

BATTLECORPS

NIGHT TERRORS

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Word of Blake Protectorate
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The sky was burning again. Point Commander Merced resisted the urge to crack his battlesuit's seals and breathe the tainted air. The memory of the stench would fill his nostrils for the rest of his days, a more certain reminder of the realities of life than anything in his codex. Instead he blinked his helmet display back to visual and off of the hellish glare of infrared. The convoy would be coming through soon.

The other four troopers of his Point were scattered in the buildings near him. He had the vantage, halfway up the tenement just off Herrera Street. Already the dust of the convoys approach was visible above the shattered buildings, toward the Gap. Merced's eyes climbed painfully again toward the space where the Hiring Hall once stood—the Gap, the Dragoons called it now—but quickly forced his gaze back down.

It was nearly time to get some back.

The first Word of Blake vehicle rolled into sight, the sleek-but-deadly shape of a Rotunda armored car. Merced ignored it, confident of the nearly-collapsed girders and ferrocete of his hide to shield him from the vehicle's simple sensors.

Behind the Rotunda came a pair of Bulldog trucks and then the heavy growling shape of a BattleMech recovery vehicle. Merced trained his optics on the recovery vehicle as soon as he saw it; if it had salvage it would change the mission. The resistance could use all the salvage it could get, which included what it could take from the Robes.

His optics focused on the bed of the recovery vehicle. Instead of a shattered 'Mech the Robes had built an enclosure, all of clear transpex. Merced chinned his com system and sent the "hold" signal to his Point. This was something new.

Inside the enclosure a single figure was standing, arms upraised. Merced frowned, tried to focus more clearly. It was a woman.

"Merced," his Point second, Barton, whispered. "We need to attack now!"

"Wait," Merced said. He'd have words with the Elemental later about radio silence, but for now his attention was on the woman. Her hands weren't raised, he saw. They were fastened up, so that she hung from the enclosure like an animal in a cage. She was wearing only a long dun-colored shift, and her head lolled to one side. *Drugged or unconscious*, Merced thought.

"What's the holdup?" Barton said. Even with the zip-squeal transmitters built into the Elemental suits the Word of Blake units would have RF detectors, and the millisecond spikes would register before long.

There was a red splash across the front of the woman's shift. Merced held his place, motionless, waiting for the recovery vehicle to rumble forward enough that the sunlight flashed away from his position, letting him get a good look at the woman and her clothing. *It can't be...*

"Abort," Merced said after a moment, once his blood warmed enough for him to speak.

"What?"

"Abort," he said, shuffling his suit back from the breach in the wall he'd been observing through. "Let them pass. Once they're gone we make best speed back to the lily pad." He made sure his ROM had a recording of the woman, then he made a backup copy in a separate location on his suit's memory. As soon as the Robes were clear he'd chance transmitting it back to base, in case they were caught. It was that important.

"Abort acknowledged," Barton said.

Ten minutes after the last Word of Blake vehicle passed—a decrepit-looking Chevalier tank—Barton's Elemental suit appeared in Merced's hide. Merced motioned the man closer, waiting. He'd saved four separate copies of his data, one each for each trooper in his Point. He already had Barton's queued.

"Merced," Barton said, bringing his suit to a crouch near Merced's, "Unity, brother. What happened?" He watched as Merced extacted a data cable and connected it to the lead in Barton's suit. "What are you doing?"

"Making copies," Merced said. He waited for the suits' computers to handshake and then immediately started the download.

"Copies of what?"

"I saw her," Merced said absently, watching the download indicator. "I saw her."

"Saw who?"

"Her," he said. The download completed and he jerked the cable free. "Let's go, Barton. We need to get this back to the Major." He climbed to his feet and stepped around his second. Barton's claw on his armored gauntlet stopped him.

"Unity, Merced," Barton said. "Talk to me." He released his Point Commander's suit. "Who did you see?"

Merced looked at the other Dragoon, trying to see past the thick, polarized transpex vision slit in the helmet to the man beneath. The words caught in his throat, choked back by hope that he dared not allow himself to feel. *What if they're not all dead...*

"Zeta," he whispered, and the moved out of the hide.



It looks like home, but it can't be. I don't see the towers. I don't see the Hall. Unity, it hurts. Where's that bastard taking me, Blake's Blood, where am I? What am I doing here? What happened on Mars? Where's the Colonel? Where's the Wolf?

Blake, Unity, Christ Jesus, what have I told them?

Why did I tell them?



