



THE HIDDEN



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You folks may remember this one from the last time I put forth a book's worth of theories for you. Seems someone didn't like this particular topic and hit me with a crude but amusing binary bomb. This time, I've taken precautions. So without further ado,

let's ask one more time about what happened to some missing worlds, and see if the "Shark" comes swimming for me again.

—Starling

## FROM ATLANTIS TO JARDINE, ARE THE LOST REALLY "LOST"?



—Mirjam Torhansson, *The Truth Underground*, Renegade Press, 1 April 3066

The tales are as old as time. Lost places, forgotten societies, a promise of wonder that draws the adventurous or the greedy to great lengths, often to disappointing ends. From the mythical unspoiled lands of Eden (the Garden, not the Clan homeworld), to the lost Terran continent of Atlantis (said to have been home to a massive and hyper-advanced civilization), to the golden cities of Macchu Pichu or El Dorado that drove many an ancient Terran treasure hunter mad with lust and greed. The legends of lost civilizations did not end with the drive into space, however. If anything, it made the phenomenon thousands of times more pronounced.

And yet, what are legends without a grain of truth? Sure, we've since learned of the truth behind Eden, Atlantis, Macchu Pichu and El Dorado: lost lands and cities that as often as not turned out to be mere fables. But what of the lost worlds of the Inner Sphere? Worlds like the Marik planet of Jardine, known to have existed for its most famous export, the felinoid tabiranth, and yet missing from virtually every astronomical map and record, even going back to the days of the Star League?

Cities may be lost, but worlds? That's another matter.

Dear reader, what would you say if I told you that Jardine is not as lost as some may think, or that hidden among the thousands of stars where humankind walks are more worlds just like it—still alive, still thriving, and (perhaps most shocking) still a danger to us all?

**How They Vanish: A Case Study**

So what makes a world disappear? Does a magician wave a magic wand, mutter an incantation, and poof, all records are expunged throughout history? Or is it more of an elaborate shell game, involving a conspiracy of millions to pull off? Well, dear reader, the answer to that one is a bit more variable. In fact, the means to make a world vanish are probably as varied as there have been vanished worlds to start with. Some general possibilities, however, might follow a few basic themes:

**Nuked/Poisoned Off the Map:** The classic explanation of the first two Succession Wars (and the Age of War), worlds with fairly low or overly centralized populations suffered from over-zealous raiders armed with atomics or biological weapons meant to sterilize all human life. Oddly enough, this was a "hit or miss" approach, as some worlds "died" from these assaults or their aftermaths, but others somehow soldiered on. Of those that died, many were actually casualties of freak environmental events triggered by the

final assault (example: Rocky, a Hegemony planet that went into a premature ice age). Some fell into a fatal tailspin from catastrophic loss of infrastructure and no small amount of neglect from the parent government (example: Hegel, which practically starved to extinction amidst a worldwide epidemic).

It is, however, harder to kill a populous world using a few nukes—even strategics—and/or poison gasses. Tailored biologicals may have better luck, as they can linger a bit longer and maybe even salt the local ecosystems, but you'd need a LOT to infect an entire planet. Therefore, the only reasons to take such worlds off the map are because they got wholly depopulated in the strikes *and* lost all industrial or strategic value in the bargain. Or if the world was barely self-sustaining to start with. For the former, it'd likely have to be a trade-dependent world with a population numbering no more than, say, ten million. For the latter, the world would need to have been marginal all along, which would likely create conditions identical to the former.

Yes, they're possible, but by necessity, such worlds tend to be small fry. Admittedly, a few really big worlds also went out this way, but only because some nation or other gathered up a DropShip or five worth of strategics and just pasted the living crap out of it—an act usually reserved for the most heavily industrialized and populated planets, where the attacker would rather sterilize the opposition than face an impregnable fortress. (Many worlds fitting that bill, however, managed to survive for decades afterward, and quite a few—like Sarna and Caph—remain on the map today.)

