant to yield to the tempest.

"That's for first squad, motherfuckers!" yelled Flores through a stream of dust-caked tears as Miller shook his fist and cheered. Chen remained silent.

Clay looked around at the hardened faces of his young troopers, feeling a sense of fatherly pride and at the same time a great sadness. None of them would ever be the same now. They had crossed the final barrier that separated those who lived as warriors and those who merely listened to the stories. There was no going back.



The platoon spent the next few hours clearing out the surrounding buildings. They suffered no further casualties, and took no prisoners. The Blakist fanatics seemed to prefer death to capture, a philosophy that was just fine as far as the men and women of Second Platoon were concerned.

After declaring the area clear of enemy soldiers, the platoon moved on foot to the Company rally point with the APCs trailing behind. The smoldering wreckage of First Squad's destroyed track was still too hot to touch. Clay marked the location on his note-puter and recorded the names of the dead for later recovery. Late afternoon was turning to early evening when they made their link up with the Company, and the waning light was fast disappearing behind the western hills.

The Company area was abuzz with activity. All around, soldiers were hurrying to finish trenches and strong points before the onset of darkness. A few soldiers wearing chainmail gloves unfurled coils of barbed wire that the unit had brought along attached to the APCs. Others piled up bags of fertilizer and playground sand, liberated from the local home improvement warehouse, around an APC that had lost a track. A group of men were filling barrels with fuel from the immobilized vehicle and wrestling them out into pits they had dug in front of the trench lines.

A runner approached Clay with a message for Lieutenant Breeden.

"He's dead." Clay said matter-of-factly. He was too tired, too emotionally spent to embellish it any more than that. "So are Quinn and Markel."

The young soldier stammered, then straightened. "Staff meeting for all platoon commanders," he pointed to a low building across an open courtyard. "I...I guess that means you, First S'arnt."

Clay squeezed his eyes closed tightly and ran a rough hand down his ashen face. "I guess so."



The meeting was just getting ready to start when Clay walked in. Jorgenson had decided to set up shop inside the local police precinct, its heavy block walls providing some degree of protection in the event of an attack. Gathered in one corner of the room were several police officers from the department who had appar-

ently offered their services. Clay also spotted a few civilian types, mostly either very young or very old men, smoking and sporting deer rifles and milling around the gathered soldiers. Noticing Lang, Clay gave his friend a nod of acknowledgement from across the room.

Captain Jorgenson appeared from a side office and with a wave of his hand quickly put down his subordinates' attempt to snap to attention. Dark circles shadowed Jorgenson's eyes as he leaned on a desk and began laying out the situation.

"As of this evening, Blackrock Falls has been declared free of enemy troops. You've all done well and you should be proud, but it's not going to last." Lieutenant Anders, the Company executive officer, produced a large aerial map and held it up so everyone in the room could see. At the center of the map was Blackrock Falls. To the west, in the foothills lay the Kallon 'Mechworks and the city of Kallontown. East of Blackrock, following the rail line, was a heavily wooded valley.

"Battalion managed to get a spotter up...for a while. It passed us this before it went offline." The Captain opened his telescopic pointer and tapped at a spot near the valley center. "This clearing, as you can all see, is the Wob landing zone. At least one *Hamilcar*-class DropShip clearly visible. That means, depending on how it's configured, that they've probably got at least a half dozen 'Mechs along with as many tanks and boo koo infantry.

"Up here," the Captain tapped a spot near the clearing, "is the magrail station. The Wobs took the station as soon as they landed and they've been loading equipment all day. The rail line runs up the mountain," he continued, tracing the route with his pointer, "and passes right through Blackrock Falls. Right through us!"

Jorgenson paused for a moment to let the impact of his statement fully sink in.

"Our flyboys have kept their DropShips away from Kallontown so far, so we think they're switching to plan B. We can expect their ground assault to roll through here sometime within the next thirty-six hours."

Captain Jorgenson's blunt assessment caused a murmur in the gathering as the officers and NCOs began discussing the situation amongst themselves. It seemed hopeless, absurd. One under-strength infantry battalion against at least an equal-sized enemy equipped with tanks and 'Mechs? Remarks like, "Screwed over

again" and "Poor bloody infantry" were bantered about. Sergeant Evans of Third Platoon was first to speak up.

"Sir, what are our options?"

"Options? Not many," answered Jorgenson. "We can't pull back, we'd only make it halfway down the mountain before they jumped on us, and anyway our orders are to hold. An attack would be suicide since we don't know the situation in the valley. We have to hold in place."

"Die in place," said someone in the crowd.

If Jorgenson heard the comment, he let it pass. "Commanders," he said, addressing the various ranks all at once, "get your people busy improving their positions. Occupy and reinforce the buildings on the east boundary. Use whatever you can find lying around. Get your heavy weapons in place and move up those carriers for fire support. The Wobs won't waste any time, they'll be coming before first light. I want every man who can hold a rifle up on the line tonight!"

"What do we have for reinforcements?" enquired a junior lieutenant as the room began to clear.

"Nothing as of now. All the magrails are being used to haul Regiment out to reinforce the capital. Command says they might be able to shake us loose some air support tomorrow or the day after."

"Any news from offworld?"

"Nothing good. The Toasters took out the HPG from within. Computer virus or something. Apparently, the crew were Blakist sympathizers. S-3 says they haven't transmitted an actual message in weeks, maybe even months. We're completely isolated. As far as the rest of the Inner Sphere knows, there's nothing happening here at all."

Jorgenson waited for the room to calm.

"Right now we're all that stands between the Wobs and the East Valley."