The lily pad was a shelter, buried beneath the ruins of the DropPort, just near where Battle Magic had made its last stand. Merced found the Major where he expected to, at a cleft where he could see the pyre that marked the last position of the final Battle Magic 'Mech. That *BattleMaster* had fought on past the death of its comrades, taking as many of the cowardly Robes with it as it could. According to rumors, the Major himself had watched and declared the small mercenary command's last stand to be worthy of the Remembrance.

"Major," Merced said, quietly.

The man facing away from Merced stood slowly, his shoulders and head going up and up and up until even Merced's two meters weren't enough to pace him. He turned away from the DropPort and regarded his subordinate coolly, his hands clasped behind his back.

Elson Novacat was many things, but to Merced he was almost a god. His Elemental physique, while hardly unique among the Dragoons, was imposing enough, but the scars that covered his body—the scars he'd earned during his Challenge, when he'd helped forge the Dragoons into something better, something stronger—spoke as silent testaments to his prowess. That he could take such grievous wounds and return to duty was nothing short of amazing. Indeed, they amazed Merced every time he was in the Major's presence.

"Point Commander Merced," Elson said, inclining his head. "Your raid was successful, *quiaff?*"

Merced frowned. "*Neg*, Major." He squared his shoulders and stuck out his jaw. If he was to be disciplined, he'd take it like a warrior. Like a Dragoon. "I aborted the raid, sir." He didn't move as Elson walked away from the mouth of the cave and came to stand in front of him. Instead of craning his head back Merced simply fixed his gaze on a point on Elson's broad chest. "New intelligence was gathered that I felt necessary to return in person."

"It must be quite valuable," Elson rumbled.

"The Robes have brought a prisoner to Outreach," Merced said. "They have her in an enclosure on the back of a 'Mech recovery vehicle. There were too many guards for a single Point without endangering the prisoner, else I would have tried to free her."

Elson regarded him coolly. "A single prisoner, Point Commander?"

"I know her, Major," Merced said. "Or rather, I know who she is." He pulled a ROM disc from a pocket of his jumpsuit and held it out. "And so do you, sir." Elson took the disc in one massive hand, but didn't speak. "An officer from Zeta Battalion."

"Impossible. Zeta was destroyed in Terra space."

Merced shook his head. "It's on the ROM, Major. The Robes have brought Major Tara Lucas home, back to Outreach." He did look up then, trying to read the expression in Elson's stony face.

The massive fist closed around the ROM disc as solidly as the emotions closed out of Elson's eyes. He reached out with his other hand and squeezed Merced's shoulder, a gesture the young Point Commander had never seen nor heard of in Dragoon lore.

It frightened him.



"Tell us where the depots are,"

"I don't know."

"Tell us where the rally points are."

"I don't know that, either."

"Tell us something, Tara."

"I've told you everything I know!"

"You've told us about Mars, Tara. We already know about Mars. Tell us about Harlech. Tell us about Romulus."

"I can't tell you what I don't know!"

"Very well... reconnect the machine, Adept."

"No, no, wait... there has to be something... not that, please... NO! NO! Nonononono!"



"Unity," Barton whispered. "This must be damn near everyone left!"

Merced looked around the main hall, as it was called. It was the largest of the caverns the Elemental Strike Cluster—or what was left of it—were operating out of. Light came from a stand of portable lamps in the back and from the odd bulb strung haphazardly from the ceiling, with long coils of wires hanging between them.

The room was filled with large men and women, some of them from the Dragoon sibkos bred for Elemental duty and some of them actual Elementals, bondsmen taken on Luthien or Morges or any of a dozen other worlds where the Dragoons had clashed with

the Clans. Merced began counting other Point Commanders and stopped when he'd counted them all.

"It *is* all of us," he said. The once-proud Elemental Strike Cluster was barely more than a Binary in strength now, a Cluster only in name.

"Elementals," Major Novacat said from the front of the hall, where he stood next to a portable holoprojector, "we have a mission." Without waiting he turned and flicked the projector on. An image of Tara Lucas in her cage sprung into being in the air next to Elson, much more clear than it had been on the grainy screen inside Merced's helmet. At this resolution he saw the bruises, saw the chains. A burning began low in his chest and filled him. *I was right there, and I did nothing*, his mind told him. Even though his mind told him he'd done his duty, his heart ached with guilt.

"This is Major Tara Lucas of Zeta Battalion," Elson said, and then waited for the susurrus of murmurs to die down. "She is a prisoner of the Word, and they've brought her to Harlech to parade in front of us." His face hardened. "They intend to draw us out, I suspect."

"They have succeeded."

A roar filled the cavern as the Elementals shouted their rage. "We are the Toads from Hell," Elson cried, over the din of noise. "We will take our *trothkin* back!" Another cry answered him, with Merced shouting as loudly as any of the others. He looked at Barton next to him, saw the same snarling rage as he felt in his own heart, and cheered again.