**Emigration/Depopulation:** This works better with cities than with planets, but then again, some planets were hellholes even when they were settled (the settlers who hung in there were just too stubborn to admit as much). In this case, whether from war damage or some other situation, the people simply leave (or get scooped away by others—hopefully others friendly toward them). This may have been common in the Star League era and Age of War, when ships were plentiful (heck, Terra itself suffered a humongous exodus right after the Liberation, with billions taking flight). But after the Succession Wars blasted anything big enough to have a KF drive, not so much. This type of action also tends to *add* planets to the map, rather than remove them—take the recently discovered Hanseatic League and Nueva Castile, for example. For that matter, how do you think we got the Clans (or the Inner Sphere to begin with)?

This one's definitely possible, at least as much as the nuking/gassing scenario.



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## FROM ATLANTIS TO JARDINE, ARE THE LOST REALLY "LOST"? (CONTINUED)

**The Big Conspiracy of Doom:** We all like this one, deep down. Name your conspirators, be they your own House government, some corporate execs, Amaris, Kerensky, ComStar, the Illuminati, a sentient and super-advanced alien race—just remember that your group must have been able to change maps throughout history to hide their worlds, to have picked worlds self-sufficient enough to see to their own needs and stay off the trade networks, and have the means to ensure that no passing JumpShip considers the world a viable jump route. Oh, and spend centuries ruthlessly keeping the secret from prying eyes...

*This is the fun one, because our brains can see only a conspiracy as having the muscle and the means to hide a world of greater importance than an outpost. These are usually separated from the worlds described in our other two categories by some indefinable weirdness, like the feeling you get when you look at an incomplete painting but don't have a copy of the finished work to compare it to. This is where our Atlantises and El Dorados come from.*

And this, apparently, is where at least one Marik world named Jardine went...

## PIECING IT TOGETHER

Torhansson's essay may not seem all that illuminating—especially as she failed to expound on it much more beyond debating how one might hide a whole world. She meant well, mind you, but the girl's just not got the heart for serious conspiracy-mongering. I do, of course, and in the time since our last publication on the subject, I actually came across a few more tidbits that shed interesting new light on the subject of hidden worlds (and Jardine in particular).

## The Stevens Factor

Just before the Jihad erupted, the story goes, a very angry Doctor Brooklyn Stevens, commander of a small merc team that included at least one ex-black ops specialist and a host of former Interstellar Expeditions vets, arrived in the Loric system for a meeting with the (now late) Doctor Henry Croft (their IE employer). Stevens, her exec, and an unknown young woman of "distinctly Polynesian features" confronted Croft on what they perceived as a double-cross, and claimed they were being targeted by Word of Blake operatives. With a final warning that IE had reaped the proverbial whirlwind, Stevens, her crew and their unknown companion vanished, making a beeline for Tharkad.

Supposedly, while on the run, they found a way to leave a trail of breadcrumbs for any possible allies to find. (Some hints even turned up in the second printings of a couple of history texts writ-

ten that very year!) Whether brilliant or simply desperate, this move succeeded in snagging the false Thomas Marik's attention. Even as the Inner Sphere plunged into a new war, he dispatched some of his Knights on a "special errand" into Lyran space.

They never returned.

Sketchy reports gleaned from a hundred or so local news nets tell the rest: mysterious, black-clad men sporting exotic weapons hit Donegal during the Blakist attack there. An inexplicably superfluous fighter run flattened the University of Chekswa with an atomic weapon. Search engines across the Lyran Alliance lit up with keywords "Jardine," "Gabriel," "Stevens," "IE," and "Rim Worlds."

Then came the White-Out, and all news stopped.

When the lights came back on, the searches had ended and Blakist APBs matching Stevens' description were little more than a footnote. A few weeks later, rescue ships in the Nestor system came upon the remains of an *Explorer*-class JumpShip that had apparently been torn apart from the inside out.

Meanwhile, a series of random "accidents" and overt attacks plagued Interstellar Expeditions, culminating in the death of Doctor Henry James Croft, the IE division head who'd hired Stevens in the first place.

Of course, with fighting erupting on every border—and the League-Alliance front being one of the fiercest—nobody bothered to follow up on any of this.