And if they get the valley they have a clear run to the 'Mech factory east of Yang-ku, then the capital itself, thought Clay. As his eyes played over the line Jorgenson had traced on the map, an idea began to take shape.

"Sir, what's the status of the rail line in our area?" he asked.

"Intact right now, Top," answered the captain. "The engineers are placing explosives on the track but they don't have enough demo to do much damage. Might delay 'em some..."

"Do we have any trains that run?"

Jorgenson looked puzzled. "Only one engine. I've ordered it back down the mountain with our wounded aboard."

Clay nodded. "Sir, I noticed a vehicle lot on the way in. They sell those big Ambassador six-wheel drives, the civvie version of our Apocalypse. We could use a few of them to take the wounded down the mountain. We can have some of the locals drive them."

"I take it you have a better idea for the magrail?"

"Yes, sir. Yes, sir, I believe I do."

Zero Two-twenty-five Hours

Tiantang Mountains

Nanking

25 March 3068

"True Vision one, this is Alpha, come in, over." Adept Michael Vega adjusted the control knobs of his long-range transceiver, attempting to tune out some of the static. *Damn mountains*, he thought as he flipped open a switch cover on the right arm of his command couch and depressed the button that would extend the *Buccaneer*'s long whip antenna.

"We are at Phase Line Gold. Negative visuals to target. Still no contact from the scouts, over."

Vega and his two fellow Mechwarriors had driven their machines hard to reach their current position overlooking Blackrock Falls. The former mercenary had not trusted the narrow service roads, thinking them too easy for hidden enemies to ambush, and had decided to take his recon section overland. The mountainous terrain was treacherous, especially in the dark, and the trek had taken most of the night. They finally reached their final waypoint at zero two hundred and now stood partially concealed on a reverse slope just under one thousand meters from the eastern edge of Blackrock Falls.

"Roger, Alpha," replied the muted, emotionless voice through the static. "Sitrep, over."

Vega scanned the landscape through his cockpit canopy glass, his 'Mech's head swiveling slowly, mimicking his actions. Seeing nothing but the glow of a few fires, Vega switched over to thermal scan. The fires shone brighter on the thermal image and were joined by several other glowing dots, hot spots that could be infantry, civilians or just glowing embers left over from other small fires. There was no way to be sure at this range.

"Say again, sitrep, over."

Yeah, yeah, give me time dammit! Vega was irritated by the impatient voice. Good recon was slow work that could not be rushed, not that some low rank pencil pusher would be able to understand that. He cycled through his 'Mech's auxiliary sensors, but magscan and seismic revealed even less about the terrain in front of him.

"True Vision one this is Alpha. Ah...negative sensor contacts. Possible enemy infantry holding the edge of town, but I've got nothing here. Please advise, over."

After a few long moments, the comm crackled again. "Alpha, proceed to target, over."

What? Are they kidding? Vega couldn't believe they would order his three 'Mechs into a city at night. The enemy could have anything in there. Tanks, powered-down 'Mechs, minefields...Vega wondered if the static was interfering with his receiver.

"True Vision, negative copy last transmission. You want me to what?"

The voice returned, sounding annoyed. "Proceed to target, Alpha. Move in and find out what's in there, over."

They are crazy. "Ah, True Vision, wouldn't it be wiser to wait till first light? I mean, if the scouts didn't report back in..."

"Negative Alpha!" The voice was louder this time. "We need intel. You're the recon element, now get in there and recon!"

Why did I ever leave the Rangers? Michael wondered. *Because you were bankrupt, dispossessed and they gave you this bucket of leaky coolant to drive around, stupid.*

Vega sighed heavily and closed the comm. He would follow his orders, no matter how ridiculous they seemed to him. He lowered the whip antenna and switched off his magscan sensors in favor of the more useful thermals, missing the electromagnetic wave emanating from Blackrock station and heading rapidly down the mountain. Sighing, he tightbeamed a transmission to his lance-mates and relayed the order to move in. Vega had a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach. This was not going to be pretty.

East Valley Control Tower

Zero Two-thirty Hours

Nanking

25 March 3068

Communications Adept Norstrum spun in his liberated swivel chair and threw his arms in the air. "MechWarriors!" he exclaimed. "What a bunch of chickenshits! Can you believe that guy? Here he is, strapped into Blake knows how many tons of armor plated firepower, and he's afraid to move on the objective because there might be," Nostrum changed his tone, mocking the Mechwarrior, "*infantry holding the edge of town!*"

Adept Singh, Norstrum's companion in the rail station tower, chuckled as he filled his coffee mug. Norstrum's antics were a continual source of amusement for Singh. Anything to break the monotony of sitting in the magrail control tower running the comms and staring at panel lights all night. He turned to add his own comment but noticed a light on the control board, indicating a train moving.

"I didn't hear them ask for clearance to move," he said, not really surprised that the higher-ups had decided to pull out of the depot without informing the tower.

"They didn't," began Norstrum, stopping in mid-comment as the light changed position. He rapped his knuckles on the side of the console.

"Must be something wrong with the system! Piece of..."

Norstrum's jaw dropped open as the blinking indicator moved toward the station instead of away. The light indicator jumped again.

"There's another train on the tracks!" he exclaimed. "It's coming full blast! Sound the alarm!"

Singh dropped his mug in his rush to slap the alarm. The klaxon wailed in the yard, sending the adepts in charge of loading the rail cars rushing forward toward the tower to investigate. Norstrum frantically began swatting buttons on the board, trying to shut off power to the sections of track nearest the station but he had paid little attention during the brief period of instruction the station-master had given, and he couldn't remember which button was which. Singh shoved him out of the way and slapped the correct

control but he was too late. The onrushing engine was little more than a projectile, moving at close to two hundred kilometers per hour. The deadened track slowed but could not stop the speeding giant as sheer momentum propelled the engine forward.

