

BATTLECORPS

SHADOWS OF FAITH

Volume 7
by Loren L. Coleman

TALES OF THE JIHAD

***Harlech
Outreach
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Was there anything worse than being left behind?

Again?

Hands shoved deep into the side pockets of his dungaree coveralls, Jason Williams shouldered his way through the saloon's swinging doors. The mixed scent of heavy alcohol and fresh wood chips assailed him as his vision adjusted to the dim lighting. Fragrant cigarette smoke stung his eyes. Left the taste of cloves on the back of his tongue.

Mac's Place was not what most expected out of a MechWarrior's saloon. Not the least of which being that any Dragoon was welcome, MechWarrior or not. There was no high polished chrome here. No cold wash of neon or the latest in trendy holographic displays playing through the smoky air, either. Damp sawdust and alder wood chips covered the floor, shoveled out and replaced daily. Tables and chairs were basic, the kind you didn't care if they got busted up on occasion. And they did. Lights were old-style: flickering bulbs beneath thick plastic shades decorated with advertisements for Timbiqui Dark, Glengarry's Finest, Sirius Ale, and the like. A few flat-screen monitors mounted up high, out of the way of danger, played a highlights reel from the Immortal Warrior series. The reel was run on a repeating loop, no sound, the constant stream of silent explosions casting down pools of garish light.

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The kind of place common tourists would likely glance around, and turn right back for the door fearing for their dental work. Never realizing—and no one was going to tell them, of course—they were as safe here as they would have been locked in a bank vault. No Dragoon started something in Mac's when it was "more than just family." Not if they wanted to come back. Ever. Mac's rules were ironclad.

So were his habits. As Jason waited, Mac himself leaned out from behind his polished mahogany bar to tap a small metal wand against a ship's bell hung on the wall. A single, soft peal rang through the large room, announcing the arrival of another Dragoon and also letting Jason know the place was clean. No civvies.

The ringing bell was mostly ignored by the afternoon crowd, but that was all right. Jason had no interest in company.

Not until he reached for a tall stool at Mac's bar, and recognized who had claimed the far end. The long, smooth piece of mahogany protected one entire wall, sheltering an oasis of exotic liquors and more beer on tap than any saloon Jason had ever known. And there, nursing a tall schooner, Major Tara Lucas, Zeta Battalion, rested with elbows on the padded rail, her dark eyes boring holes into the Legacy Wall.

Mac had already pulled a frosted mug of Bright Sun pale, a Federated Sun's favorite which Jason refused to give up despite his abandonment on Elgin and his forced change of allegiance. Showing a hint of prescience common (in Jason's experience) among the best bartenders, Mac slid the glass away, down the bar's immaculate surface—coasting it to a perfect stop at the seat next to the major.

Jason debated it for all of three seconds, then nodded. "Yeah," he muttered beneath his breath. Slouched down to the end of the bar and rested one hip only on the tall stool. He might not be staying long.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

The frontal assault. Subtle.

Tara Lucas didn't look around. She continued to stare at the photos and the few holograms jumbled together on the Legacy Wall as part of Mac's ceremonial collage. Her smile was both tight and grim—if she'd had fangs, they would be showing—but at least it was a smile. That was something, right?

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"I thought the line was 'What are you doing in a place like this?'" she shot back. More of a solitary sniper round than any kind of barrage.

Picking up his mug, Jason blew back some of the foam and sipped deep. Buying him some time. Retrenching his position. The cold, amber ale washed away a measure of his bitterness. "No," he finally said. "I mean why aren't you with Zeta?"

Another forward probe, but gentler. A reconnaissance in force, perhaps.

She shrugged. "Zeta should be somewhere special? Not welcome at Mac's place anymore?"

Striking at him from the flanks. Trying to box him in. He eased himself up fully onto the bar stool, turned away. "All Dragoons are welcome at Mac's," he said. Feigned a retreat as he lapsed into an uncomfortable silence with the major, both of them staring straight ahead, picking familiar faces off the Legacy Wall.

Out of the hundred or so faces spread before him, Jason found Corporal Paul Scholes and Lieutenant Bryce Karlsson, both from the Home Guard. Both men he had worked alongside, fought alongside. And both killed during the TempTown assault on Harlech. Teresa Black, Wolf Spiders, who fell on New Home. Jarl Tepps, body not recovered, Keid.

That was Mac's Legacy Wall. Every face staring back at Jason had died a Dragoon. And back toward the center, in a place of honor, was the one face no one had ever thought to see pasted there. At least, not until old age had finally claimed him—and even then most Dragoons would have bet on a Trial of Refusal being fought against The Grim Reaper.

Jaime Wolf.

The Blakists would pay, of course. In blood. No one doubted for a second that this did not end with October's assault. TempTown trash and a few Word of Blake terrorist cells razing Harlech, destroying the Hiring Hall? They were to let that go? The Dragoons did not roll over for anyone like that.

Which was why it *was* strange that a senior officer from Zeta was still around. What with the counter-strike task force staging at Outreach's nadir jump point, nearly ready to head out of system. Beta Regiment and Zeta, supported by the First Dismal Disinherited, with WarShip escort. As a senior officer in the Home

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Guard, Jason knew the rough outlines of their reprisal strike. Take out the Word of Blake research facilities on Mars, and remind the Blakists that—though they might have stronger arm these days—they, too, could be reached.

Solid. Proportionate. Jason would just have rather been invited along.

He sipped at his ale. Mood darkening again. “Look. If it’s operational security, you only had to say.”

Tara slammed down her glass, hard. Golden brew slopped up over the rim of the tall schooner, splashed the bar and Jason’s hand. She turned, glared at him, dark eyes cold and deadly, like twin gun barrels. “Do you really want to go at this?” she asked, voice furious and pitched just low enough not to carry past Jason, possibly Mac.

“You walked in here with a chip on your shoulder, and on a normal day I’d already have knocked it off. Zeta ships with the *Beowulf*, which has been on picket duty. So we’ll use a pirate point outbound. Lift-off is midnight, so I thought I’d come in here and say goodbye to a few friends.” She nodded to the Legacy Wall. “Who knows if it’s nearly my turn up there, or if this place will still be standing when I get back—nothing’s for certain anymore, is it. There. You have your answer. So if you want to pick a fight, stop dancing around and throw a real punch.”

Jason knew when he was outmatched. And out of line. He used the bar towel Mac threw him to wipe off his hand, and clean up her spill. “It’s hard,” he said, running up a white flag, “being ordered to stay behind. They were my friends, too. He was my commander.”

“And you were on the ball.” Tara nodded, grudgingly. “When The Colonel went down, you didn’t waste time. You held up your end. Which is the *only* reason you aren’t picking yourself up off the floor.”

Jason remembered. “That was you,” he said. “That day. In the *Annihilator*.”

A shrug. “Who can remember that far back? Just another day in the life of a lowly merc, right?” The fire had left Tara’s voice, but not her eyes. “This isn’t Elgin, Captain. This is Outreach and you are a Dragoon. Whether you believe you are treated as such or not. And we both have our orders. You keep our home safe.”

Sliding off her stool, Tara dug into one pocket for a couple of crumpled bills and a single silver *kroner*, tossed them onto the bar

and waved Mac to show she was paying for both drinks. Nodded abruptly at Jason as she stepped away from the bar.

“Tara,” Jason called after her. Was surprised when she actually stopped and looked back, one slender eyebrow rising toward her hair line. What else to say, in the spirit of détente if nothing else?

“Give them hell,” he said.

“No,” Tara Lucas said. Smiled tight and cold.

“They don’t get off that easy.”

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