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## THE BALLAD OF BROOKLYN STEVENS

A records search through The Usual Sources (filtered for our collective sanity, of course) reveals that the Word of Blake launched a funny little manhunt into Lyran and Free Worlds space mere weeks before the start of the Jihad. Their “mystery quarry,” it seems, was one Doctor Brooklyn Marie Stevens, a Lyran-born mercenary and one-time employee of Interstellar Expeditions.

Stevens was one of those active academics you see mainly in holovid dramatizations—boasting doctorates in archaeology and Star League history from the University of Tharkad along with an unconventional, off-the-books sort of military training that made her equally capable of handling herself in a brawl or on a dig site. Following what could best be described as a “bad breakup” with IE, Doctor Stevens and her crew managed to abscond with an *Explorer*-class JumpShip, three long-range shuttles, about four IndustrialMechs and at least two “black box” units that apparently make up an undisclosed part of IE’s own communications net. Why IE never followed up that kind of “resignation” with legal action (or lethal force) is a matter of a lot of fun speculation, but it proved convenient enough for them when they actually hired Stevens and her runaway crew for a mission: locate (and thereby prove the existence of) the planet Jardine.

Astoundingly, within less than four months—armed with little more than a discredited and buried report by an equally discredited and buried exo-biologist named Amanda Holyfield—Stevens not only returned with a report of her own, but also a *native* from Jardine. It was the crowning moment of her career.

It was also her death warrant.

The Word of Blake’s manhunt targeted Stevens, her family and her crew. They tracked down her husband, Professor Tyler Stevens, at Tharkad U on Donegal. They blasted her venerable ship apart near Skye, and tracked her deep into Marik space before the fake Thomas Marik managed to whisk her away (if only for a short time).

But while Stevens’ greatest triumph may have been her undoing, she left behind a legacy that would put half the intel masterminds in the Inner Sphere to shame (and, had it come sooner, could even have saved lives). Not only did she locate the long-lost world of Jardine, she left clues to its existence and that of a secret cabal who ran it and as many as four more such “Hidden Worlds.” Considering the evidence, Stevens’ discovery establishes an almost-certain link between these five worlds and the descendants of Stefan Amaris—a link that, if true, shows us that the Word of Blake works hand-in-glove with the heirs of history’s most notorious villain.

## The Rim Worlds Connection

We all know the official story: When Stefan the Usurper launched his war against the Camerons and brought down the Star League, he did so with an army that arose out of the blue. It was an army carefully poised to strike at the heart of the Terran Hegemony by a years-long campaign aimed at courting a naïve boy’s trust, and driving a wedge between the First Lord and his Protector.

What followed was said to be a lesson for the ages (the kind humans have to relearn every few centuries or so, when greedy and powerful men make a play to “take it all”). Amaris’ army was smashed, and his ancestral domain—the Rim Worlds Republic—was wiped off the map by the SLDF (with maybe a little unasked-for help from the Lyrans, who came to the party only after all the real blood had been spilled). In the Republic’s fiery demise, Kerensky made sure everyone knew that Amaris and his family were dead. Examples were made of the likes of the Greenhaven Gestapo and the 33rd Amaris Dragoons. History recorded Amaris’ name alongside Adolf Hitler and Jinjiro Kurita.

And somehow lost in the shuffle were *billions* upon *billions* of lives, the citizens of a realm shattered beyond all repair. The Elsies absorbed only half of the Republic’s worlds (the profitable half, of course, with the functioning factories). But in the anarchy that followed, the outer reaches of the Rim Worlds were simply left to rot, forgotten by the Steiners—history’s ever-wasteful, would-be predators.

In just a few decades (forget centuries!), dozens of “leftover” Republic worlds vanished from the star charts, many supposedly due to “extreme population decline” (a euphemism old navigators used to describe a world that wasn’t worth the fuel it cost to get there). Sure, a lot were dependent on their neighbors for vital resources—all now nixed by the utter demolition of their central government and interstellar infrastructure. But unless Aleks K. launched a few *million* nukes, bio-chem weapons, and such, the odds of almost a hundred worlds depopulating in less than a fifth as many years is pretty hard to swallow, don’t you think?