It was a simple plan, he found out.



It's dark so dark why is it so dark oh Jesus what have I told them I have to resist I have to hold out they'll come for I know they will I have to hold on the battalion will come for me the Colonel will come for me the Wolf will—

The Wolf is dead, Unity I remember the Wolf they killed him the Robe bastards and Waco that stupid malfing idiot Waco he brought the dregs out and the Wolf oh Jesus the Wolf—

What have I told them? I told them about Mars about the plan the deployment oh Jesus the Colonel he's dead I saw his cockpit

breached on Mars the blood the air its all gone the Colonel oh Christ the Colonel the battalion Tammy oh oh oh—



"They're coming," Barton whispered over the link. Merced nodded his head imperceptibly beneath his helmet, watching the same feed his second was watching. The Toads from Hell were spread in a space roughly two hundred meters square, with a Star's worth of Elementals along each side of the road, with a bit of separation in case of crossfires. The convoy with Major Lucas was coming down the street now. It had been easy to plan for where it was going to be; the Robes did little to hide its location and they had made special efforts to clear the streets for its passage. Penal gangs worked themselves to death clearing the rubble so the recovery vehicle could haul its gilded cage around.

Merced suspected a trap. He knew there were active Dragoon BattleMechs on Romulus. The Major didn't employ any and didn't try to coordinate with them, but he'd seen the tracks and scammed the reports from Robe servers. A single Dragoon 'Mech could destroy this paltry column, and even the Word had learned to fear Dragoon Elementals in the ruins of Harlech. It didn't make sense for them to parade so valuable a prisoner with so little protection.

Unless she wasn't that valuable.

"Alpha Star," Major Novacat said, on the general frequency. "Attack!"

Merced and the rest of Beta Star waited while their comrades moved into the attack. From around the rear of the column Elementals sprung into view and loosed carefully-hoarded short-range missiles at the trailing Chevalier tank. In a matter of seconds the tank ceased to exist as the fat-bodied SRMs tore into it, slipping through the savaged armor to explode inside. The Elementals then switched to their lasers, targeting the wheels of the recovery vehicle and the soft-bodied trucks that tailed it. The suspicion was that the trucks carried infantry for security duty when the convoy stopped, or maybe laborers for last-minute road clearing.

Suspicious were wrong.

There were, in total, twelve Bulldog trucks in the convoy, each with a canvas cover in the back. When Alpha Star lit off, all of the trucks shed their cloaks and shimmering shapes in gray and black

armor erupted from the bed. Merced locked his visor onto one and enhanced the view, but he already knew what he saw. His blood ran a little cool as he did the math and realized just how many of them there were.

"Purifiers," he whispered.

The mimetic-armored Word of Blake battlesuits were no match physically for the Elementals suits the Dragoons were wearing, but there were a lot more of them and the lasers Merced was sure they were carrying more than matched the Dragoons' arm-mounted weapons. He shifted his stance and trained his short-range missile battery on the engagement area to the rear, but static crackled in his earphones as the Major changed his orders.

"Two Point, Beta Star," Novacat called. "Free the prisoner. All Elementals, engage the enemy. Purifiers on the field, warriors. Let us show these *savashri* how true warriors fight!" With a roar the rest of Beta Star rose from concealment and fired. The Roturnda in the van of the Word of Blake column erupted into smoke and flame even as it was wheeling around to engage the Dragoons in the rear. Merced and his Point held their positions, waiting for the rest of the Elementals to get engaged, to draw the Robes' attention to them instead of the now-disabled prisoner vehicle.

In the cage, Merced saw Major Lucas wriggle weakly, as if she were trying to escape. He ground his teeth and signaled his Point. All five Elemental clambered out of concealment and triggered their jump jets, hurtling through the air toward the recovery vehicle.



The noise make it stop make it stop the noise please Jesus Unity make it stop the noise the shaking the sound how was it so loud there was hardly enough air to breathe on Mars how was the sound so loud so loud Unity so loud it was like home—

"Home."

I can't be home I can't be they can't of brought me here not here not now not after everything I said everything I told Unity I can't have told them—

"I'm home."

Unity the Colonel was dead the Wolf I'm in Harlech how did I get

here Harlech Unity this is home Unity! What is that a man a giant a 'Mech no I know that it's a—Unity!

"That's an Elemental."

That's a Dragoon.



Merced crouched on the front of the recovery vehicle's bed, tearing at the base of the transpex enclosure with his claw. The rest of Two Point was crouched around him, facing outward, watching for any sign that the Robes had noticed them up there. Merced tore carefully at the enclosure, glancing at Major Lucas every couple of seconds, just in case. It would be a simple thing to blast through it but he didn't want to endanger her more than he had to.

