

SHADOWS OF FAITH

VOLUME 3

by Loren L. Coleman



TALES OF THE JIHAD

-4-

***Harlech
Outreach
14 November 3067***

Jason Williamson sat on a metal folding chair in the first row of assembled Home Guard officers and senior enlisted. Hands balled into fists. One of twenty men crammed into this barren, musty room with its silvered, raw lumber siding and stark overhead lighting which was nothing more than a low-energy floodlight coil suspended from a dangling wire. Calling it a substandard office was being kind. This delapidated loft inside one of Harlech's abandoned warehouses, the building temporarily seized by the Home Guard as a combination maintenance and logistics depot.

A place where they could gather to hear the latest reports. To sit, and wait. Watching, as Major Alexander Veng leaned over a battered overhead projector which some technician with a grudge against the Home Guard could only have found on display in a museum dedicated to antique office equipment.

The projector whirred and rattled in complaint as an internal cooling fan with a shoddy bearing fought against the heat thrown off by an internal, naked halogen bulb. The struggling fan shoved hot exhaust out of louvered slots in the side of the projector's painted aluminum box. Stirring papers strewn over Veng's metal desk and washing back over Jason's face in a scorched-smelling draft.

As uncomfortable as Jason felt, however, it had to be worse for his new commanding officer. Major Veng (soon to be Brevet-Colonel Veng, no doubt) worked directly up against that little metal-shod oven, often with his face shoved into the up-cast light such that his face washed out in a pale mask with dark, glittering

pits for eyes and a grim frown tightened below his jet black walrus mustache; an overexposed jack-o-lantern. The major slipped a new transparency onto the bright glass. Fudged it about until he centered it well enough below the magnifying lens to cast a new list of names and numbers onto the white sheet tacked against the office wall.

Low tech at its finest. Barely a step above finger painting on cave walls.

"Not much new to report on the aggressors," Veng said. Used a black grease pencil to check off each of the first three rows. "Waco's Rangers. Smithson's Chinese Bandits. The Tiger Sharks. These formed the main thrust which led the charge out of TempTown. Hit us hard at the DropPort, and caught Epsilon mobilizing on the practice grounds."

Everyone nodded. This much they had known from the first day. But Veng paused at the next entry. Circled it. Drew a line through it. "51st Dark Panzers."

Jason leaned forward. Caught others in his peripheral vision doing the same. Chairs scuffed against the wooden flooring and a few loose planks creaked. Jason's fists tightened until his fingernails pressed painfully into the palms of his hands. The Dark Panzers had been the most damaging of several surprises dished out against Wolf's Dragoons during last month's sneak attack. A unit of the Allied Mercenary Command! They were supposed to have been vetted and cleared. They were supposed to have been fighting on *their* side!

But instead the 51st turned their coat, stabbing a long knife into the Dragoons' back. The chaos surrounding that treachery had been part of what led to Brian Cameron setting Condition Feral. Ultimately, it was what had led to Jaime Wolf's small command being isolated and hammered by Colonel Wayne Waco leading a fresh charge out of TempTown.

And worse.

"If WolfNet's investigation holds up," Major Veng said, sweating as he leaned over the projector's bright warm up-cast, "and there is no reason to think otherwise at this time, they've confirmed that it was the Dark Panzers who hit our barracks with fuel-air explosives. Smuggled in, we believe, only four hours preceding the actual assault. There was a single alert from one of our own sentries who went missing about then. Corporal Hammecher. That

situation was under investigation by a security team when the main assault hit."

Pieces and parts. All being carefully reconstructed so that Wolf's Dragoons would have the best overall picture of what had happened that day, and in the days which followed. Warnings which might have prevented—or lessened—their losses, standing out so blatant with the benefit of 20/20 hindsight.

Jason forced a swallow, his throat painfully dry. Nearly fifteen hundred men lost to those damned fuel-air explosives alone.

The lowest pit of hell was too good for the Dark Panzers.

