

BATTLECORPS

EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

Ben Rome

***Above Orbital Plane, Grid MZ-73
Luthien System, Draconis Combine
6 January 3068***

Precentor Alice Phuong hated making hard decisions. Not because they were hard. Rather, because each one had the potential of being that “swing point” most historians harped on and on about. The ones where the history books record whether a leader succeeded or failed. Or where they “came into their own.” Or “began the downward spiral.” She could think of many such clichés from her own studies. She hated every one that she had encountered.

Because she was afraid of being reviled for centuries after her demise.

Sitting above the sensor range of Luthien’s orbital satellites and observation posts, she hated the fact that she faced one now.

“Status report,” she snapped while clutching the observation rail alongside the long edge of the *Blake Ascendant*’s Spartan bridge. While it was the umpteenth time she’d uttered the phrase, her subordinates reacted as if it was the first they’d heard it.

The sign of a well-trained bridge crew. *McKenna himself would be proud*, she thought.

“All units reporting ready. Ninth Division is prepared to drop on your command. *Sword of Promise* and *Light of Hope* are awaiting orders,” responded the communications officer. He didn’t look up. *As is proper*.

“All fighters prepped for launch,” responded her aerospace tactical officer to her right. He, too, stared intently at his screens.

“Precentor, we are as ready to go as we will ever be,” whispered Precentor Tamara Kehoe.

“Thank you, Precentor,” snapped Alice. She knew the captain of the *Ascendant* was as eager to move as she was. They’d been here in Luthien’s sensor “dead zone” for almost a full month, watching the promised time slip by. Their mission had turned from one of showmanship to one of rescue. They now awaited the moment of decision from above.

That moment was soon, Alice knew. She'd received orders from the Precentor Martial that morning. They were to move at her discretion. In other words, as she saw fit.

Hence the hard decision.

She stared out at the inky blackness dotted with faint starlight. The bridge windows would have blast shields drop as soon as she put them under way. The sight calmed her as she once more reviewed the facts.

The Coordinator of the Draconis Combine, defender of the Star League and its ideals, had gone missing on the *Invisible Truth*, ComStar's flagship. As far as the Precentor Martial could determine, the Coordinator was being held prisoner on the ship, a hostage against further Word of Blake actions.

Where did it go so wrong? she thought. *Why did the Steiner-Davion brats have to succumb to their selfish nature and shatter the Star League?* Her original orders were so much garbage, thanks to those two spawn of Hanse Davion. *The apples don't fall far from the tree in that bloodline*, she thought grimly.

So, instead of revealing themselves and pledging to the security of the Star League above Luthien, she'd been ordered to pursue "Option Omicron." *Because you always have a backup plan*, she thought, remembering her classes from Sandhurst.

Because the Combine had fought to save the now-dead League, she had been ordered to unveil the newly strengthened Ninth Division and defend any attacks against the Combine rather than attack or invade the planet. But then all hell had broken loose mere days ago, when Black Dragon loyalists had seized Unity Palace and declared themselves the new military *junta* in charge of the Combine.

Why the Society had done so was beyond her comprehension. The intricacies of Combine politics were convoluted to a Kuritan resident, and all but impossible to outsiders. And it wasn't her job to analyze the whys and wherefores of the Black Dragons—that's for the whack jobs in ROM to handle, she mused. Since the Coordinator had gone missing, she had to decide whose side she would come down on—and how exactly to carry it out.

So here she was, above Luthien. The fate of an ally of the Word of Blake lay in her hands—so what should she do?

By Blake's blessed robes, I hate these decisions.

She realized she'd closed her eyes. Opening them, she glanced around the bridge. Only Precentor Kehoe was looking at her, a mixture of understanding and curiosity on her face.

She looked into Kehoe's eyes. "Take us in, half speed."

Geosynchronous orbit, Blake Ascendant Luthien, Draconis Combine

15 January 3068

The *Black Lion's* conference room smelled of antiseptic and old sweat, pricking the tip of Alice's nose as she breathed. The room practically glowed with the warmth of anticipation as her Division commanders stood crowded around the massive holotable dominating the center of the floor. Etched in detailed blue and brown lines, the massive plateau where the Imperial City lay crowded the center of the holographic landscape, with the darker lines of gray streets and buildings stretched out in a haphazard web that surrounded the massive palace complex. *In a weird Zen-type way, it all looks...right*, she thought. Except where the giant buildings of the Luthien Armor Works complex began their disjointed harmony in one corner, showing only the tip of the massive OmniMech industriplex.