Norstrum stared, transfixed, at the monster barreling toward him. Just before the ten-ton beast plowed into the parked train outside, Norstrum noticed a slogan that someone had scrawled in large red letters across the hood. *Express To Hell.*



Singh was thrown off his feet by the blast as the speeding locomotive collided with the lead engine of the train parked outside the tower. Both engines disintegrated with a bone-searing scream of tearing metal.

The tower rocked as the booming continued. Rail cars loaded with fuel, ammunition, vehicles and all the other implements of war exploded and sailed into the air. The earthquake-like tremors lasted for several minutes. The tower began to fill with smoke.

Singh hauled Norstrum up from the floor and tried to coax his stunned companion to abandon the burning tower. Norstrum, still in shocked disbelief, shook his foot loose from an overturned swivel chair and followed his friend outside.

The yard was a scene of sheer chaos. Men scrambled in all directions. Rail cars were piled on top of each other in flaming heaps that lit the early morning darkness. One flatbed had been dislodged from the rail and overturned, spilling a pair of Puma heavy tanks, which lay upside down in an expanding puddle of burning petrol. Norstrum and Singh were flattened again by the blast wave as the missile ammo in one of the tanks cooked off, tossing the machine's heavy hull into the air like a child's toy. Afraid to move, the two adepts hugged the ground, ducking their heads with each new booming detonation. They lay there until well past sunup.



Muffled reports, like the sound of far off thunder, drifted across the eastern edge of Blackrock Falls. A brilliant flash illuminated the early morning sky, most troops at first mistaking it for lightning. Word of Top Clay's scheme spread fast though and soon they were celebrating, albeit quietly, each successive blast. Their

morale was lifted for a moment but the fair mood was soon to be broken as one, then more of the forward observation posts reported in.

'Mechs! There were enemy 'Mechs approaching across the barren, rocky slope to the east. The soldiers manning the listening posts rushed past the trenches and wire just as the trio of giant silhouettes loomed out of the inky darkness. Troops scrambled for their posts, hunkering down behind locked and loaded weapons. Then they waited.

The enemy goliaths approached slowly, tentatively, their pilots obviously unsure of what awaited them and none too eager to find out. There were three of them, a newly reconditioned *Wasp*, a hatchet wielding Word of Blake design called a *Buccaneer*, and a third 'Mech that no one recognized. The third 'Mech appeared to be a light class machine and carried a fearsome looking sword in its right hand. Light or not, each footfall sent tremors through the ruined buildings, shaking loose pieces of debris that collapsed in small dust clouds.

The 'Mechs moved closer. *One hundred meters. Seventy-five meters.* Still the men waited, sweaty hands clinging tightly to their weapons. *Fifty meters. Forty meters.*



Thirty meters from the edge of town, the mouth of hell opened up and swallowed Michael Vega. A flare shot up into the night, burning as hot as a small sun, temporarily fouling his thermal sensors. He switched to visual and was greeted by the sight of hundreds of lines of tracer darting past his cockpit. Small arms fire of all sizes and types illuminated the landscape in a continuous array of coruscating beams and twinkling muzzle flashes. It was as if the entire population of this miserable planet had gathered here and they were all armed and firing right at him.

Normally, 'Mechs had little to fear from infantry. In the open terrain preferred by most Mechwarriors, the lowly infantry were outranged, outmaneuvered and outgunned. However, here, in a city at night, they were deadly. In numbers, able to strike from concealment and concentrate fire, they became a Mechwarrior's worst nightmare, one that was coming true for Michael Vega and his recon section.

Short-range missile detonations against his 'Mech's legs threatened to throw Vega off balance as laser and PPC beams caressed

his torso. A pair of miniguns mounted on a dug-in personnel carrier opened up on him, sending dual streams of red tracer biting into the *Buccaneer*'s upper arm and shoulder. Armor plating spalled away in sheets, threatening to give way and expose the 'Mech's vital inner workings.

Sidestepping to pull his machine out of the line of fire, Vega glanced right and noticed Seth Mirozov's *Ghurka* backing away under a furious assault. The small 'Mech took a step backward, its foot coming down on a stack of barrels strung together with thick steel cord. The barrels exploded with a force that shook the ground under the *Buccaneer*'s feet and covered the *Ghurka* with a wave of flaming gelatin. The little 'Mech, now missing its right foot below the ankle joint, lurched and plunged to the ground, bouncing once on the rocky soil before coming to rest on its face. The flames spread out and quickly swallowed the supine 'Mech.

"Pull back!" Vega shouted into the comm. Whipping his machine about, he realized that Debra Cantner had already chosen discretion over valor, and was hunkered down out of small arms range snapping off shots with her medium laser to cover his retreat.

Cantner and Vega backpedaled beyond SRM range and stopped on the wooded hilltop that had been their overwatch position. Vega worried the enemy with a few shots from his extended range laser, an action that equated to swatting flies with a hammer. Mirozov's burning *Ghurka* was still prostrate on the rocky hillock where it had fallen. Dialing up his visual magnification, Vega confirmed that the escape hatch remained dogged tight. He attempted to contact the rail station but got no reply. After a few more unsuccessful tries, Vega decided their position on the hill was too exposed and he and Cantner retreated into the tree line.



The mood in the trenches was ecstatic. Soldiers cheered and raised their arms in victory salutes. Maybe 'Mechs weren't so tough after all. The fallen machine continued to burn in the field to their front, a glowing reminder of their triumph.

