

DOG SOLDIERS

Jeff Kautz

BATTLECORPS

Then there was the war, and I married it because there was nothing else when I reached the age of falling in love.

Guy Sajer

The Forgotten Soldier

***Outskirts of Wenfang
Changzhou Province
Nanking
29 September 3063***

Lingyin Temple rested on the crest of a sloping hilltop, one kilometer north of the city of *Wenfang*. From any point atop its walls or modest tower, one had a view for several hundred meters in all directions. The hill upon which the temple was perched was covered in tall grasses, which gave visitors the impression of a thick green carpet, extending to the edge of the woods that bordered the hill on three sides. The south slope followed a well-traveled footpath down toward the Han River, which flowed lazily past the city below. Far above the noise and pollution, *Lingyin* Temple provided the perfect destination for a pilgrimage of enlightenment, or a terrorist group on the run.

A figure lay on the east slope, his green and brown tiger-striped coverall and black body armor virtually invisible against the tall grass, which rustled slightly in the soft evening breeze. As the sun's rays slowly disappeared behind the temple walls, the figure adjusted his visor to take one last look at tonight's objective. Dialing in maximum magnification, he slowly scanned the outer walls, switching from visible light to low light amplification and finally thermal, searching for anything out of the ordinary, any small movement, any sign that their presence on the hillside had been detected. Finding none, he slowly, carefully rose to one knee and issued a quick arm signal before moving quickly but carefully up the hill.

Behind him, spread out across the hillside, twenty shadowy figures emerged and began advancing toward the temple in a series of bounds and short rushes. They had spent the last few hours lying doggo on the slope, the few hours prior on their bellies, crawling an inch at a time to get to their positions below the temple. Despite their tired, cramped muscles, they made the last one hundred fifty meters in less than thirty seconds.

The last rays of the sun slipped below the temple walls, casting the eastern slope in shadow. The silent figures hunched in the darkness at the base of the east wall. Another series of arm signals from the leader sent a few of them around to cover the back gate while the rest crept forward, rounding a corner to line up outside the main entrance on the temple's south side.

The leader placed his left hand on the shoulder of the figure in front of him, a soldier carrying a communications rig attached to the back of his molded armor vest. The soldier handed the leader a long, telescoping wand that resembled a kind of antenna. The leader attached a thin cable to the end of the wand, which was tethered to a handheld viewing device, then extended the antenna until it was the height of a man. The communications specialist then took hold of the wand and, taking cues from the leader, slid it slowly upward until the tip protruded just above the top of the stone wall. As he began tracking slowly from side to side, the tiny camera mounted in the tip of the wand fed real-time video to the handheld viewer below.

The leader slid his helmet visor upward, revealing caramel-colored skin and eyes of deep brown. Staff Sergeant Davis Clay of the Second Platoon, First Federated Commonwealth Mechanized Infantry stared intently at the video feed, making mental notes of every detail no matter how minute.

Lingyin Temple, like many others of its type, was constructed with a high barricade just inside the main entrance, running parallel to the outer wall. Ostensibly to deflect evil spirits who might attempt to enter the temple, this spirit wall would provide cover to troops entering through the main gate, but could also become a bottleneck and a potential firetrap should his team become pinned behind it. Beyond the spirit wall was an open courtyard. A stone path traversed an immaculately tended garden of dogwoods and ornamental shrubs before blending into a set of shallow steps, beyond which, almost concealed behind a huge bronze gong, was the entrance to the main pavilion. A squat tower, placed near the rear of the building, housed the living quarters for the monks that occupied the temple. Clay frowned as the camera panned across its surface revealing a series of narrow windows carved into the stone face. Good position for snipers. He made a note on the electronic touch screen, which he then instantly transmitted to his squad leaders.

Hundreds, maybe thousands of votive candles had been placed randomly in the open courtyard, some on simple stone pedestals, others in elaborate candelabras, bathing the temple interior in an orange glow. *So that's what's been playing hell with my thermal scan*, thought Clay.

He turned to the rest of his squad and made an up and down gesture with his fingers along the bridge of his nose. Taking his cue, the assembled squad slid their night visors up away from their eyes. The light given off by the candles was bright enough

that they wouldn't be needed, and could in fact become a liability in combat.

Clay silently signaled to his breach team while scanning the compound one last time. Two members of the team crept up to the massive wooden double doors and attached small charges to the four heavy hinges that held them in place. After inserting thin cylindrical detonators into each charge, the troopers assumed positions on either side of the main archway, using the pair of stone guardians that flanked the doorway as cover.

Holding up the fingers of his gloved right hand so that all the squad members could see, Clay began a silent countdown.

Five...four...three...two...when the count reached one the four charges exploded in unison, tearing the heavy doors from their hinges and propelling them into the courtyard, where they splintered against the spirit wall with a resounding *crack*.

Rushing through the breach, Clay led Fire Team One, assigned the role of providing suppressive fire, to the right, while Corporal Wu and the assault team moved around the wall to the left.

Almost immediately, both teams came under a deadly hail of fire from the main temple. At least one gunner had concealed himself behind the massive gong and was sweeping the courtyard with sustained bursts. As Clay had feared, the troops hesitated and began to bunch up behind the inner wall. *One grenade and we're all dead*, he thought. Clay detached a smoke canister from his shoulder harness and pitched it over the wall. When the billowy cloud had filled the courtyard, he rushed forward in a crouch, yelling for his team to follow.

Private Wecker, the newest member of Clay's team, knelt at the edge of the spirit wall and raked the courtyard with his light machine gun, rounds snapping leaves from the dogwoods and pinging loudly off the face of the gong.

Clay tapped Janice Yi on the shoulder and she bolted across the courtyard, seeking the cover of a stone pillar set against the far temple wall. Before she made it halfway, she was spun down violently onto her left side, as if a rug had been pulled from beneath her feet.

Clay rushed across the open space and grabbed the screaming Yi by her collar, dragging her toward the relative safety of the large column. Blood trailed across the stones behind her as he pulled,

and Clay could see that a round had torn into her left leg, breaking her wraparound shin guard and carrying off a good sized chunk of her calf. She would live, but she would not walk for a while.