"So far, there have been no responses to our transmission this morning," she started, bringing the tactical briefing to order. "Scattered fighting between the Second Sword of Light and the Otomo continues here." Alice pointed with a small handheld laser at a large swath of destruction that crept down the north side of the Unity Plateau. "A larger—and more importantly, unidentified—force seems to be making their way along the Daimyo Canal towards the LAW complex, where the remnants of the Izanagi Warriors and the Fourteenth Sun Zhang have holed up."

"Plausible to think the DCMS will support us?" asked Demi-Precentor John Majors, one of her younger commanders. "We did declare ourselves the 'Dragon's Dove,' after all." He was referring to the Combine superstition where the blue dove represented a friend of the Combine, much as the yellow bird symbolized an enemy.

"I'd like to think so, John. But we've not heard anything from them. All communications and broadcasts are propaganda pieces from the Black Dragons, and with the DCMS High Command sector obliterated, we just don't know how the DCMS will receive us."

"Not to mention the fact that they're probably still pissed at how easily we disarmed those *Bastion* stations," commented Precentor Kehoe from her observer's station near the back of the room. "For as much as they spend on them, I'm surprised they gave up so easily."

"They've been isolated from Luthien for about a month now. And to be honest, they're nothing but a tin can in space with a big light gun. Hardly a match for juggernauts such as ours," replied Alice.

"Still, if even one of those Dracs had some balls, we might be singing a different tune."

Alice waved away the Precentor's concerns. "Water under the proverbial bridge now, Precentor. Just keep your eyes peeled for those missing Combine WarShips and we'll be fine. Meantimes, we need to figure out how to come down on the right side of this situation."

"Well, the good news is that the Luthien HPG is still down, according to my sources on the planet," said Precentor Christopher Schmidt. Alice didn't like the ROM spook anymore than the rest of the standard militia, but she had to admit his info was almost always dead on. Schmidt looked at the other commanders. "The DCMS is in shambles right now. With no communications coming in from offworld and with the surprising actions of the Second Sword, they're in utter chaos. We'll have time to correct the situation before presenting our case to the Combine people."

"So please, fill us in on exactly what the hell's going on down there. Quit withholding information and being so Blake-damned mysterious," snapped Alice. Several commanders gasped at the blasphemy coming from her mouth, but she didn't care. She noticed a twitch at one end of Schmidt's mouth. *Was the bastard trying to smile?*

"Very well, Precentor Phuong. According to our agents' reports, the Black Dragons flooded all the major media outlets with propaganda pieces almost immediately after the Coordinator's address on the fifteenth of December. Calling for change, a return to solid foundations and demanding a wake-up call of the citizenry, the Society apparently tried to rouse public discontent towards Theodore. After over two weeks of such propaganda and no sign of reaction from the populace, they initiated a coup.

"From what we can gather, on the evening of the twenty-ninth the Second Sword of Light surrounded the Imperial Palace. A fire-fight broke out between the Second Sword and the Otomo, which spread beyond the Palace grounds and into the city. The Inazagi Warriors attempted to assist the Otomo, but were beaten back by the Second Sword."

"Wait a second," interrupted John. "The Second Sword? Thought those boys were Combine red through and through."

"We've been receiving indications for some time now from our mole in Imperial Palace that *Tai-sa* To has been increasingly incensed with the slow pace of rebuilding the unit after the Dominion war, and that his mistress has turned him to the ways of the *Kokuryu-kai*."

Alice stared at the ROM Precentor in shock. "A loyal Combine unit, turned just like that?"