Clay looked over the faces of his elated soldiers, each bathed in the orange glow of the fire. He could not help but feel proud of them. They had seen comrades butchered and burned, been under heavy fire and faced off against man's ultimate machines

of war, but not one of them had run, not one had frozen under fire. They had performed as a team, a family.

Travis appeared with a bottle of liberated champagne that he had acquired somewhere in town. Flores produced a huge combat knife and used the point to dig out the cork, which shot skyward with a loud pop, causing some nearby troopers to dive for cover. The squad laughed together and turned toward Clay before indulging in the drink, as if seeking his permission. Clay looked at the grinning Sergeant Deemer and nodded his approval. Miller let out a whoop and grabbed the bottle, raising it to his mouth and chugging until the tingly liquid ran from his nose. Chen took a sip, followed by Flores who swallowed deeply. When each soldier had had a drink, Travis took the bottle and shook it vigorously. With his thumb over the mouth of the bottle, he sprayed the foamy champagne over himself and the others. Clay allowed the party to play itself out. It was important that the troops let off some steam and have a little fun while they could. Clay had a hunch that laughter would be in short supply in the coming days.



The rest of the night was quiet, as was the following day. The troops spent the daylight hours further improving their positions and catching up on much needed rest. A team went out to inspect the downed 'Mech but found its surface still too hot to touch. They left it smoldering in the rocky field.

Rumor and speculation spread among the Company like wildfire. Some thought for sure that the Blakists had pulled back, maybe even lifted off-world. Others suspected they were only waiting for their chance to employ terror weapons, as they had on Tharkad and Outreach. They expected that at any moment a warship would appear overhead to rain nuclear death on them all. Clay suspected that the enemy was waiting, biding his time while repairing the damage to the rail line. They would come, he was sure. Probably sooner than later.

Around noon, Captain Jorgenson summoned Clay and informed him that Second Platoon was going into reserve due to the losses they had taken in the earlier fighting. Clay assembled the platoon and they moved to a position a few hundred meters behind the front line, setting up the platoon TOC in the garage of the six-wheel drive dealership while the troops claimed the showroom for their bivouac. The low building was still basically intact, minus

its huge bay windows, and the solid block construction offered a small measure of protection. The troops worked on reinforcing the position using whatever they could find while Clay rotated the squads on and off work details. When night fell, the exhausted soldiers put down their tools, consumed what little reconstituted chow their stomachs could handle, and fell into a restless sleep.

The squad leaders had come up with a duty roster for the night's watch that made sure everyone served a shift, themselves included, but not for more than one hour. They would serve in overlapping pairs, putting a fresh set of eyes on watch every thirty minutes. Clay served the first hour with Sergeant Benton, the burly squad leader for the weapons section. The two chatted together quietly and sucked down instant coffee they heated using the portable chemical burner that came with the standard issue mess kit.

Clay had always been fond of the good-natured Benton and had been glad to see him finish the Sergeants Academy and take command of the weapons squad. Be it a firefight or a bar fight, Benton was one man Clay wanted by his side.

At the end of their hour, Clay sent Benton off to wake the next watch while he stayed at his post. Left temporarily alone, he gazed up at the stars and thought of Trinity. He hoped she would have fled Yang-ku, but in his heart, he knew she would never abandon her job at the hospital in such a time of crisis. It was not in her nature. Though he had never considered himself a religious man, he found himself praying that she was somewhere safe.

The sound of boots crunching on the hard packed snow shook him from his reverie. Private Waelchi settled in next to Clay and rubbed his palms together for warmth. Clay chatted with the boy and shared his coffee before shuffling off to an uneasy rest.



Private Stephen Briggs looked at his watch for the hundredth time as he shuffled his feet to try to keep them from freezing to the ground. *Zero three thirty-three*, he thought. *Twenty-seven minutes to go*. Briggs knew that the likelihood of his getting any additional sleep was slim, but at least the sun would come up soon—it rose early in the mountains—and perhaps its rays would help warm his frigid bones.

Briggs was from Qingjiang, a coastal city close to the equator. Accustomed to long, lazy days at the beach, he had never been ex-

posed to the kind of conditions he was experiencing here and his body was slow acclimating to the environment. Already, he had moved back to a position just within the showroom doorway in a vain attempt to block out some of the icy wind. Jing, on the other hand, had been raised in the Shao'Ti and was quite comfortable with the cold. His friend since joining the weapons squad, Jing took great pleasure wearing just a thin tee shirt while on guard duty with Briggs, who shivered incessantly despite bundling himself in multiple layers of whatever heavy clothing he could find. Briggs' teeth chattered just thinking about it.

Jing had gone around to the rear of the building to relieve himself, leaving Briggs alone with his thoughts. Briggs tried to concentrate on home, sunshine and days at the shore with his girlfriend Mai. *Think warm thoughts*, he told himself, teeth chattering so loudly he felt sure he would wake all the sleeping troopers in the auto showroom. He took his gloved hands out of his coat pockets and rubbed them together vigorously, trying to instill some life into his numb fingers. At least the snow had stopped, leaving only a light coating on the ground that quickly crystallized into ice.