About one meter shy of the stone pillar, Clay himself was hit, a round slamming into the communications unit mounted on his back. The jarring impact severed his shoulder harness and slammed him to the ground, crushing the air from his lungs. Stunned, he glanced over at Wecker just in time to see the machine gun fly from his hands and skate across the courtyard stones. Wecker recoiled, grasping his hand in pain. Clay searched through the smoke enveloping the courtyard, trying to locate the source of the fire, when he remembered the tower. *Sniper. Must be using thermals to see through the smoke.*

Clay reflected on how lucky they had been thus far. The heat radiating from the candles must be fouling the sniper's thermal sight, throwing off his aim. Knowing their luck would not hold out, Clay groped for his own dropped rifle and brought it around to lay some fire into the area where he thought the tower windows would be, but a heavy round shattered the weapon before he could get off a shot.

Desperately, sure that the next shot would find either Yi or himself, Clay crawled on top of the wounded trooper, using his body to shield hers. Long moments passed as Clay tensed, preparing for the fatal impact, but the shot never came. Across the compound, Corporal Wu's assault team had managed to silence the gong gunner and had begun working their way into the shrine using concussion grenades and short bursts of automatic fire. In short order it was over. The entire battle had lasted less than four minutes.



Seated on a bench along the garden pathway, Clay removed his helmet and gloves and shrugged out of his armored vest, feeling extremely lucky to have cheated death one more time. At age forty-three and closing in on twenty-five years in the service, he wasn't sure how many more times he could get away with it.

He sat, gazing at the stars when Corporal Lang approached. Tall and gangly with large eyes and a protruding Adams apple, Lang looked more like some great avian creature than a soldier of the AFFC. Clay had learned not to let his almost comical appearance

believe his true nature, however. Lang was a warrior in every sense of the word. There was not a man in the Second Platoon that Clay trusted more implicitly, which was why it would be so hard to let him go.

Lang's tour of duty was at an end. He had taken a six-month extension in order to stay with Clay while the unit tramped all over Nanking hunting down terrorist holdouts, but that mission was almost over. Tonight's operation had succeeded in eliminating the last remnants of a particularly efficient *Zhangzheng de Guang* unit that had spread terror over two continents before the Regiment had run them to ground. Lang could now retire from military life knowing that he had seen the mission through to the end. Clay respected that. He had decided not to tow the company line and try to talk Lang into staying. As far as he was concerned, as much as the unit, and Clay himself, would miss him, Lang had earned the right to enjoy the rest of his life while he was still young.

Lang, noticing the sheen of sweat on Clay's forehead, tossed him a towel.

"You're getting too old for this," he said, smiling.

"Don't I know it!" Clay wiped his face and rubbed the towel through the tight, black curls of his close cropped hair. He tossed the towel back to the corporal, who stuffed it under a webbing strap.

"So this is it, huh?"

Lang plopped down hard on the bench. "Yeh," he said.

The two sat in silence for a moment. Lang looked over his right shoulder and noticed a couple of MPs leading a few prisoners out of the compound. "Check these guys out," he said. "They look like refugees. Hard to believe these are the guys we've been hunting for so long."

Clay shot a glance in the direction of the prisoners. They were dressed in what amounted to rags, with sandals made from truck tires and dirty scarves wrapped around their heads. The MPs had bound their hands with plastic wrist cuffs.

There were only three, two men, one noticeably older than the other, and a woman. Clay studied the trio as the MPs prodded them toward the main gate. He scanned the faces as they passed, trying to single out one of them as the sniper who had held his life in his hands. His eyes drifted over those of a young man with

Asian features and a shock of long black hair billowing out from beneath his head wrap. The young man appeared to be no older than his late teens, but his dirty face was etched with a look of pure defiance. Their eyes met and locked, and Clay found himself staring into a pair of hard, gray irises, cold like stone, yet still alight with inner fire. This had to be the one. Their eyes remained locked until the prisoners rounded the inner wall on their way out of the compound.

Lang turned to speak again but the sharp report of an explosion cut him off and set him and Clay running toward the origin of the blast. It had come from the main gate and already smoke was billowing out from behind the inner wall.

As soon as he reached the doorway, Clay knew it was too late. A female MP, burned and bleeding, lay in the archway pleading for help. The body of one MP was sprawled just outside the opening. The female prisoner was dead, her torn corpse lying half in, half out of the archway, covered in blood and bits of flesh that had belonged to the older man. A stunned, bloodied MP was staggering through the smoke toward Clay, who grabbed the man to steady him.

“He...he had a grenade,” the distraught man managed. “He...he just...oh my God...”

The man was weeping now as a medic came to attend him. It was then that Clay noticed that the body of the third prisoner, the younger one, was missing. He searched the floor through the smoky haze but found no sign. Rushing outside, he scanned the darkened hillside for movement, for any trace, but there was none. The man had slipped away into the night.

Gladston Hill Training Base
Ningpo Mountain Range
Nanking
6 June 3067

Davis Clay peered through the dusty window at the incoming transport VTOL as he depressed the button on the coffeemaker, spraying the steaming liquid into his mug. The craft was just a speck on the horizon now, but in a few minutes it would touch down on the tiny landing pad with its load of fresh, new recruits, the first since the start of the Civil War.

The war had officially ended in April though pockets of Lyrans sympathizers, Capellan terrorists, Skye separatists and other opportunist groups still held out on some worlds. Nanking had finally been declared fully secure in May, even though there had been no significant fighting on the world since 3064, with the first recruiting drives starting up soon after.

Whether due to patriotism, newfound nationalistic fervor or the chance for free college courses, the drives were proving wildly successful, with more new enlistees than there were available slots. This situation afforded the Regiment the rare opportunity to be very discriminating when it came to selecting eligible recruits. Only those applicants with the best potential and highest aptitude scores were selected for full time duty with the First Federated Suns RCT. The rest would be relegated to reserve postings or used to fill out the depleted ranks of the Nanking Militia. The group arriving at Gladston Hill today, though few in number, would be the best of those who had chosen service within the ranks of the *PBI*, the poor bloody infantry.

The best? Maybe, thought Clay as he watched the transport begin its approach run. *But still a bunch of brain dead civilian slugs. We'll fix that soon enough.*

He grinned as the VTOL pilot put the craft into a steep dive followed by a last minute flare that dropped the rear of the aircraft down hard on the dusty parade field that served as Gladston Hill's LZ. *That should wake up anyone who fell asleep on the flight.*

As the pilot throttled the engines to idle, Clay observed the unmistakable silhouette of Staff Sergeant William Donnelly, Gladston Hill's primary training NCO, stalking through the swirling dust cloud toward the transport's lowering rear ramp. A large, square-

jawed man with bulging muscles that strained against the seams of his perfectly pressed uniform, Donnely was an imposing presence who never failed to make an impression on new recruits, which was part of the reason he was so good at his job.