"Just like that," Schmidt nodded. He turned to the rest of the officers. "At dawn on the thirtieth, several key Voice of the Dragon broadcast stations began airing Black Dragon representatives who declared that a new day had dawned on Luthien. After the traitors to the Way were apprehended, Luthien 'would be held in safekeeping until Theodore Kurita admitted to the sins of the dynasty and atoned for it through *seppuku*.' Fighting has been sporadic since New Year's Day, when at least two mercenary commands came out from hiding and hit the remnants of the Otomo near the Palace. The First Genyosha was nowhere to be found. My guess is that that 'unknown' force along the Canal is part of that unit, attempting to link up with the others at the LAW complex."

"So the Dragons now hold the Palace, the broadcast stations, and what else?"

"The HPG."

Majors looked up in surprise. "What?"

Schmidt shrugged. "Mercenaries seized the HPG from the ComStar garrison at the same time the Second Sword hit the Otomo. Since the ComStar personnel were upgrading the system—and can't finish it, thanks to the rebels' subsequent execution of the entire facility's staff—the HPG is for all intents and purposes cut off from the rest of the Inner Sphere."

"Which gives us an advantage," said Alice. She smiled at the questioning looks from her staff officers. "We can rescue the DCMS from the Black Dragons, reconnect the HPG, and we'll be seen as heroes to the rest of the Combine, helping elevate our status with the Coordinator. This will accomplish the Precentor Martial's orders, that we 'show the rest of the Star League Council that the Coordinator was correct in trying to save the Star League.'"

That, along with our demands on New Avalon and Tharkad, will help reconvene the Council.”

She was relieved to see Schmidt nod enthusiastically. “Indeed, that is an excellent course of action, Precentor. The Blessed Will of Blake be done.”

A chill ran down her spine. *Why did that suddenly seem so...ominous?*

“So, now that we know our goal, let’s figure out how to carry it through. Ideas?” she zoomed the landscape back out to encompass the massive metroplex surrounding Unity Palace.

The collection of officers stared silently at the massive display of Imperial City. A couple of them fidgeted, rustling their white robes with a quiet whisper. Alice startled slightly as the circulation system kicked on with a *whuff* and smiled to herself as she saw Schmidt look up in alarm at the noise. He met her gaze as he looked along the row of officers, narrowing his eyes. She knew he would be a problem at some point—members of the Toyama sect within the Word trusted no one from the other factions. *Which makes them excellent members of ROM, but poor team players among the Militia.* A large majority of the Ninth were made up of Expatriates such as herself, veteran Com Guards who had left ComStar when Victor Davion had been tapped as the new Precentor Martial.

She also knew he’d kill her without question if she appeared to deviate from Blake’s way. The trick was to try to devise ways to keep him out of her hair until the present situation was resolved. Or rather, how he perceived Blake’s way through the warped teachings of the dead Conrad Toyama.

More like Kernoff’s way, she thought. Her mouth soured at the thought of the current head of ROM. She’d only met the head of the Word’s intelligence service once, and she still had the shivers when she remembered his cold, dead stare. *It was as if the Devil himself stared into my soul...*

She wrenched her thoughts from that dark road, looking again at her officers. Demi-Precentor Victor Franks was staring at her with his emerald gaze. “Yes, Victor?”

He picked up his laser pointer and tapped in a code on the table controls near him, mumbling a quiet prayer. The scenery shifted to a large park halfway between the LAW complex and three mas-

sive bridges that spanned the Daimyo Canal. "What if we dropped two Level II's here," he began, circling the far side of the bridges that were closest to the Second Sword. "We can link up with the First Genyosha and establish a defensive position against the Sworders in case they turn and push for the LAW complex."

"Why would they do that?" asked Bruce Lenca, one of her elite battle armor troopers. "They've got their hands full with two companies of Otomo right now. To turn for the complex would expose their rear to harassing fire."

"But which is more important to them, crushing the Otomo or making sure no one controls the factory?" replied Franks. "Let's face it, even with communications down, it's still only a matter of time before word gets out to surrounding systems and more DCMS troops come charging in. They don't control the starports, and who knows when or even if the Sworders will get reinforcements? They're going to need those parts and more importantly, 'Mechs, in order to keep their grip on the Palace." He spun the landscape around to zoom in on the palace grounds. "If I'm not mistaken, controlling the palace complex here is the only way they can maintain their claim to the throne. Luthien's an oddity that way, because the rest of the world will fall in line with whoever sits on that throne. And the way Luthien swings, thus swings the Combine as a whole."