"Why aren't the Lone Wolves on the list?" he asked, jumping forward. The remainder of Veng's transparency was fill with smaller units. Lance-sized. A demi-company here and there. "And the Red Riders? If we're including the piecemeal stuff?"

"And Dark Lloyd's Wild Bunch?" another man asked from a row behind Jason.

Another: "Garret's Metalshod? They bit into the Crimson Crusaders pretty bad."

"The Terriers?"

"Upshaw's Highland Moors?"

Veng held up a hand, waved down the sudden flurry of questions. The man had deep, dark bags under both eyes; luggage he'd picked up working twenty-hour days, Jason knew. On top of being thrust into overall responsibility for the decimated Home Guard, Veng was wearing a second "hat" with Procurement and a third as an aide to Brian Cameron who had assumed control of Outreach Command in Jaime Wolf's place.

Too many open billets. Not enough live bodies to fill them.

"This is WolfNet's call," Veng said. "Near as they figure, the units you mentioned—and pieces-parts of others you haven't—were not organized for the original assault plans. Joy-riders. Scavengers. Men and women caught up in the sudden bloodlust."

TempTown trash, in other words. The Dragoons' open-door policy for Outreach had created their own type of shantytown; full of disgraced soldiers and low-caliber mercs, armed to the teeth with enough firepower to take over your average industrial world. "All the rotten eggs in one basket," was a common description of

TempTown. *Of course* the dregs of Harlech had surfaced during the fighting. Embittered warriors with nothing left to lose. Many of them jealous, often hating the Dragoons for nothing more than the unit's (hard-won) fortunes.

"Everyone on the current list, then." A new voice. This one in the far back of the office loft and heavy with an Outback accent. "WolfNet is branding them all as conspirators?"

"Conspirators or cat's paws," Veng corrected. He smudged a greasy asterisk next to each name, walking up from the bottom of the long list. "Major Noketsuna's report to Brian Cameron detailed out the various paths which tracked money trails or other support from each unit back through one of the three primaries," double asterisks next to Waco's, Smithson's, and the Tiger Sharks, "or directly to *them*."

Them.

Word of Blake.

"We did not see this coming?" Lieutenant Sera Kault asked. Far right side of the first row, anchoring one corner of the assembled warriors. She had tied back her long, iron-straight black hair, pulling it away from her heart-shaped face. "It must have been months in the planning. WolfNet did not sniff this out?"

"To *blazes* with what we saw coming or didn't." A leather-faced sergeant in the back trumped Sera's question with a loud and gravelly voice. "Want to know what we're finally gonna do about it!"

There were murmurs of support from around the room. Jason had a hard time swallowing down his own growl. Flashbacks from Elgin: faceless enemies; battlefield betrayals; the weeks of chaos leading into months of uncertainty and then two years (*two years!*) of stagnation. Abandoned and all but forgotten. That wasn't going to happen here. The Dragoons did not roll over and expose their bellies to *anyone*. Certainly not to machine-worshipping Blakists!

He dry-swallowed against the bitter taste in his mouth. Felt his nails biting into the flesh of his palms and relaxed. Marginally.

It *wasn't* going to happen here. Already plans were being drawn up, he knew. And he looked forward to being a part of them.

"Major Noketsuna's Intelligence Group did have several investigations underway," Veng said. Addressing Kault first, but switching quickly over to the real question hanging dark and heavy overhead. "We can second-guess them for being too late to save our friends

and comrades, or we can be thankful that what intelligence we *do* have will allow us to formulate a quick and proportional response.”

“Great Father take a proportional response!” Heads craned around to find the speaker. The same sergeant as before. Horace Clarke. His dark eyes afire with rage. “I want to hurt those robe-wearing bastards where they live!”

There was a great deal more vocal support this time. Several officers slid to the front of their seats, as if ready to be off. Faces flushed with emotion. A young officer on the far left stood, unable to keep his seat, and stomped off some nervous energy. Rabble-rousing at its finest. These people wanted blood.

So did Jason. Though he tempered that lust with at least a small measure of caution. He turned fully in his seat, facing back over the several rows.