In an effort to keep his mind occupied by something other than the cold, Briggs knelt behind his light machine gun and sighted down the blued steel barrel. He tracked from side to side, concentrating on no single object lest the darkness play tricks on his eyes, until the feel of the cold metal against his cheek became too much for him and he stood up again, breathing heavily into his hands. He glanced at his watch again. *Four forty-five. Fifteen more minutes.*

A slight noise from somewhere in front suddenly shook him from his stupor. A heavy thud, almost like a footfall breaking the icy surface of the snow. Gazing out into the night, Briggs couldn't see anything, and his ears could not pinpoint where the sound had come from. He heard the sound again and realized that Jing had been gone a long time. *I hope he's not foolish enough to try and sneak up on a man with a loaded machine gun*, thought Briggs, but Jing was the kind who just might do that. *He's probably crawled back into bed, or gone to put on some more clothes*. Briggs chuckled at the thought of his friend, the great arctic warrior who never knew cold, rummaging through his rucksack in the middle of the night looking for something warm to wear. He grinned. *I'll have my Grandma knit you a sweater, tough guy.*

Just then, Briggs noticed a marking in the snow not two meters from where he stood. It was like a depression, its edges outlined

in shadow. Was it new or had he just failed to notice it before now? He squinted to see it better and it seemed to flutter and disappear. The air seemed ionized, almost like one of the heat mirages he would see on the horizon back home. As he leaned forward, he exhaled a vaporous breath that seemed to gather and crystallize in front of his face, as if he were breathing on a windowpane.

Blinking hard, he pulled the layers back from his ears and heard a faint electronic hum, accompanied by soft, clicking noises. A slight ozone smell permeated the air. Something *was* out there, and it was right in front of him. His first instinct was to reach for his weapon but his hand never found it. He had no time to cry out a warning before the icy claw closed around his throat.

On the floor of the auto showroom, Private Parrish of the weapons squad was having trouble sleeping. Transferred from First squad only a few weeks before, he was close to the men who died in the ambush. The memory of their horrible deaths haunted his sleep and the hard, cold floor wasn't helping.

A slight commotion, barely audible, stirred him and he pried open his eyes, careful to give them time to adjust to the darkness. As his vision slowly cleared, he could make out the silhouette of what looked like the perimeter guard slowly sinking into the floor. Blinking away the sleep, Parrish realized that the figure was not sinking, but was instead being lowered to the ground by something, but he couldn't tell what. There was a shape in the doorway, but it seemed to have no solid form, like a ghost.

Parrish watched, afraid to even breathe as the ghost pressed the guard's body to the block wall and let it slide gently and quietly to rest on the floor. The shadow floated closer, moving into the room. Parrish felt for the trigger guard of his rifle and slowly, silently began to inch the barrel upward until it was level with the ghost. Using his thumb, he carefully rotated the safety catch to full automatic, trying his best to minimize the metallic *clack* that occurred when the catch fell into position. It snapped like a thunderclap, causing him to inhale deeply and become suddenly aware of his own heartbeat.

The ghost seemed to twitch, perhaps alerted by the sound. It started moving again, this time straight toward Parrish. The terrified youngster's finger tightened on the trigger.

Clay and the rest of the sleeping soldiers jerked awake at the roar of the blast and immediately the firing began, as everyone in the room loosed rounds in all directions. Tracer and beam

crisscrossed the enclosed space, lending the room a strobe effect. Shadowy figures moved through the manmade nightmare, their heavy footfalls crushing the limbs of those underfoot. Men screamed as stray rounds tore their flesh.

Clay tried to yell above the cacophony, ordering a cease-fire, his voice barely piercing the din. Finally, the firing trailed off and stopped. The room was silent, save for the cries of the wounded. A green chemical light stick swinging from the ceiling bathed the room in its undulating, artificial glow. Clay studied the chem-stick for a moment, then spoke so all in the room could hear.

"Listen up, I want no firing! No matter what I do, nobody fire okay?"

Clay waited for the weak affirmative from the troops before aiming his pistol and loosing a single round at the light stick.

The chemical stick exploded in a brilliant flash that sent a spray of luminous green liquid in all directions throughout the room. In a rear corner, a hulking shape suddenly took on a bright green luminescent glow before just as quickly returning to shadow.

"There!" Clay rushed at the shadow, rifle barking on full automatic. A few of the troopers closest to the entity added their own fire and the shape went down with a heavy metallic clang.

The first rays of the sun were just peeking through the bay window opening into the room, and Clay could now make out the form they had just put down.

It was a suit of battle armor, ugly and dark, with rounded edges and a helm that resembled some sort of alien being. The surface of the suit was interspersed with tiny ports, each holding a micro lens camera that recorded the suit's surroundings, enabling the built in mimetic camouflage to blend in with any environment. Two others lay in dead heaps, victims of the few seconds of furious, random weapons fire.

Purifiers. Clay had heard of them and studied the tech manuals but he had never expected to encounter one. Remembering the manual, he knew that they were normally used in headhunter style attacks or sometimes as artillery spotters.

A faint electronic hum emanating from the dead suit caught Clay's attention. It was then that he noticed that the suit's left arm ended not in a weapon barrel or a manipulative claw, but in a semi-cylindrical housing with a laser emitter at the nose. A compact TAG unit, and it was still transmitting.



"Out of the building! Everyone get out now!" Clay rushed out of the showroom, pushing and dragging several others with him. As if on cue, the ripping, freight train sound of enemy artillery split the air.

"Incoming," most everyone screamed at once while scrambling to find whatever cover he or she could. Clay, Miller and Doc Travis dashed across the street, diving into an open hole that had once been someone's basement. The house above no longer existed thanks to the heavy fighting that had occurred earlier. They curled into tight balls, hands covering their heads as round after round tore at the earth around their improvised shelter, showering them with dirt and debris. They each worried for their comrades, hoping that everyone had found some means of protection from the steel storm, while at the same time praying that the next enemy projectile would not find its way to their position.

Again and again the shells screamed and roared, each close blast lifting and tossing the three occupants of the improvised shelter. Fire scorched their faces while the concussion forced the air from their lungs.