The thought of what would happen next made Clay hearken back to that day so many years ago when he and his group of trainees had first arrived at the recruit depot back home, and his grin widened.



Shaken from his uneasy slumber by the thud of the aircraft on the dusty plateau, Regimental recruit Chen blinked hard and tried to clear the cobwebs from his mind. At first he thought they had crashed, a feeling shared by many of his fellow recruits, judging by the fearful expressions on their faces. The rear ramp slowly lowered, filling the cramped troop compartment with choking grey dust and the ozone smell of the idling engines. A hulking figure emerged from the cloud, hands on hips, and placed one large booted heel on the bottom of the ramp. An image of Yen Lo Wang himself emerging from the smoke of Hell manifested itself in Chen's mind for a brief second, and then the giant spoke.

"You ladies got thirty seconds to unass this aircraft and twenty-nine of 'em are already gone!"

Thirty-five men and women piled out of the back of the transport in a tangled heap of arms, legs and equipment. Several recruits tripped over themselves or each other and a few others had to run back and retrieve dropped or forgotten gear. Troops scrambled in seemingly haphazard directions trying to respond to orders barked from the giant and several equally imposing sergeants who had appeared out of nowhere yet seemed to be everywhere, blowing whistles and bellowing commands.

After what seemed like an eternity but must have been only a few minutes of running, lifting duffels and dropping for pushups, a semblance of a formation was made on the parade field, exhausted and terrified troops struggling to control their labored breathing and shaking limbs.

At the front of the formation, the giant appeared again, stalking slowly forward and back, glaring through mirrored sunglasses past the brim of the campaign hat he wore low on his forehead. The giant slowly removed the sunglasses and folded them into a

breast pocket, revealing hard, angry eyes set beneath a furrowed brow. Chen wished at once that the giant had left the glasses on.

Scowling a look of pure contempt, the giant spat once and began to speak in a booming voice to which the whining VTOL engines offered no competition.

"All right you maggots! This is what your life is going to be like for the next three months! That's twelve long, agonizing weeks! Anyone who doesn't think they can hang had best sound off now while the transport's still here to take you back to mommy and daddy!"

As if on cue, the pilot throttled up the engines and propelled the craft into the air, sailing low over the assembled troops, the prop wash sending several garrison caps sailing across the parade ground. Unflinching, the giant turned slightly, gaze following the retreating transport, his wide-brimmed campaign hat secure on his head as if it was glued down. "Aw hell," he exclaimed in a mocking tone. "I guess you're stuck here now!"

As the giant turned to address the formation, his brow furrowed even further and his face adopted a quizzical look that suddenly screwed itself into an infuriated grimace. "What the hell are you all doing out of uniform? I turn my back on you for one second and you all throw your headgear on the ground?" he bellowed through clenched teeth.

"But, sir," one unlucky recruit thought to offer an explanation. "The wind from the ship..."

The giant flew into the boy's face, hat brim tapping a steady beat on the bridge of the young man's nose. "Sir? Did you just call me *sir*?" Spittle spewed from the giant's mouth as he roared, his voice growing in volume and intensity. "Are you trying to insult me? Are you insinuating that I don't *work* for a living? Well, I'm waiting!"

The recruit, who was visibly shaking, managed only to stammer "Sir, I..." The giant let out a deep, guttural inhuman growl.

"GET DOWN", he bellowed. "Get down all of you and don't stop until I get tired!"

As one, the assembled troops dropped to their hands and began another grueling series of pushups.

Clay finished his coffee and approached the assembly from the left flank, out of eyeshot of the troops who would be staring forward at attention. "What do we have here, Sergeant Donnelly?"

The giant snapped to and turned to address Clay, who was now centered on the formation of prone men and women.

"A gaggle of insubordinate civilian drag-asses by the looks of it, Top. Might be hope for some of 'em but most of 'em would probably make better artillery shells than infantry soldiers."

Clay waited while Donnely took time out to bark at a young woman whose knees were dragging in the dust.

"I see. May I have them for a while?"

"Sure, Top. Don't know why you'd want 'em, though." With that, the giant turned on his heel and jogged to the back of the formation, leaving Clay to address the recruits.

"Recover," he said calmly, allowing the exhausted troopers time to regain their feet. "Go get your headgear and form back up on the double."

Clay kept his tone even. It was the duty of his training instructors to ride the troops. As company First Sergeant, he needed to strike a chord right away with them, to show that they could trust him but that he was also ultimately in charge of their fates.

The troops gathered their caps and reassembled quickly.

"Stand at ease."

"Very good. My name is First Sergeant Clay. You will address me as First Sergeant, not Sergeant, not Top, not Sarge, and certainly not sir! I am, along with Staff Sergeant Donnely, with whom you have all so recently become acquainted, in charge of your training here at lovely Gladston Hill. Let me then be the first to welcome you here to our little garden spot among the clouds, where, like it or not, you will spend the next three months of your miserable, collective existences." Clay allowed a moment for the reality to sink in.

"Sergeant Donnely will be your primary training instructor for the duration of your stay here. You will address him and all your other instructors as 'Drill Sergeant.' You will treat these men and women with respect at all times and you will follow their orders to the letter. Those of you who had the opportunity to attend the weekend recruit familiarization course will already be aware of basic military practices and courtesies. It will be your job to educate those recruits who did not attend the recruit familiarization course. Now, I want you all to take a good look around you...go

ahead, make sure you take it all in." The troops, wary now of the possibility of a trap and not wishing to invite more pushups for breaking formation, did not move at first, then slowly began to swivel their heads as far as they could with their feet still planted and arms in the small of their backs. Clay paused for a moment of dramatic effect before continuing.

"You will notice that we are on a mountain," he said the last word slowly, dragging it out and injecting it with maximum facetiousness. "There are only two ways off this mountain. One is to survive this course and go on to graduation. The other is to be carried off on a stretcher, or in a body bag." Clay let his voice assume a grave tone. "It makes no difference to me which way you choose, but the choice will be yours."