“The Colonel is dead,” he said calmly. A slap in the face to many, who suddenly riveted on him as the person standing in their way. Eyes slashed at him like lasers. “Maeve Wolf is returning from Naja, but we won’t have her here for another month, at least. Brian Cameron and Colonel Rand—if they have something we can do now, I’ll take it and be glad.”

“Toss you some scraps and you’d be glad,” Clarke shot back. “Real Dragoons don’t beg at tableside.”

A hot flush warmed the back of Jason’s neck and his hand clamped down on the backrest of his folding chair. A ready weapon if he needed one to beat some sense, and some decorum, into the sergeant’s thick head.

“And here I thought *real* Dragoons prided themselves on level-headed professionalism. Not impulsive tantrums.”

“Maybe a little impulsiveness is what we need right now.”

There were still too many angry faces on the sergeant’s side of the impromptu debate. So Jason merely nodded, as if conceding the point. “I doubt Colonel Waco could have said it better.”

Then he deliberately turned his back on the veteran noncom.

Throwing Waco’s name into the other man’s face was a calculated risk on Jason’s part. At some point, insult could overbalance the very real example of the type of dire consequences toward which impulsive decisions so often led. After all, Waco’s style of

brash leadership had caused him to lose an entire regiment, the core of his Rangers, turning the once proud man into a Hiring Hall joke and banishing him to the dregs of TempTown.

But as one leader of the recent assault, perhaps *the* chief instigator, in fact, the wound might be too raw for rubbing such coarse salt into it.

Jason tensed, listening behind him for any sudden disturbance. But all Clarke managed was a stuttering, "You...why you little..." as his rage sputtered down and was lost inside a cold vacuum.

"As you were," Veng said. Finally stepping in to play peacekeeper now that Jason had successfully drawn out and lanced the sergeant's ire. "We have enough enemies as is without creating more among ourselves.

"Now as Captain Williamson knows, we *are* moving forward with immediate plans. Some of the rest of you have already heard rumors of the Mars operation as well, I'm certain. Maeve Wolf, consulting through HPG comms, has authorized our proportional response to the Word of Blake escalation. The balance of Gamma Regiment will be pulled from Tikonov by week's end, giving us extra support here on Outreach. The remains of Epsilon have already been folded into Beta, bringing it back close to operational strength, but expect to see other asset shifts over the next few days including further cuts into the Home Guard. What's left of us."

A solemn reminder that the Outreach Home Guard, and the Dragoons as a whole, were not so strong that they could afford mistakes. Not now.

"Take care of your people," Veng said. "Take care of your equipment. I need readiness reports and your latest logistics evaluations on my desk—such as it is—by zero-eight-hundred tomorrow. Daily briefing at fifteen hundred. Dismissed," he said, preempting further questions (or simple outbursts).

Chair legs scraped across the plank floor. A few bumped together as the assembled officers and enlisted rose to the feet. A few shuffled in place, waiting to see if Major Veng would start a more casual discussion of the situation now that all official functions had ended. But not Jason. He was halfway to the door when Veng caught him.

"Captain Williamson," Veng called over. "Will you stay."

It wasn't a request.



It took great effort for Jason to keep from slamming the rickety wooden door on his way out of Major Veng's office, venting his frustration. He held himself in check by the thinnest of margins and merely shut the door firmly. *Very* firmly. The door's thin sheet of dust-scarred glass rattled with a dangerous edge.

He left it to its complaints as he stomped down the single flight of wooden stairs which led from the office loft down to the warehouse's stained ferrocrete floor. Waited at the bottom step for a cargo hauler to trundle by, the laboring tractor pulling a small train of wheeled trailers stacked high with all manner of supplies ranging from autocannon munitions to a variety of paints. It passed with a knocking engine and a cough of thick diesel fumes, and Jason leaped up on the end of the last trailer to hitch a ride across the busy floor to a far, dark corner where his company had crowded in their machines. His *short* company.

Very short, in fact, with only two 'Mechs and a half dozen armored vehicles attached to the command.