For long minutes the barrage continued, rounds working up and down through their positions as the enemy gunners fired for effect. Miller began to shake uncontrollably and Clay held on to him tightly. The trooper screamed and clawed at the earth, desperate to break Clay's grip and run. Clay kept the young man pinned under his weight as the dirt and bricks rained down on them.

Then, just as abruptly as it had started, the barrage lifted. Despite the ringing in his ears, Clay could hear more rounds falling to the north now, along the canal where Lang's reservists were holding. *At least I hope they're still holding*, he thought.

As the dust and ash began slowly dissipating, the men and women of Second Platoon crawled out from their various covered positions. They were fewer in number now but most had somehow survived. Hannan and Chen were all right. Wecker had been caught in the middle of the street. He had suffered the barrage lying prone in the open while rounds burst on all sides. He rose from his position and blew as much dust as he could from his weapon's working parts. He had come through, miraculously without a scratch. Forest and Waelchi were not so lucky. They had last been seen diving for cover beneath a derelict groundcar. The

car had taken a direct hit. There was no sign of the car or of either man.

Looking around, Clay could not locate Sergeant Benton or any other member of the weapons squad. Behind him, the Ambassador dealership was gone, pulverized by several direct hits. Clay could make out a few arms and legs protruding from the rubble. He fought back the urge to vomit.

"Everyone listen up!" Clay knew he had to rally the stunned troops for what was sure to follow the artillery barrage. "They'll be coming any second! Lock and load and find some cover!"

At that moment, the dusty air was ripped by enemy small arms fire. The Blakist infantry had arrived. Kelley went down with a vicious hit to her left thigh. She lay writhing on the pavement as Travis rushed out into the firestorm to aid her. Clay took up a position behind a low wall and began to search for the wireless set in the rubble of the auto showroom.

To his front, Wecker cut loose with the machine gun from behind a pile of loose debris. Hannan dove in on Wecker's right and added her firepower to his. Miller, drawing courage from somewhere deep within himself, charged forward and took a position behind a burnt out Ambassador on Wecker's left and began sending steady, aimed laser bursts toward the enemy. For their efforts, they were rewarded with a fusillade of fire from the Blakists that forced them to duck their heads.

Clay emptied a magazine into the dust cloud, aiming at strobing muzzle flashes as he could not yet see the enemy. He located the wireless set and pulled it free from beneath a pile of shallow rubble, hoping it would still be in working order. It was, and he began calling out on the company net.

"Charlie six, this is Charlie two, how read, over?" There was no response. "Charlie six, this is Charlie two, radio check, over." Still the net was silent.

"This is Charlie two, calling any Charlie call sign, come in, over!" Still nothing. Either no one else in Charlie Company had a functioning wireless or else there was no Charlie Company left outside of Second Platoon. Suddenly the set came to life.

"Any Charlie call sign, this is X-ray six actual, come in, over."

There, pinned behind a wall under a heavy concentration of enemy fire, Clay was almost euphoric at the sound of a friendly voice.

He had begun to feel like the platoon was alone on the surface of an airless moon. X-ray was the battalion call sign. The company command net was still strangely silent.

"X-ray, this is Charlie two, I read you five by five, over!" Clay was practically shouting into the handset. "We are receiving heavy fire and are in danger of being overrun. Heavy casualties! Requesting support of any kind in my sector, over!"

"Roger that, Charlie. We're working on it. How long can you hold, over?" Clay noted that the speaker had asked not *if* his troops could hold but *for how long*, their eventual destruction thus being only a matter of time as far as Battalion was concerned.

"We're holding for now but we're spread thin. If you get us some help we can push 'em back!" Clay wanted to instill some feeling with the Battalion staff that there was still hope. Otherwise, he feared his young troops would be hung out to dry, a speed bump to slow the Blakist advance. "I'll take whatever you got!"

"Roger that, Charlie two. Dig in; we'll get you some help ASAP." Clay was not confident that the promised support, whatever it was, would arrive in time to save what was left of the platoon.

The roar of the battle around him was deafening. Bullets spattered the wall he was using for cover. Clay hunkered down under a shower of ferrocrete, then peered down the smoke-filled avenue. He could finally see some of the Blakist soldiers, roughly a hundred meters down the street. At least thirty enemy troopers were advancing in short rushes, covered by some of their fellows who had occupied the buildings and were firing down into the platoon's positions.

Wecker opened fire on a group moving up the right side of the avenue and cut down two, sending the rest scattering for cover. Clay's own fire chopped down another in the doorway of a shop on the left.

In response, the Blakists in the buildings poured a rain of lead and laser down into the streets. A heavy machine gun mounted in a third story window walked fire toward Wecker's exposed position, the heavy rounds sending chunks of pavement cascading into the air. Suddenly, Clay heard a loud shot ring out from behind him and the gun fell silent. Another Word of Blake soldier took the gunner's place but was himself cut down before firing a shot. The gunner's body fell out of the window along with the gun itself.

Glancing over his right shoulder, Clay grinned at Chen, who together with Flores had found a position where they could sight down the entire street. Chen returned Clay's smile and went back to his work, diligently picking off the Blakists from their positions in windows and on rooftops while Flores used her auto-grenade launcher to land volley after volley of explosive death onto the heads of the enemy. One after another fell to the deadly barrage.

Wecker, Hannan and Miller used the respite provided by Chen to rake the street with suppressive fire. The horrendous enemy fire slackened as the Blakists scattered and fled, taking cover in the rubble.



A pair of enemy attack helicopters streaked by, low and fast, sweeping across the squad's position, raising the smoke and dust into a whirling tornado. Thankfully, they ignored Clay's scattered troopers and vectored north toward Lang's reservists.