"Personally, I would like to see you all survive, because if you die up here I will have to fill out lots of paperwork explaining why you did so, and I hate paperwork, so I will offer you some advice. Learn to work together. Listen carefully to what you are told and learn quickly. Things will be coming at you fast and furious over the next few weeks so pay attention! We do not have time or patience for babysitting! I know you will not disappoint me. Platoon, attention." The troops snapped to in their best effort at togetherness. Perhaps there was some hope after all. "*Sarn't* Donnely."

"Yes, First Sergeant."

"Take control of your men."

"Yes, First Sergeant!"



Clay faded to the outer perimeter of the parade field, to a position that allowed him to observe the new recruits from a distance. He made mental notes as he observed each of the new men and women. This one needed to lose weight, that one was not paying attention. That one was still breathing heavily from the earlier exercise. It would help to determine what level the new people were at both physically and mentally and hopefully give the training staff an idea of where to start.

Donnely was calling roll from a roster sheet and taking every opportunity to reinforce the need for the recruits to sound off. As Clay's gaze floated across the faces of the assembled trainees, one of them seemed suddenly familiar. The recruit stood at perfect

attention and seemed somehow confident, much more sure of himself than the others. For a second the trooper's eyes wavered and he glanced in Clay's direction. Those eyes, almond shaped with irises the color of smoke...Where had Clay seen those eyes before? The recruit glanced back in Clay's direction as Donnelly called off the name "Chen."

"Present," said the recruit, his eyes still locked with Clay's.

***Gladston Hill Training Base
Ningpo Mountain Range
Nanking
1 August 3067***

The first few weeks of recruit training had, as promised, been intense. Clay had watched Donnely and the other instructors drill the troops on a myriad of military subjects. Marching, close order drill, chemical warfare preparation, first aid, weapons familiarization, land navigation, battlefield communication...The troops had performed well, thanks in no small part to Sergeant Donnely's "motivational exercises."

Most of the recruits had shown strength in some areas and weakness in others. The lone standout was Recruit Chen, who had excelled in every aspect of the training so far. Particularly adept at rifle marksmanship, his scores were the highest of any recruit in Gladston Hill's history. His performance had been enough to earn him a promotion to private, a prize coveted by the other troops who were still referred to only as recruit.

Chen's very presence at Gladston Hill left Clay feeling perplexed, and not a little disturbed. The young man obviously possessed more than a passing familiarization with weapons and military practices. The question of where he had developed that knowledge was of great concern.

Donnely's reports merely reinforced what Clay had already observed; Chen was an introvert who was highly skilled at the military arts but kept himself apart from the rest of the troops. He did not make friends. He had, on several occasions, shown impatience and even disgust with the recruits who did not learn as fast as he did, or who were not as physically fit. Twice he had abandoned slower troopers during the long morning runs rather than attempting to motivate them. Even now, as the persistent cold rain that was such a part of life in these mountains bombarded the troops, Chen chose to sit alone under a tree studying a plastic covered field handbook rather than eating midday chow beneath the field tent with the other recruits. Some of the troops were beginning to resent what they perceived as Chen's "holier than thou" attitude, but Chen showed no sign that he recognized their resentment or that he even cared.

Clay made a mental note to watch Chen closely, especially during the squad drills scheduled to begin the following day.

The next morning after breakfast, the recruits assembled on the parade ground for a full-pack forced march to the next training area. They bid goodbye to the relative comfort of their barracks at Gladston Hill, tossing their duffel bags into the bed of a truck as they filed out the main gate and headed down the service road that wound down the mountain.

Their longest march so far, the quick pace, coupled with the thin mountain air and the weight of their packs and weapons soon began to get the better of some recruits. Donnely, in the vanguard of the column, called a halt to allow the recruits a few minutes to catch their breath.

Recruit Travis, a thin, gangly young man and squad mate of Chen's, was visibly having trouble with his load. Recruit Margaret Hannan approached Travis to try to help him. She began taking Travis' gear and distributing it throughout the rest of the squad while the young trooper tried to catch his breath.

Hannan was a flame-haired firebrand with a forceful personality who had clashed with Chen on several occasions during the prior weeks. When she attempted to unload an ammo belt for the crew-served machine gun on Chen, he flatly refused her. Hannan, never one to back down, gave Chen a stern rebuke, which he repaid in kind. Hannan grimaced and balled her fists as if she were ready to strike. Clay and Donnely both witnessed the exchange and Donnely intervened, stepping into the space between the sparring recruits.

"Recruit Chen, why did you refuse to carry that ammo?"

"I'm already carrying two belts," he spat. "He can't even carry one! If he can't carry his own weight we'd be better off without him!"

"Then you're suggesting we leave him?"

"Yes! If he can't hang then he should be left behind. He's nothing but a liability! He should never have come in the first place!"

"What if that were you, Chen? Would you want us to leave you?"

Chen looked down his nose at the bleary-eyed Travis, who was relying on the support of Margaret Hannan's shoulder to keep his feet. "That would never be me," he snarled.

"Okay, what about the ammo? Don't you think it might come in handy when you get to your objective?" Donnely threw the ammo

at Chen, who winced as the heavy belt bounced off his chest. Without waiting for a response from Chen, Donnelly whirled and began pacing up and down the length of the column, his voice reverberating off the mountainside.

"People, we are moving into the next phase of our training. Tomorrow we begin squad battle tactics. Up till now we have focused on the individual but now we must learn to work as a team, and a team is only as strong as its weakest member! If a member of your team is having trouble, you *must* stop to help him, otherwise the rest of your team will suffer. If we do not learn to work together we will all die separately!"

The big sergeant glared at Chen, and then turned his fiery gaze toward Travis and Hannan.

"Get that man on his feet, we're moving out!"



That evening, as the exhausted recruits finished their chow and prepared their field tents for much needed sleep, Clay called Chen into the CP. Chen pushed aside the tent flap and assumed the position of attention, rendering the customary salute.

"Recruit Chen reporting as ordered, First Sergeant."

"At ease, Chen," replied Clay. "Have a seat." The recruit seated himself in the folding chair across the small desk from Clay. His face was stoic, unreadable. Clay wasted no time getting to the point. "Chen, why are you here?"

"First Sergeant, I'm here to serve the Federated Suns and the people of Nanking."

"Nice answer. Very politically correct. How long have you been rehearsing that?"

Chen's face still betrayed nothing. "I don't know what you mean, First Sergeant."