So, okay, if these worlds are being hidden somehow, who’s doing the hiding? And why?

The Steiners are an obvious candidate, given their opportunistic land grab, but as much as they crowed among themselves when they took the Republic’s heartlands, one would think swallowing *an entire realm whole* would make them downright orgasmic. Heck, the industrial/political clout would be immeasurable! But

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their apparent failure to accomplish this public coup makes the Lyrans look a bit unlikely.

The other Houses are more remote, largely due to geography, plus lack of resolve and resources. An outside chance exists that the Combine and the Free Worlds would've considered such moves to pincer their mutual enemy, but three centuries of failing to crush the Steiners would seem to take them out of the running as well.

ComStar, then? Well, the Rim was no friend to Jerome's band, but the descendants of the SLCOMNET were still rebuilding an HPG network then, identifying worlds that were dying even as they went (kind of like an unofficial post-Star League census). But could they have lied or conveniently "erred" on their assessment of dozens of former RWR planets, taking them off their maps and posting advisories that those planets were no longer habitable? Certainly possible, but with little more than a Star League courier fleet and a smattering of ex-SLDF mercs at their disposal, it would've been pretty brassy of Blake to try to claim a swath of worlds along a border still in the throes of an active assimilation effort. (Though, all things considered, marking struggling worlds "dead" would also be a neat way for Jerome to further punish the Rimmers by discouraging merchant travel to their worlds. Cruel, but neat.)

What if the Lyrans *did* get bold enough to advance again, after all? Some, according to old reports, actually did. Likely in the hopes of snagging a bit of overlooked resources, or merely trade partners among the former Republic territories, some ships went out there in the decades after the Star League fell. But very few of these expeditions returned with news of struggling ex-Rimmers eager to reconnect with the Sphere. Indeed, in the few cases where human life was found, it had reportedly regressed to wandering tribes or—at best—warring city states. These worlds would eventually be snapped up by the Bandit Kingdoms to come, but the Lyrans wrote them off as useless. The rest were barren wastes, home to dead, empty cities and crumbling, stripped-out factories. Within less than twenty years, an entire civilization had been written off and nearly forgotten—recognized only as a cautionary tale on the wages of betrayal and evil.

Back to ComStar. Though they are certainly front-runners in any scheme to hide worlds, they may still have been hard-pressed to do so on a scale that the remnant Rim Worlds represented. And it's highly doubtful that they evacuated entire planets into the bargain. So who, then?

Why not the Rim Worlds itself?

I mean, who better? Their government was smashed. Their realm bore the taint of the villain who destroyed a golden age. Their neighbors were engaging in an orgy of nuclear warfare. Why not, rather than wait for the axe to fall, simply flee the carnage? If we follow this thread, interesting possibilities emerge, particularly if we try to imagine *where* they went. Did they flee deeper into space, forming the mysterious Deep Periphery realms like the Hanseatic League and the Umayyad Caliphates? Did some find new worlds to settle well off the beaten trade routes, effectively pulling a Kerensky? Or were some clever enough to hide in plain view, occupying worlds deep within the Inner Sphere and playing possum in our midst all this time?

But why? Well, if we follow the Rim hiding itself theory, the answers are brutally simple: survival...and possibly revenge. When the Rim Worlds died, a lot of people lost homes, careers, livelihoods, trade partners, allies and family. To save what remained—whether accomplished by the Lyrans, ComStar, or the Rimmers themselves—hiding the survivors would be a viable option and would sidestep any unpleasantness that might arise from seeking asylum openly by factions embracing an eternal war.

But if the Rim Worlds' survivors fled into hiding for themselves? Well, now we have a people who not only shield themselves from prying eyes to avoid someone finishing the job that Kerensky started—but a people who likely hold a lasting grudge against the entire Inner Sphere.

### The Five and the Word

So where does that leave us?