Corporal Will Wecker took a moment to wipe the sweat from his eyes but instead merely smeared his face with dirt. The Blake troopers had lost their nerve but only for a moment, he knew. They would call in reinforcements, heavy weapons, battle armor, 'Mechs. They would get into the buildings, work around the flanks. They would open the storm drains and stream out behind the lines. They would keep coming, no matter how much it cost.

Wecker studied the fear etched on the faces of the young men and women around him. They would do their duty, no doubt, but he could see no way that this small, inexperienced force could hope to stop the coming assault. He felt like a scared rabbit, hiding in the rubble, waiting for the next wave of enemy fire to chase him further into his hole. He decided to show the toaster-worshipping bastards what a *real* soldier was made of, how a *real* soldier fights. If he had to die, he would do it standing up, not cowering in cover. Wecker would not wait for the enemy. He would take the fight to them.



Clay watched helplessly as one of the bravest, most foolhardy, most incredible scenes he had ever witnessed played out in front of him. He stared in wide-eyed horror as Wecker levered himself off the ground and began marching forward down the center of the street, firing the machinegun from the hip. He tried to scream, to order Wecker back but the words would not come. He tried to reach out but his feet slipped on the rubble and spent shell casings. All he could do, all any of them could do was gaze incredulously as Miller and Hannan also rose and stalked forward, weapons blazing. The three of them resembled marshalls from some long ago, western holovid, marching down the dusty street dispatching outlaws one by one.

They had gone about ten steps when a short-range missile, riding its smoky contrail, swirled out from somewhere in the ruins at the end of the boulevard. The warhead slammed into Wecker and exploded, instantly reducing him to fragments and red mist. Blood and shrapnel sprayed Hannan, the concussion spinning her roughly to the ground. She lay on the pavement in a crumpled, lifeless heap. Miller was simply gone. Smoke rose from the spot where he had been.

Silence fell across the battlefield for the briefest of moments, then all hell broke loose. Heavy rounds from dozens of automatic weapons whirred and whizzed around Clay and the others, chipping away at their cover.

The wireless set chattered behind Clay, something about support on the way but he was barely conscious of it.

Not more than five meters to his right, a Word of Blake soldier, appearing almost alien in chemical mask and full body armor, appeared just behind Travis, who was still hunkered down tending to Kelley's wounded leg. The Blakist casually, almost nonchalantly fired a burst of rounds into the medic's back as he stepped over his prostate form. Travis' lifeless body slumped over Kelley. The Blakist then turned on Clay, whose own rifle had jammed. Clay stared cold death in the face as the enemy soldier leveled his weapon.

On the ground, pinned beneath Travis' body, Kelley pulled the medic's sidearm pistol and fired, catching the Blakist under the helmet near the base of the skull. The enemy soldier's face exploded outward, spraying Clay with gore.

Another enemy trooper stalked up behind Kelley, but was quickly dispatched by Chen, who was sitting upright firing his pistol with

his right hand while cradling Flores' head in his left. Flores was dead, her body riddled with bullets. Tears left tracks in the dust as they streamed down Chen's face. He was screaming as he fired.

Clay dropped his rifle and pulled his own sidearm, a heavy magazine-fed slug thrower that he used to dispatch two more Blakist ground troopers as they emerged from the smoke. Another enemy soldier charged toward Clay as he struggled to free a new magazine for his spent weapon. Sergeant Deemer flew into the face of the enemy infantryman, hacking him savagely with the side of an entrenching tool.

At the end of the street, Clay could see enemy armored personnel carriers arriving, their gunners laying down support fire for the rapidly disembarking troops. A Goblin medium tank moved up in support. Behind the tank, he could just begin to make out a pair of massive silhouettes. The Word of Blake 'Mechs had arrived.

Clay slid a fresh magazine, his last, into his automatic and jacked the slide, chambering the first round. This was it, then. The final stand. His young troops had held as long as anyone could have hoped. They had done their job, valiantly and with honor. They had fought and died as one and Clay would remain with them until his last breath.

As if to embellish his thoughts, the Goblin opened up with its laser, the searing beam tearing into the remains of the car showroom. The superheated ferrocrete imploded in a tornado of debris, flinging Clay to the ground and tearing the pistol from his grip. With effort he rose, delirious and bleeding from countless lacerations, and saw the battered, bloody figure of Margaret Hannan staggering toward him through the dust and smoke, dragging her right leg behind her as she struggled to walk. Her face was streaked with blood and tears, her wide-eyed expression one of pure shock and pain. Her mouth moved but the ringing in his ears prevented Clay from hearing anything but a constant roar that reminded him somehow of the ocean he had once visited with Trinity.

Again the wireless crackled. "...two this is Blue Flight...on approach...heads down..."

At that moment, Clay noticed that the sun had broken through the dingy skies, its rays somehow penetrating the smoke and dust. He watched with detached wonder, two shapes in the sky, silhouetted by the light, soundlessly approaching.

Turning, he glanced at Hannan, their eyes meeting for a moment, and the stark realization of what was about to happen hit him full force, shaking him free of his shocked delirium. Hannan was alive, maybe she alone among his young squad, and he had to do everything possible to protect her.

He lunged at her, but his battered body protested, barely moving, as if everything was happening in slow motion. *Too late*, he thought, as the bombs landed and turned the world upside down.

Clay felt strangely content, almost euphoric, as his body hurtled through the air. It was almost as if he were detached from himself. His mind was aware of the surrounding flame but his body felt no heat, no pain. The noise should have been deafening but he heard nothing. He saw sky, earth and sky again, felt something give way beneath him and then thankfully, mercifully, the darkness fell.