"Cut the crap!" Clay's patience was wearing thin. "You and I both know who you are. I want to know what you're doing here!"

Chen's face was as impassive and unemotional as ever. "First Sergeant, I think you must have me confused with someone else."

Clay thought to himself that Chen would make an excellent poker player. *All right then. If he wants to play, I'll just up the ante.* "Tomorrow we break the platoon up into squads. I'm placing you in charge of first squad. You'll have Kelley, Aranson, Brathwaite, Hannan, Reichel and Travis." Clay smiled inwardly as Chen's lip curled slightly at the mention of Hannan and Travis.

"You will be responsible for their training and their well-being. I expect you to have them working as a cohesive fighting unit by the time our four-day tactical exercise begins, is that understood?"

Chen's face reddened. "Yes, First Sergeant," he acknowledged through clenched teeth.

"Good. Dismissed." Chen rose from his chair, saluted and turned to leave. "Oh, and one more thing," continued Clay. "You'll have a cadre member assigned to you throughout the training period. His role will be as an observer and evaluator. He'll report on everything you do so he'll need to be close to you the whole time. He'll eat, sleep and shit with you."

"Sounds wonderful," remarked Chen mockingly. "Who's the lucky guy?"

Clay allowed his grin to spread across his face. "Why, you are Chen. You got stuck with me!"

Great Eaves Valley Training Area
Ningpo Mountains
Nanking
2 August 3067

The new day broke wet and cold. A misty rain fell, accompanied by a lingering fog that would blanket Great Eaves forest for the better part of the day if the rain kept up. The Valley lay in the center of the Ningpo range, a Shangri-la, accessible only by a few overgrown logging roads that had fallen into disuse since the forest became protected government land. The training area, such as it was, was indistinguishable from the surrounding terrain, just a few pine needle covered clearings complete with small mess pavilions and the obligatory portable toilets.

During the morning run, they had passed a huge and imposing obstacle course and a few low buildings that appeared to Chen to be places to shower. Aside from these few signs of civilization there was only the forest. Dark and foreboding, its tall timbers allowed only the barest sunlight to penetrate the gloom.

Raised in the city for most of his life, Chen was amazed that such places still existed, yet thankful in a way that they did. Seated on his helmet, poncho barely managing to keep the rain from his face, he peered up through the trees between bites of reconstituted eggs. For a moment he imagined himself on top of the tallest tree in the valley, clinging to the spire with one hand and shielding his eyes from the sun with the other as he gazed out across the landscape, master of all he surveyed. Or maybe he was an eagle, soaring high above, dipping below the clouds only occasionally to gaze down and scoff at the trivial affairs of men.

Despite the rain and the aches and pains that came from sleeping on the cold ground, Chen mustered a smile at the thought of such a childlike fantasy, a smile that quickly faded with the approach of First Sergeant Clay.

Clay stopped over Chen but did not look down, concentrating instead on the last few clumps of eggs on his plate.

“Oh eight-thirty formation in full field gear. Get your people ready.” With that, the First Sergeant stalked off in the direction of the platoon CP. Chen sighed and pushed himself up from his makeshift seat, dumped his plate into a plastic trash bag nailed to a tree and shuffled off to the bivouac area to round up the squad.

As the platoon formed up, Chen took his place at the right of his squad. Standing at ease, he glanced around at the assembled faces. Lieutenant Morgan had fallen in with the first squad, along with Staff Sergeant George, one of the instructors from Gladston Hill. Third squad had picked up Staff Sergeant Voss and Chen's second squad had taken on First Sergeant Clay, who had filled in at the far left of the line as though he were just another private. *Yeah right*, thought Chen. At precisely zero eight thirty hours Donnely trotted up to the front and center position facing the platoon and called them to attention.

"Ladies and gentlemen welcome to Hell," he boomed. "Very soon you will all understand why we call it that!"

He continued, raising his voice slightly as the rain intensified. "The next few weeks will be the toughest yet. You will learn all aspects of basic squad tactics, from tactical maneuvering to defense to attack. You will go everywhere and do everything as a squad, so get used to looking at each other's ugly faces! The last four days of your training will be your field exercise, where you will be pitted against your fellow squads in round-the-clock simulated combat. Those of you who fail to learn to work together can expect a rude awakening!" Donnely glared at the assembled recruits, stopping for a long moment as his gaze locked on Chen, who avoided eye contact with some difficulty.

"Training Sergeants, take charge of your squads."



Squad training did indeed prove to be hell, much tougher than any of the recruits were expecting. They trained from dawn to dusk without break, trudging back to their tiny tents in time to get as much uneasy sleep as they could before the next grueling day. They subsisted solely off vacuum-packed field rations and the tepid water from their plastic canteens. Salt stains formed white crusts on their sweaty fatigues which never seemed to fully dry. They washed their bodies every few days at the shower buildings by the obstacle course, holding their breath under trickles of icy water pumped in straight from mountain streams.

The weather was rarely on their side. The tall tree canopy shielded them somewhat from the heat during the day but the nights were chilly and damp and the misty rain was their constant companion. Tender feet cracked and bled, while arms and faces

developed sores and lesions, thanks in no small part to the numerous biting insects that swarmed throughout the forest. Only the yellow horsepill each soldier consumed daily with their breakfast ration staved off infection.

By the time the field exercise began, the troops resembled ragged scarecrows in their patched and faded uniforms. Lack of sleep showed in the dark circles under their sunken eyes. Despite all the hardships they had endured, however, their mental state was actually improving. They had taken all of what man or nature could throw at them and survived, even thrived. The training had shown them that there were no limits to what they could overcome. They were proud of themselves for making it this far, for not giving up, and they were each keenly aware that there were only four days to go before it was all over. Four more brutal days and they would leave the cursed mountain forever.

Great Eaves Valley Training Area
Ningpo Mountains
Nanking
27 August 3067

The field exercise had not gone well for the Second Squad. Though they had done well enough in squad tactics classes, the amount of teamwork required to apply what they had learned was just not there. The squad was repeatedly victimized by the other squads during the day's activities and then forced to endure their chastising remarks when the unit gathered together for meals or mail call. They were the butt of jokes, the platoon whipping boy, and everyone knew that most of their problems could be attributed to one man. Their squad leader, Recruit Chen.