His *Gallowglas* was the unit's anchor; all seventy tons of myomer and composite armor and hard-hitting energy weapons. Just now the '*Glas* knelt down in an exaggerated stride, head bowed forward and right arm PPC levered across the knee as if resting. Or waiting to be knighted. An illusion which was spoiled by the platform truck tucked in close, and two technicians crouched in the truck's high basket which held them beneath a large maintenance panel in the 'Mech's lower chest. Long ropes of braided myomer musculature hung down out of that opened panel, with one tech using a long, hooked bar to hold them aside while the other leaned in with a cutting torch.

Behind the *Gallowglas* waited Lieutenant Ewan Graff's *Wolverine*, tall and stocky, like a linebacker. And hunkered around both avatars in tight formation were the paired Pegasus hovercraft and Myrmidon tanks, an ancient Rhino which belonged in some war-time museum somewhere, and a newer Bandit hover transport missing its central turret. Even with Major Veng's vague promise of additional repairs and some light infantry assets to go with the Bandit, it was generous calling the unit anything more than a strengthened lance or perhaps a battered demi-company.

Still, it was his. He had a command, and a home, because of the Dragoons. He wasn't still trapped on Elgin, fighting at the whim of a few petty warlords and pitying himself for what he had lost. Were his current frustrations really so reasonable?

Yes, dammit!

He kicked out at what appeared to be a used-up and discarded paint bucket, left laying nearby on the floor for the express purpose of being in the way of someone in a mood. Cracked one side of the heavy plastic pail with a satisfying *crunch*. Sent it clattering across the warehouse floor, upending several times before it bounced off one of the Rhino's drive castors. Spilling a few, final glops of gray primer across the stained ferrocrete and splashing another oily stripe into the tank's linked treads.

Jason felt immediate chagrin, letting his anger slip in such a manner. Better he had busted out Major Veng's door window and taken a good dressing down for it. Now, in a fit of pique, he had created more work for someone else. The mess would have to be cleaned up, after all.

He vented the last of his anger in a deep exhale, and looked around for something absorbant. A handful of towels. Any kind of sand-and-clay mixture, like that used for oil spills. Something.

"A bad sign, when your officer get called in by the Old Man. And come storming out with one a them shit-rolls-downhill attitudes."

Jason turned, didn't see the speaker at first. Then saw the head which had poked up from a crew access hatch on the Rhino. Reddish-brown hair matted to one side with sweat and what looked like a healthy smear of oil. Bright eyes glinting in the warehouse's shadowed interior. And a lopsided smirk.

Sergeant Angus Dent. One of Jason's veterans. An Outreach native, he had a polyglot accent with a hint of Outback drawl. Just enough to set him apart from the usual.

"Kicking a paint bucket at this old Rhino, you just might take out a tread. Put me right out a work. Sir."

"The day you fail to make muster, I turn in my bars," Jason said. It was a mark of personal pride for the non-com, he knew, that he kept the ancient tank in fighting trim. "You'd push that hunk of scrap onto the battlefield by hand if you had to."

Dent stood, raised himself halfway through the hatch and leaned out to slap the side of his eighty-ton beast. "Wouldn't I though?" he said. Nodded. "What's eating you, Captain? The major give you a scold for egging on Horace *Hornblower*? Clarke's so gung-ho rar-in-to-go he sleep in his battlesuit."

There it was, on a nearby maintenance trolley. A plastic pail with a funnel mouth, filled with absorbant. Jason snagged it, popped the top and poured out a healthy measure over the paint spills. Splashed it around generously. Felt Dent's eyes on him still. Glanced over.

"The major wanted to discuss those further cuts into the Home Guard," he said. "We're losing most of our aerospace. And all of our armored infantry." What was left of their small battlesuit contingent, after the fuel-air explosives.

Dent shrugged. The man had narrow shoulders. They rose and fell sharply. "That'll make Clarke happy. What he wanted, after all."

"He wasn't the only one. And the major let me know that our company will not be cut into. At all."