Well, for starters, the existence of hidden worlds in our Sphere is no longer a stretch, but a very likely possibility. Anyone who survived on a world bombed to dust could conceivably have eked out a living and spawned a new order while ComStar quietly wrote them off (either deliberately or due to incompetence).

For another, a vast number of these worlds could've included the flagging remains of the Rim Worlds Republic, the nation-state that overthrew the Star League and effectively unleashed centuries of warfare. They may not be the only people who would want to live on hidden worlds, but as the so-called destroyers of civilization, they'd certainly have a lot of motivation to stay in the shadows.

Finally, we have a secret kept so long and so well that people even today are willing to kill for it (just ask Doctor Holyfield, Croft and the Stevens family). And these people seem to include the Word of Blake.

But why the Word, and why now?



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## RIM WORLDS OUTPOST #27

In 3055, soon after the rise of the so-called “reformed” ComStar, then-Primus Sharilar Mori and her Combine buddy, Theodore Kurita, announced the formation of the Explorer Corps (conveniently ignoring the fact that the organization formally existed as a branch of ComStar as far back as 2980). Billing the endeavors of this new (or newly outed) allied organization as a concerted effort to explore the Deep Periphery for new worlds (and hopefully the Clan homelands!), the Corps was a dream come true to some and a nightmare to others. Archaeologists far and wide lauded its scientific research benefits while Spheroid military leaders eagerly anticipated any info on the Clans’ origins. To the average merc, it was a new employment opportunity that fired the imagination and (hopefully) would bear few risks for excellent pay. But to the Clans and the Deep Periphery’s more reclusive realms, it posed a threat. And to the average lostech prospector or fringe groups like *Interstellar Expeditions*? It was competition.

Some of you may recall, however, that the first few star maps of the Deep Periphery, coreward of the Sphere, were quickly recalled by the Explorer Corps a mere month or two after they’d been posted for all to see. “Editorial reasons” were cited, and boy, they weren’t kidding! When the revised maps came back a month or so later, an entire *realm* had disappeared. This vanishing realm had been named simply “RWR Outpost #27.”

Queries to ComStar by parties within and outside their Explorer Corps either went unanswered or received a pat “we apologize for the error” reply that never explained what would conjure a vaguely defined area the size of the Circinus Federation and then—just as quickly—expel it from existence. Until one day, a frustrated acolyte on Pesht lost his patience with the question and—in what surely must have been the biggest Career-Limiting Move

of his life—exploded in a five-minute rant about Word of Blake “monkey warfare.” According to the poor fellow, Blakist moles in ROM (or the EC itself) planted evidence in their cartography database about a nine-star “mini realm” not so cryptically dubbed “RWR Outpost #27.” The reasons for this “prank” were many and petty, though a large part focused on demonstrating how fallible ComStar’s info services could be, as well as undermining the trust between ComStar and its allies.

But what if it was all a front? Strangely enough, few known expeditions have ever been launched to check out the region described in this allegedly apocryphal map. Of the few wandering traders passing through that region, none ever checked out the local planets—though some odd reports over the past ten years claim that at least one system in the RWR Outpost 27 area possessed warning buoys that were “ancient in manufacture, yet still operational.” These quarantine sats (at least two SkyWard Model IXs were mentioned) powered up as the merchants came into range and announced that an unspecified “planet below” was unsafe for travelers in accordance with the “ComStar Safe Transit and Astrogation Project.”

Curiouser and curiouser, eh? So how does ComStar come to “discover” and then “lose” again a system they apparently marked “closed” centuries ago? Are these travelers seeing things in the dark depths of space, or have they really passed through a forgotten realm? If their accounts are accurate, why did ComStar quarantine these worlds, assign them a cluster name and then purge their records after revealing them?

Or did the Word of Blake somehow “steal” these worlds? Could the truth be even more sinister, even more intertwined?

—Starling

## AMARIS AND COMSTAR?

The connection between the Rim Worlds and ComStar may look paper-thin, unless one digs deep enough into the events of early 3057 that many leaders would prefer to forget—specifically, a rash of unexplained raids aimed at almost every House and Clan. At first, these raids seemed wholly unfocused, save for the fact that all of them sported colors from other Houses and made a point of leaving witnesses behind to tell the tale. False flags, of course, are a common enough ploy in many trades, but the timing of these strikes—coupled with the gory suicides of the few raider warriors downed in these battles—swiftly demonstrated a com-

mon link that prompted the Free Worlds League (at the very least) to investigate.