First Sergeant Clay had put Chen in charge of the squad and refused to make a change, ignoring the requests from several squad members that had come to him privately. Hannan had cornered him twice, imploring him for help only to be turned away. Clay used the excuse that he was just an observer, no longer in a position to make changes to the command structure. Whatever the problem, the squad would have to work it out on its own.

The divisions grew deeper as the days wore on. Chen was more dictator than leader, barking orders in a patronizing manner as if the rest of the squad were mere children. In the field, his abilities were unquestioned, but he lacked the patience needed to nurture along those who had even the slightest trouble keeping up. During the numerous long patrols, he moved through the torturous terrain at a breakneck pace, often overtaking his own point element. Twice he had caused the squad to become so spread out the members had lost contact with each other in the thick undergrowth, allowing the opposing squads to set up effective ambushes.

First Squad, under the command of Lieutenant Morgan, an arrogant young man who was using the field time to complete his officer training requirements, had been particularly troublesome. Sensing their weakness, Morgan had his troops stalk Second Squad, never missing an opportunity to humiliate them with a mock attack or simulated ambush. On the morning of the fourth day, they had gone so far as to throw tear gas canisters into Second Squad's bivouac area while the troops had been trying to eat breakfast.

The afternoon had been no kinder to the young recruits. Travis' canteen seal had apparently cracked, allowing gas residue from

the morning's debacle to seep in, ruining his water supply. Chen had chastised Travis for carrying unserviceable equipment and refused to allow him access to the squad's reserve, a five-liter jug that the squaddies shared responsibility for carrying. Hannan, who was in charge of the jug at the time, refused to abide by Chen's order and gave the jug to Travis anyway. Chen angrily swatted the container out of Travis' hands, spilling its contents in the process. Hannan launched herself at Chen and the two wrestled on the forest floor. The other squad members stood by, refusing to intervene. Most even cheered for Hannan. Clay watched from the sidelines as the pitiful scene unfolded, remaining silent even as Sergeant Voss and Third Squad moved in unnoticed.

Finally separating the two brawling recruits, the squad members were startled to find themselves surrounded, their abandoned weapons gathered up and confiscated by the grinning Sergeant Voss. Captured, they were paraded past First Squad's perimeter with their hands over their heads to the great delight of the howling Lieutenant Morgan, whose laughter and catcalls followed them through the thick woods.

The squad was silent as they made their way back to the bivouac area. At chow, Chen sat by himself, his back to the rest of the squad. Gone were the jokes and jibes and embellished retellings of the day's events. Instead, they sat in silence and nibbled at their tasteless rations, heads hung low. Clay noticed more than one trooper casting a sidelong, contemptuous glance at Chen's back. Occasionally one of the recruits would whisper something, which would be met with nods of silent approval.

Clay observed the behavior for a while before deciding to step in. He had seen this kind of thing occur within a squad before. Often the troops would work out their differences within the squad, albeit with the occasional black eye or bruised ego. This situation, however, was different, and if Clay's suspicions about Chen and his background were right, he knew he couldn't afford to let this one go on any further than it already had.

He found Chen sitting on the side of the wooded hill that bordered the camp, staring out into the trees as if lost in contemplation. Clay sat next to him and scooped a few spoonfuls of beef and noodles into his mouth, washing it down with a swig of instant coffee. Chen's expression did not change; he just continued to stare into the tree line. Distant thunder rolled up the valley, signaling bad weather in the offing.

"Another tough day, eh." Clay began, less a question than a statement of fact.

Characteristically, Chen remained silent.

“You need to get this situation under control, Squad Leader.” By addressing him by rank, Clay hoped to inject a sense of authority into his voice. “Those troops back there have lost confidence in themselves. You need to help them get it back.”

Chen finally spoke. “Why should they have confidence? They’re clueless! Stupid! I’ve tried to show them but they just don’t get it!”

“You’ve tried to beat it into their brains. They have Donelly and Morgan for that, they don’t need it from you. You need to lead. They need an example and that has to be you! You need to get down in the mud with them and be part of the team. They have the ability; you just need to pull it out of them. You lead and they *will* follow!”

Chen sat in silence. Clay hoped he had gotten through to the boy but as always, his face was a blank slate, his expression unreadable. Clay got to his feet and emptied the remainder of his coffee into the brush. Leaning down, he placed his hand on Chen’s shoulder. “You can’t lead them from here, son,” he said in a low voice before leaving the young man alone with his thoughts.



Later that evening a truck rolled into the camp with portable showers erected on the back. Each trooper was given five minutes to wash away the week’s worth of accumulated grime and fatigue in the petrol heated water. Fresh uniforms were issued, along with the usual supply of pyrotechnics and blank ammunition. The soldiers were allowed two hours of personal time to change clothes, draw supplies and perform preventative maintenance on their weapons and equipment, and to stretch out tired, overworked muscles before moving into their tactical assembly areas for the night.

The troops of Second Squad were busy in the squad tent, finishing up the last of their personal chores before packing to move out into the wilderness. The hot showers and clean uniforms, along with the fact that Chen had been absent since chow, had done wonders for their morale. Even the thunderstorm outside failed to darken the mood as the soldiers laughed and joked with each other while checking weapons, waterproofing boots or composing letters home.

The tent flap suddenly flew open, instantly diverting everyone's attention. A flash of lightning lit the mountain, silhouetting the drenched figure standing in the entrance. It was Chen. All activity in the tent ceased as he ducked through the opening and shut the flap behind. He was soaked from head to toe, rain water ran down his cheeks and beaded up in his close-cropped black hair. He seemed not to notice. All eyes were upon him and as he began to speak, in a voice that was soft and humble where before it had been harsh and authoritative.

"We have had a difficult couple of days as a squad," he began. "Most of the problems are directly attributable to me. I understand that and take full responsibility."

The recruits stared at Chen, shocked expressions on their faces. Hannan dropped the toothbrush she had been using to clean her rifle. He continued.

"The other squads have had a good laugh at our expense this week. Well, the laughter stops now. After tonight, the only ones laughing in this camp will be us! Team leaders, have someone draw extra pyro and round up all the red luminous sticks you can find. I will need to see Hannan and Kelley in my tent in five minutes."

The recruits stared at each other in stunned disbelief as Chen disappeared into the storm. The silence lasted for what seemed like minutes until the chatter started, each recruit speculating, most openly suspicious of what their suddenly humble squad leader had in store for them.