The Word had done enough.

Bruises covered most of the exposed flesh on Major Lucas' body. There were burn marks on her wrists and temples, and when what was left of her hair hung just right Merced saw the telltale discolorations of near strangulation. There was blood crusted around her wrists where the manacles held her. Merced tore at a chunk of transpex, broke it free, and considered using his laser to soften the thick transparent material bit. He looked up at the Major to check on her. If the inside of the enclosure was warm adding heat from the laser to the mix might be a bad thing. She was watching him. Her eyes were open, and focused. She watched him.

Barton's battlesuit jerked and disappeared.

A flickering afterimage in his optics was all the warning Merced had before a squad or more of Purifiers bounded onto the recovery vehicle's trailer with them. He twisted and stood, aware that the exhaust ports of his missile launcher were scraping against the transpex, and brought his right arm up. His fingers were already clutching the firing controls, bringing the big 'Mech-hunting laser to bear on the light-armored Purifiers.

"Merced!" Barton called. He was on the ground, struggling with two of the more-nimble Purifiers. Merced swung his laser that way, trying to get a lock, but the targeting computer in his battlesuit let the reticle slide as easily off the mimetic armor as if it were light itself. He swore, steadied himself, and fired. His pulse caught the rightmost Purifier in the back, burning nearly all the

way through the powered armor and dropping the infantryman to the ground. The Robe scrambled forward, toward the dubious cover of the recovery trailer, while its fellow concentrated on the downed Dragoon. The Purifier's big ER laser pointed downward, and Barton had time for a scream before the Robe trooper melted his faceplate like a wax model in the hot sun.

Merced screamed and triggered his SRMs. From barely four meters away the warheads barely had time to arm before they both struck the killer Word of Blake armored infantryman. The Purifier and the remains of Barton's suit both disappeared into a black-orange fireball. The force of the explosion buffeted the Elementals and send one of the Purifiers bouncing off of the trailer. Merced panted for breathing, his thumb still clicking down on the firing control for his missile launchers even though he knew he was dry. There'd been only enough rounds to load each Elemental with one pair of missiles.

"One minute!" Major Novacat called. Merced heard static crackling in the background of the Major's transmission. He twisted, looking around, past the enclosure, toward the back of the column. What he saw tripped him out of his fugue. His mouth flattened to a thin line. He turned fully, burning at one of the nearby Purifiers with his laser as he did so.

"Mech!"



"Get me out of here!"

What are you doing don't point that thing at me don't you know who I am who am I NO I need to get out of here I need to get to a 'Mech I need to make these bastards pay PAY DAMN IT WHERE ARE YOU GOING?

"No!"



She was screaming at him.

Merced saw it as he slugged his jump jets, leaping up and over the enclosure and toward the back of the column. His attention was focused on the 'Mech. It was a *Panther*, bone-white and battle-scarred.

When Merced was at the apex of his leap the 'Mech fired its chest-mounted missiles. Merced twisted in the air, narrowly avoiding the quartet of missiles. Other Elementals were engaging the 'Mech as Merced came down, ninety meters closer to the *Panther* but still a little more than sixty meters away. He crouched, letting his jets recycle, and snap-fired his laser. The whisker-thin beam took the *Panther* in the right elbow, burning at the armor there.

"Two Point," he growled. "Get the prisoner out. Get her to the zoomers. Get her out of here."

"But—"

"You have your orders!" Merced leapt again, letting the jets in the calves of his armor hurl him toward the *Panther*. The Robe jock must have seen him. The *Panther's* left arm came up, the fingers reaching, grabbing, but Merced was past them, inside its reach, and then he hit.

His fingers clutched the claw controls, sinking the dense finger tines into the tough armor of the *Panther's* left chest. The impact smashed him forward against the inside of his battlesuit. He felt blood flowing where his chin had grazed, but he shook the disorientation away. He had to move.

The *Panther's* battle fist smashed against the armor next to him, barely ten centimeters away from his helmet. Merced blinked, jerked, and started clambering up the *Panther's* chest. The articulated claw at the end of his left fist gave him enough purchase to seat the Elemental suit's feet, and in moments he was over the *Panther's* shoulder and dangling down its back. Another round of missiles struck the 'Mech from the Elementals to the front. The concussion left Merced dangling from his claw only, flapping like a leaf in the wind, before another Dragoon Elemental clanged into place next to him. Merced looked at the other Dragoon, waiting for his suit to paint it with an ID on his HUD. When the identifier popped up, Merced blinked.