"Very perceptive, Precentor," commented Schmidt.

Alice manipulated the controls, zooming in on the area Victor had marked. "That end of the bridgehead is mostly park and greenspace, with little building cover. I'd hate to ruin the beauty of the park, but taking down high rises and office buildings through collateral damage would be worse, especially considering we're trying to be the good guys here."

"Agreed, which is why it's the best ground for engagement. We can mine the Dragon Mile Avenue approach after we set up roadblocks to deter civilians. Once we land, those Sworders have to come at us, as we're the bigger threat. Our recent transmission leaves no doubt who we support. Their coup will die nascent if they ignore us."

Alice pondered for a moment. "We should put at least two squads of battle armor along the river approach, along with some VTOL support to make contact with the First Genyosha. And if it's not DCMS forces but unknown rebels, we can pull back quickly and still be able to defend the LAW approach."

"Agreed," commented Precentor Schmidt. *Like I need his vote.* "I will have my Blake's Wrath unit drop into the LAW complex and make contact with the Fourteenth Sun Zhang."

Her eyes widened. "Why?"

He looked at her impassively. "So they are not surprised by our presence. That complex is made of miles of ferrocabide and steel. Who knows if our announcement of intent even reached them? Do we want to take the chance that they don't know and fire on sight?"

He had a point. "Very well, Precentor. I assume you will be joining them?" *And getting out of my hair?* she added silently.

"But of course, Precentor. I will initiate contact myself. By the end of our conversation, they will understand why we have come." His lips twitched again, sending another chill down her spine.

Why do I suddenly feel doomed? The light in the room seemed to darken slightly, as if acknowledging her own dark thoughts. She shrugged it off. *No need to get all mystical now,* she thought. "Good, then. The fewer miscommunications we have, the better position we'll be in at the end of all this," she replied.

She tapped the controls again. "Now, we need to have some contingencies in place, just in case we're not welcomed by either party—or if the Dragons decide we're good for them and the DCMS wants us dead."

"That makes no sense," replied Majors. "Why wouldn't they think we're there to help them?"

"It's not that we don't expect that, John." She coded in some commands, and the bridgehead, palace, and LAW complex brightened with a yellow glow, marking the objectives. "But we have to prepare for any contingency. Because if we don't, we may get caught with our robes open. Being prepared for anything is the best way to avoid failure."

"As the Blessed Blake himself said, 'No plan survives contact with your enemies'," intoned Schmidt. "'But being thusly prepared is the foundations of superior warfare.'"

"Blessed be Blake," responded the rest of the officers, uttering the ritual response. Alice allowed a moment of quiet for the group to absorb the "sacred" saying.

"So, lets figure out who we should place where, and set our parameters. Then we'll tear that plan apart until we're satisfied we've got every possibility addressed." She smiled as her team began to converse among themselves, their hushed voices a gentle murmur. She looked over again at Schmidt, who was gazing at her with the same look Kernoff had given her a year ago. She shivered again and turned to the room controls to turn up the heat.

It's not like he's out to ruin the Precentor Martial's plans, she thought. Franks caught her attention at that moment, ruining her train of thought. She turned to answer his question, the sudden notion of doom forgotten.

Pirate Broadcast "Roar of the Beast"
Luthien, Draconis Combine
31 January 3068

"...so rather than remain out of this internal conflict among hard-line rebels and progressive liberals, the Word of Blake decided to force the people of Luthien to listen by detonating nuclear warheads from within the Luthien Armor Works industriplex. The explosion occurred during a supposed 'white flag' meeting between the Blakist commander and Tai-sa Shih Chou of the First Genyosha near the Shiro Kurita Memorial Bridgeway. Apparently, the Blakists have their own agenda, simultaneously attacking the Second Sword nearby. While the Blakist attack allowed the Otomo to escape destruction, the treachery displayed during their meeting with the First Genyosha only shows their true intent for the Combine. Devious to the core, the Blakist commander dared to shake our hand in friendship while attempting to cut out our hearts. Death to the intruders, we say! May the blood of Blake and the Black stain the Dragon's Maw as we do our duty to the Combine..."