Hannan and Kelley met with Chen as directed; the three of them huddled over a map in a tent that had been set up for a single person. The raging thunderstorm outside provided the perfect backdrop as Chen laid out the details of his plan. When he was finished, Hannan and Kelley merely nodded, their wicked grins acknowledging their approval.



The storm hit the mountain hard and stayed with the troops of Second Platoon as they moved out to their tactical perimeters where they would encamp for the night. Clay sensed a different attitude within the squad, but whatever was going on, the troops were keeping quiet. His curiosity piqued when, just one hour after setting up, Chen decided to move the perimeter two hundred

meters further north, and the troops, instead of grumbling about the change, simply picked up their still packed gear and moved. They had obviously been expecting the change of position. When questioned, Chen cited “operational security” as the basis for his decision, although Clay was skeptical that Chen believed one of the other squads would attempt to launch a mock attack in the middle of a downpour like the one that was scouring the mountainside. Still, he could not fault the recruit for being cautious.

As the night, and the storm wore on, Clay noticed that few of the troops elected to sleep. They seemed keyed up. Ready.

Let them stay up, he thought to himself. *Not this guy.* Clay lay back and let the rain beating against his poncho shelter lull him to sleep.

Some hours later, Clay was shaken awake. The storm had intensified and he opened his eyes to find Chen’s camouflage blackened face not five inches from his own.

“Wake up, First Sergeant. Get it together. We move out in five mikes!”



True to his word, Chen led the squad out of their concealed perimeter exactly five minutes after waking Clay. The First Sergeant fell in at the end of their column where he could observe the squad’s activity without getting in the way. This was their operation; more importantly it was Chen’s chance to earn the trust and respect of his squad mates, and, though still skeptical, Clay had no desire to interfere.

The squad moved out from the cover of the tree line and into the storm, which was quickly becoming a raging torrent. Clay studied them as they moved. Their faces blacked out with camouflage paint and every piece of equipment taped or tied off to avoid unnecessary squeaks and rattles. They traveled light and stealthy, ignoring the drenching rain. Every few minutes they would halt and sink slowly into the tall grass, listening intently. Tuning their senses to the environment.

Clay could not help but be impressed. He himself had worked with teams that had taken months or years of constant drilling and preparation before attaining the level of professionalism this young squad was demonstrating. Maybe the other members were

trying to show Chen that they were capable of soldiering at his level, as if they had something to prove. And they did. The frustration of the past few days, carried on sagging shoulders, written in hard lines on tight faces, was gone tonight. Tonight, they were confident. Focused.

They moved, cautious and steady, for two hours, skirting open areas and avoiding obvious trails. They took an irregular, circuitous route that nevertheless kept them on a constant heading, straight toward the First Squad perimeter.

First Squad had set up their security perimeter inside a tree line that bordered an open field. Chen halted on the edge of a wooded area overlooking the field, just opposite their positions. He led the squad members into the clearing in pairs, carefully placing each trooper before returning to the woods to retrieve the next two. Clay followed behind the last pair, the wind and rain from the heavy squall masking their approach through the high grass.

Chen positioned the squad in a cigar shaped security perimeter, designed to provide covering fire in all directions while allowing the squad leader to retain control of his troops. He squatted next to Reichel, who was covering the rear, and counted each man by placing his hand on their shoulders as they entered the perimeter. Satisfied that everyone was accounted for, he immediately tapped Hannan and Kelley and the three moved off silently into the waning downpour, to be swallowed up by the shoulder high grass and the pitch black of the moonless night



Recruit Dorian Zander was disgusted, firstly that he had guard duty yet again for the third consecutive night, secondly because each time he had drawn the oh-two-hundred time slot. He would just be getting back to sleep when it would be time to get up again, if he could find sleep at all with the storm raging all around. The storm was the third reason he was upset. Why was it even necessary to post a guard? Who in their right mind would leave the relative comfort of a shelter and the warmth of a waterproof thermal bag to attack in this mess? *At least the rain is letting up a little*, he thought, pulling his poncho tighter around his body.

A flash of lightning in the distance illuminated the mountain for just an instant, and Zander squeezed his eyes shut hard to clear the spots. In that instant, a hand snaked around his head and

clamped down hard over his mouth. Something vaguely sharp was dragged across his throat as a voice, gruff and menacing whispered into his left ear. "You're dead. No sounds or I cut your throat for real!" Zander, surprised and terrified, did not resist as his attacker lowered him gently to the ground.



Clay shimmied up through the grass, drawing even with Travis, who lay with the squad light machine gun pointed in the direction of the "enemy" perimeter. Travis checked his watch and whispered to Clay. "Should be seeing something any minute now."

At that moment, a huge flash of light followed by a loud boom lit First Squad's position. The explosion was followed by another, then another as the hand grenade simulators went off, sowing shock and confusion inside the encampment. The bright flashes emitted by the pyrotechnics also had the added benefit of temporarily blinding anyone who was unfortunate enough to be looking at them when they went off, adding to the chaos as blinded troopers stumbled over each other in their haste to react.

Travis cracked open a few red luminous sticks and waved them in the air briefly before scattering them on the ground in front of his position. As the last of the simulators, big artillery types that emitted a shrill whistle before delivering their loud blasts, were still wreaking havoc, three figures came crashing into the squad perimeter. Chen, breathing heavily, counted his troops and signaled them to move, placing himself at their head.

Travis rose to one knee and began firing the machine gun in long sweeping bursts, burning through a belt of blank ammunition in just a few seconds. Doubled over, he rushed past Reichel, tapping him on the shoulder. "Last man," he said as he passed, reloading the machine gun as he ran. Reichel rose up and turned, trotting backwards to cover the rear as the line of shadowy figures disappeared into the safety of the thick woods.

First Squad's camp was a scene of utter chaos. Lieutenant Morgan, clad in only his trousers and t-shirt, staggered from his tent. "What the hell is going on? Sergeant George, what the hell is going on here?"

The stoic sergeant merely reclined against the dirt berm of a prepared fighting position. He answered, a slight hint of sarcasm tinting his voice.

“We got attacked, sir. Took us completely by surprise.” He cast a disapproving glance toward Recruit Zander, who bowed his head sheepishly.

The Lieutenant stared incredulously at the man. “Well, aren’t you going to do something? You can’t just sit there! Get the squad organized and go get them!”

“I can’t do that, sir.”

The Lieutenant was steaming. “And why not?”