Elson Novacat.

"You have your orders, Point Commander," Major Novacat said. He started up the *Panther's* back with an ease that Merced knew he'd never be able to match if he fought inside his Elemental suit for the next twenty years. "Get the prisoner, *quiaff?*"

"Aff, Major!" Merced shouted, then began to follow his command. Elson reached the *Panther's* shoulder and twisted, driving his

claw into the access hatch on the side of the *Panther's* head. The 'Mech jerked as the pilot reacted to the noise inside his cockpit, but Merced kept his place. He was just coming up beside Novacat when the Major ripped the access hatch free and thrust his laser inside the cockpit. Bloody red light flashed inside once, twice, and then the *Panther* staggered. Elson withdrew his arm, twisted, and leapt away.

Merced leapt off when the *Panther* was halfway down, using the 'Mech's momentum to add to his jump. He ran the remaining two dozen meters to the recovery vehicle, ignoring the battle still going on around him, and then leapt to the front of the enclosure.

The shattered suits of two of his Point were intermingled with the remains of the squad of Purifiers that had approached them. The remaining Elemental was on one knee, tearing at the transpex with his claw. Merced looked up. Major Lucas was thrashing against her restraints, watching the Elemental's progress. When she saw Merced she looked right at his faceplate and screamed, a full-throated roar that the transpex swallowed whole. From the tendons standing out on her neck Merced could imagine the sound. He'd been in the bars of Harlech before; he'd seen a frustrated Zeta.

"Move," he said to his Elemental. He lowered his laser, fired. The transpex soaked up the energy, spreading it around as best it could. Merced kicked at the hole once his laser cycled off. The armored boot sunk right through the softened transpex like it was molasses. He and the other Elemental leaned in with their claws.

Something grabbed his arm and wrenched him around. Merced found himself staring at a washed-out reflection of himself as the Purifier let go of his arm and raised its laser to cut him in half. Merced roared and stepped forward, smashing the helmet of his Elemental suit into the lighter powered armor. The Purifier collapsed, a great gray patch smashed into the reactive camouflage covering of its armor. Merced stamped with his boot, or tried to, but the half-melted transpex still coating it slowed him down enough that the Purifier slithered out of the way.

"Get the prisoner!" Merced shouted, and moved after the Robe trooper.

The Purifier dropped from the side of the trailer and turned, its laser already trained. Merced snarled and leapt, trying to throw off its aim, but he wasn't faster than light. The laser took his Elemental suit in the thorax, fusing the armor there and washing heat across

Merced's chest and stomach. The armor held but the explosive reaction of its holding threw Merced's trajectory off. He crashed to the ground, rolled in the rubble, and came up ready to fight.

There were two Purifiers in front of him now.

"I'm still a Dragoon," he whispered.

His laser took the right-side Purifier in the throat, just beneath where his head-butt had smashed its armor. The Purifier's armor composite held for a nanosecond and then failed as the laser ate its way through the battlesuit's protection into the trooper beneath. The other Purifier danced away from its mate and fired back, its laser burning most of the armor over Merced's left leg. Pain flared through him for a second before the battlesuit flooded his leg with painkillers, but it was enough to make Merced stumble. He fell to the side, fighting to keep his feet, but gravity claimed him and smashed him into the wreckage of one of the Bulldogs. He thrashed, trying to free himself.

"It's over," a voice said. The Purifier trooper stood in front of him, his laser trained on Merced's helmet. Merced stopped moving. The indicator on the side of his HUD was still climbing; his laser was still charging. It'd be a few seconds before he could fire again. He watched the Purifier.

"I'm a Dragoon," Merced said. "It's never over."

"You seem to die like any other unbeliever."

Merced snarled behind his helmet. His intellect told him he'd never be able to get his gauntlet up before the Purifier could fire, but his heart roared at him to try. He was a Dragoon. He was a Toad from Hell.

"You walked right into it," the Purifier said. "We knew we'd draw you out with that bitch. She's been helping us for years."

Merced laughed. "She's a Dragoon," he said. The laser was charged. He tensed his right arm, praying the Purifier was distracted, praying the servos would fire, praying he was fast enough. He took a deep breath, held it. Something moved in his field of vision, from behind the Purifier.

"That's right, you Robe son of a bitch," Tara Lucas said. She was free, leaning on the Elemental. The Purifier started, the helmet rotating slightly to bring its sensors to bear. The Elemental fired, a full-power beam, and it took the Purifier in the back. Merced jerked

his arm up, fired as well, burning the Word of Blake trooper's right arm off at the shoulder.

"A Dragoon," Tara Lucas whispered, just before she collapsed.