"So we don't get rolled up into Beta. We'll hit the ground together, and Blake save the Word if we..." Dent caught on late to what Jason was actually saying. Snorted a loud exhale. "We'll not be going."

Jason nodded. "With the Second Dismal Disinherited reporting back to Outreach, we'll tap into the Allied Mercenary Command instead. Plus, Colonel Rand and Brian Cameron want some support structure left to back Gamma on their return."

"Errm." Dent bit on his lower lip. Considered. "Double-up on patrol duty. Loan us out to civilian enforcement. Keep on with the clean-up a Harlech and the DropPort."

"That's the cut of it, all right."

"And you wanted a piece a the Blakists yourself? A touch a Waco in you as well?"

So *that* part of the daily briefing was already making its way through grapevine gossip. "I certainly didn't want to be left behind," he said. *Again*.

Dent nodded. "Uh huh. Mind if I make an observation? Captain."

Jason returned the half-emptied pail to the maintenance trolley. Shrugged as he grabbed handfuls of coarse, brown paper towels to sweep up his mess. "Why not?"

"We picked you up on Hsien, didn't we?"

"Elgin."

"Same thing." Dent waved aside the details with an oily hand. "We're both talking Chaos March. Saw the mess after Katrina pull out and leave Victor swinging in the wind. Marik and Liao making inroad. You end up fighting for some local noble trying to make good on the bad situation?"

"Not for two years," he admitted. "Spent that on Jolo, laying out traps and playing one noble's forces against the others. Waiting. Finally, the few of us left admitted the AFFC wasn't coming back. Decided to support Count Novgorod, and *that* was a mistake." An understatement which covered six more grueling months. "That was about when Wolf's Dragoons first showed up in support of Baron Men Hou."

Which had begun the real path of turning Jason Williamson from an officer of the Armed Forces of the Federated Commonwealth to a mercenary ready to swap prince for paymaster.

"My point," Dent said, promising that he did indeed have one buried around here somewhere, "is that you came to us after three year a pretty hard living." He leaned down, elbows on the Rhino's deck, greasy hands clasped together. "You've studied up on our history, and you know we've had our own spot a trouble. I was adopted during Elson Novacat's brief rebellion. And no, I won't tell you on which side I fought. It doesn't make a whit a difference to me, 'cause it never mattered a whit to The Colonel after. I just wanted you to know that I saw the clean-up after one a the worst event in Dragoon history."

"And?" Jason asked. He scraped up his first pile of clay and sand with the paper towels.

"And Wolf's Dragoons, for all a our own trouble, has never left *anyone* behind."

"That's a good record," Jason admitted. A smile actually tugged at the corner of his mouth. "Though a long-winded way of making your point."

"It seem like we're going to have time on our hand."

Jason laughed. Short and sharp, but a laugh nonetheless. Battlefield orphan or not, it didn't mean he couldn't still make a home. That he hadn't *already* made one. A fact it was good to be reminded of, from time to time.

"All right, Angus. Point taken." He tossed the wad of towels and clumping clay into a trash receptacle on the trolley. "Now let me finish cleaning up my own mistake, and I'll draw some dungarees from a locker and give you a hand on whatever mess your Rhino has decided to dump out on the floor this time."

"See. That's what I like about *you*. Captain."

"What's that?"

"If I *did* have to push this old beast out onto the battlefield, you'd jump down and lend a hand."

Jason started pulling out more towels by the fistful. Threw Dent a mocking glare. "I'd give you a kick in the ass with the foot of my 'Mech, you mean."

"Bah!" the sergeant yelled. Ducked down into the crew compartment to get back to his own work.

Jason crouched down over the second smear of clumping clay and gray paint, towels bunched in his fists as he paused. Considered what Dent had had to say. Hard to fault the man for loyalty. Then again, from everything Jason *had* read and studied on the history of the Dragoons, the sergeant had stated nothing less than the truth. The Dragoons did not leave people behind. Not in the same way he had been abandoned on Elgin. For which he was thankful.

Because at this point, he couldn't imagine anything worse than being left behind and forgotten again.

Not yet, he couldn't.

To be continued...