George craned his neck and pulled down his shirt collar, exposing a luminous red line where an open chemical light stick, doubling as a knife had been dragged across his throat. “Because I’m dead, sir,” he said.

“Dammit! Okay, I’ll get the squad together and...”

“Sir,” George shook his head and tossed Morgan one of the small compacts they used to apply camouflage face paint. The lieutenant unfolded the compact, its small mirror revealing a glowing red line across his own neck.

“DAMMIT!”



Thirty minutes would pass before First Squad could mount any kind of organized pursuit. By that time, Chen and the rest of Second Squad were long gone. They took great delight in hearing two more simulated explosives detonate far behind as the pursuing soldiers of First Squad happened across the “going away presents” Reichel had left for them. The satisfied smiles on the faces of the recruits shone brightly, despite the darkness, the rain and the streaked camouflage paint.

The squad moved quickly, less concerned with stealth than with putting maximum distance between themselves and their enemy. Chen led them on a winding route that differed greatly from the one they had taken earlier, stopping only once in an area that Clay recognized as being close to the company assembly area. Parking them there, Chen disappeared alone into the dark, returning after a few minutes to lead them back to their own perimeter.

Long hours passed. By the time the recruits finally bedded down, the rain had stopped and the sky had begun to lighten. Waist high

fog clung to the forest floor. Clay had volunteered to stay up for the remainder of the night, allowing the recruits to get the sleep he felt they had earned. About an hour before first light, he heard rustling from the open area where the squad had established its original bivouac. He chuckled under his breath, imagining First Squad's frustration as they searched the tall wet grass in vain.

The next morning marked their final day on the mountain. The company would reassemble and spend the morning cleaning the camp and their equipment before making their way to a landing zone where the transports would pick them up.

Arriving at the assembly area, the troops of Recruit Platoon Alpha were greeted by the sight of a soggy uniform shirt belonging to Lieutenant Morgan hanging limply from the flagpole in the center of camp. The spectacle, heightened by the scene made by the furious Lieutenant as he struggled to recover the shirt, sent a wave of muted laughter through the assembled troops, including some of the men in Morgan's own squad and each of the training cadre NCOs.

Sergeant Donnely, looking immaculate in starched fatigues and spit-shined field boots, stepped out onto the porch in front of the headquarters cabin.

"Congratulations, ladies," he boomed at the assembled troops. "You passed. You are the first graduating class of recruits in the history of the First Federated Suns Lancers!"

The recruits let out a collective whoop, some of them throwing their caps into the air. Sergeant Donnely descended the steps and moved through the formation, personally shaking the hand of every soldier. When he got to Recruit Chen, the corner of his mouth screwed up into a scowl that changed to a grin, and he winked his silent approval of the previous night's actions. Chen breathed deep, his chest puffing out with pride as he struggled to contain his own satisfied smirk.

The march to the landing zone was unhurried, even casual. The recruits joyously sang bawdy cadences as they wound their way along the road, sun breaking through the trees to shine on their exhausted but euphoric faces. The stress of the last three months melted away and even the instructors seemed different, almost friendly in a way that seemed totally out of character. The troops lifted out not in the flying cattle cars that had first deposited them at Gladston Hill, but in open-sided VTOLs that carried a squad at a time, allowing them to take in the beautiful mountain scenery.

Chen sat, legs hanging out of the open side door and enjoyed the feeling of the wind on his face. On his left, an exhausted Margaret Hannan dozed despite the noise and motion of the aircraft, her head resting on his shoulder. Chen allowed her to sleep and found himself smiling for the first time in years.

***Replacement Processing Center, Camp Allard
Outskirts of Yang-ku
Nanking
1 September 3067***

Davis Clay mounted the steps to the small wooden headquarters building. He stopped in the hallway where the duty rosters were posted, looking for the chart that would tell him when the next wave of recruits would come through. Though he had expected a few weeks off before the next rotation, he was surprised to find no schedule at all. He continued down the hall and checked in at the desk outside the door to the Duty Officer's office. Recognizing Clay's voice as he conversed with the corporal on desk duty, Captain Jorgenson invited his old friend in and closed the door behind him.

The room was small and spartan with no personal décor as it was not permanently assigned but instead served as the headquarters for the Officer of the Day, a position which changed daily according to a duty rotation. Jorgenson, a thickly built, slightly balding man of Rasalhaguian descent, winced as he sipped from a cup of stale smelling coffee drawn from a pot that needed a good cleaning.

"Worst part of this job," he commented, voice betraying a vague accent. He held out his hand to Clay, who shook it vigorously. "Good to see you back, Dave. The new kids look promising."

"All in all I'm pretty pleased. A few of them show some real potential."

Jorgenson nodded but added nothing further, prompting Clay to get straight to the point.

"I didn't notice a training schedule for the next round."

The other man's expression didn't change. "There's not going to be a next round, at least not here. We're moving."

"Moving?"

"Yep. Not just us, mind you. The whole regiment, everybody... offworld."

The news was a shock to Clay. The First had been stationed in the Sarna March almost since its inception. They were just start-

ing to make great strides here on Nanking after almost ten years of effort.

Captain Jorgenson tapped a few keys and brought up a star map on his computer monitor. He turned the monitor so that Clay could see and pointed to the planet Hadnall, halfway across Federated Suns space, bordering on what had been the St. Ives Compact.

“The First Crucis is coming to relieve us in a few months. They’re way understrength and they need a pacified world to rebuild,” Jorgenson made quotation gestures with his fingers when he spoke the word “pacified.” “Lucky for them we did the pacifying. Anyway, their first units should arrive just after the first of the new year, so keep this under your hat for now.”



Outside, Clay stopped to watch his recruits marching off to take the first in a battery of written tests designed to determine their best suited primary military specialties. They looked sharp, each recruit perfectly in step and loudly repeating the marching cadence sung by Sergeant Deemer, a wily veteran who had been assigned to oversee the platoon while they underwent their testing. Fresh uniforms replaced the rags worn in the mountains, and the warm showers, hot food and their first real rest in weeks had helped revitalize the troops. Clay was extremely proud of each of them but his pride was tempered slightly by the thought that soon they would be uprooted, taken away from friends and family and placed on a volatile border that could explode into armed conflict at any moment. Despite how much they had grown during training, they weren’t ready. Not yet. Clay would only have a few more months to get them that way.