**Kowloon Township
Suburbs of Yang-ku
Nanking
6 May 3068**

The four occupants of the open-topped truck stared off in four different directions as the vehicle bumped down the dusty track, each lost in his or her own thoughts.

As he watched the trees and small houses speed by, Davis Clay thought how easy it would be to imagine the war had never come here, easy if not for the scars that served as a painful reminder. Hannan, in the seat next to him, still wore a cast on her right arm and her legs were heavily bandaged. Her hair, now grown slightly longer than regulation, whipped in the wind, revealing the stitches just below her scalp and the spot the doctors had shaved before removing the shrapnel from her head.

Miller, riding in front, still bore the remains of the head wrap he had worn since the battle.

Lang, the driver, wore his pain in the deep lines of his haunted expression. Many of his reservists had died in Blackrock, but Lang had once again come through the fight without a scratch, at least physically. His scars were deep inside and he would carry them on his soul for the rest of his days.

Miraculously, a few of them had survived that terrible day. Miller, blown into a trench by the missile that killed Wecker, spent the battle unconscious under a pile of rubble. He had been found by a search and rescue dog three days after the engagement, long after all hope of finding survivors had been abandoned.

Kelley was still at the base hospital, recovering from her leg wound and the burns she suffered during the air strike. Ironically, Travis' dead body had sheltered her from the worst of the blast. Travis was posthumously awarded the Federated Suns Medal of Honor for his sacrifice. He had done his duty to the end and beyond.

Sergeant Deemer was wounded as well, though not seriously. He had been assigned the thankless task of rebuilding the shattered company, a task which kept him busy around the clock.

Clay's own wounds were severe, requiring several weeks of hospitalization, followed by months of rehabilitation and physical

therapy. He had lain in a coma state for days after the actions at Blackrock, and he had awoken to find Margaret Hannan sleeping in a chair at his bedside. It was Hannan who convinced the field surgeon, some say under threat of physical violence, to examine him as he had been given up for dead. Clay's lunge before the air strike hit had saved her life, his body knocking hers into a shell crater and shielding her from the falling debris. Heavily wounded herself, she had struggled to dig him out of the rubble and carry him to an aid station. Despite her toughness and pride, her eyes still welled up with tears whenever they met his.

One morning during his recuperation, Clay woke from a medicated slumber to find Trinity at the foot of his bed, tending to the flowers his various well-wishers had brought. The two talked for a long time about many things. She returned often and each time she stayed a little longer and their talks, uncomfortable at first, grew more intimate. They agreed to try and make a new start together. Clay promised to spend his mandatory leave with her at her home in Shu district, far from the base.

He had been released from the care facility only hours before, but he had vowed not to begin his convalescence right away. There was one last job to complete first.



The little truck screeched to a stop on the dirt path outside a humble looking single story dwelling, built in the same familiar style as most of those in this lower-middle class section of *Kowloon*. Gingerly, Clay stepped out of the vehicle and reached in to retrieve the package that he had carried here from the base hospital. He and Hannan linked arms, each leaning against the other for support, and approached the door.

Mrs. Lee opened the door and stood in the doorway as they made their way up the short walk. No words were exchanged, none were needed, as Clay handed her the package. A glass display case containing a set of singed dogtags placed on a neatly folded Federated Suns flag. The name on the dogtags was that of Yun Chen, Private First Class, First Federated Suns Mechanized Infantry.

Trembling, Mrs. Lee clutched the package tightly to her chest before gently placing it on a side table. She wept softly and wrapped her spindly arms around Clay and Hannan for what seemed like a very long time.



Even though a precious few had survived the battle of Blackrock, many more would never come down from that cold plateau. The last memory Clay had of Chen was of him firing his sidearm, Flores' dead body sprawled across his lap. They had been incinerated, their bodies unrecoverable. Curiously, Chen's I.D. tags, the very same ones that now adorned Mrs. Lee's flag case, had been found several yards away, resting on a ferroconcrete post as if they'd been placed there intentionally for someone to find.

Still sobbing, Mrs. Lee finally relinquished her hold. Hannan bent down and whispered something to her in her native dialect; a prayer of some sort, to which the poor old woman merely nodded and smiled.

As they turned to leave, Clay reached into his back pocket and pulled out the envelope that was his other reason for coming here today. He had almost forgotten it. He handed the envelope to Mrs. Lee but left before she could open it. Inside was a check for one million D-bills, paid out from an insurance policy taken out by one Yun Chen, six days before the battle of Blackrock Falls. He had finally found a way to atone.



Hannan and Clay glanced skyward as they shuffled back to the truck. A white contrail stood out against the orange sky. Another DropShip lifting more of the regiment off Nanking.

"I can't believe we're still going," said Hannan. "After everything..."

"When do you lift?" Clay asked even though he already knew the answer. He was hoping she would change her mind. No dice.

"Day after tomorrow," she said. "Surgeon's think I'll heal just as good on board ship as I would here. Maybe even better."

"You don't have to go..." Clay let his reply trail off. The look in Hannan's eyes was enough to convince him. He had seen that look many times before. In his own eyes. She *had* to go. They walked the rest of the way in silence.

On the ride back to the base, Clay reflected on his life and future. The Battle of Nanking was over, at least for now. The Word of Blake force, having failed to capture the Kallon factory, had been content to cripple it using a combination of air strikes and suicidal battlearmor drops. They hadn't destroyed it fully, but the damage they'd done would be enough to halt production indefinitely. Then they had mysteriously slipped away. Clay suspected, knew, that they would be back, stronger next time. What he wasn't sure of was if he would be on the front line to face them when that time came. He had decisions to make, but this time he vowed he would not make them alone.