According to the rumors, the investigation tracked the entire affair back to a man claiming to be—get this—Stefan Amaris VII. Working from a secret Periphery base (the rumor places this on New St. Andrews), “Amaris” managed to gather up close to a regiment of BattleMechs made up mostly of bandits and mercs who couldn’t get honest work if their lives depended on it. How far he really stood a chance of succeeding is immaterial; in all likelihood, “Amaris” would’ve wound up another two-bit bandit king if the local Houses didn’t destroy him on general principles.

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But his story does have some interesting features that seem to link Amaris and ComStar. Consider:

- “Amaris” was actually born Richard Thurston-Moray on ComStar-occupied Terra. (The name Moray tracked back to a known mistress of the Usurper who went missing during the Liberation, though there seems to be a generation-long gap in it.)
- At an early age (and with no small degree of prodding by local recruiters), Thurston-Moray entered the Order and would eventually work as an archivist—the perfect place to discover his buried lineage.
- New St. Andrews, at the time, was classified as a “recent” discovery by ComStar’s Explorer Corps.
- At the time of his great discovery (which included either six other guys named Stefan Ulkris Amaris who managed to somehow avoid being burned at the stake long enough to father kids, or six other direct ancestors he chose to retroactively grant the name to), Thurston-Moray also learned that ComStar had uncovered a secret Terran bank account funded by the original Amaris during his reign as “Emperor” there.
- This secret stash accounted for roughly 6 percent of the treasury of the Terran Hegemony before Kerensky showed up, siphoned straight from the Hegemony’s taxpayers.

So, let’s get this straight. ComStar just happens to get an heir to Amaris in its ranks? Said acolyte just happens to work in the archives? Where he just happens to stumble over data from two major recent discoveries ComStar just happened to come upon—discoveries that just happened to provide a key source for a base world and the resources to hire troops for a major campaign? That’s an awful lot of things “just happening,” isn’t it?

The question is, did ComStar create this new Amaris, or was he some kind of Blakist plant, either directly or indirectly? Either way, a connection with the followers of Blake and the fallen House of Amaris seems incontrovertible. But what exactly is the connection, how far does it go, and who is in charge? More important than that, what are their plans?

Couple this with the on-again, off-again discovery of the so-called RWR Outpost #27, and the mysterious disappearance of millions of Rimmies after the fall of the Star League, and a very sinister picture takes shape. Lostech prospectors and other explorers have found no sign of the former Republic beyond the bandit kingdoms that rose in its wake, leaving whole planetary populations unaccounted for in the Near Periphery. These people went somewhere, and judging by the Stevens’ discovery and its aftermath, one distinct possibility is “inward” rather than “outward.”

## HIDING PLANETS

So how *do* you hide a world if you don’t think you have what it takes to lead a caravan of JumpShips over a year’s travel into the unknown, to hide behind a nebula or two? Well, at this point, let me paraphrase Torhanssen’s rather long-winded seminar on the topic...

Let’s face it, folks: space is HUGE! And sensors only work so far with any kind of reliability. To begin even looking for a hidden world, one first has to know which one of those millions upon millions of stars out there one’s quarry is orbiting. Mounting an expedition then becomes the next step, which is prohibitively expensive—especially in a day and age when only crazy or extremely confident JumpShip captains venture to systems where no spare parts are likely to be found should the drive core burn out. The good news is, a hidden world will be completely safe from casual observation or the idly curious.

But say the searching party is a bit more determined and resourceful. What do you need to do these days to hide from those prying eyes?

**Step 1: Seal the borders.** All off-world contact with your hidden world must be squelched. You can’t have any HPGs or spaceports (at least none with standing control facilities, surface-to-orbit communications, active radar and ILS networks. Things like that are too easily spotted off-planet, and HPG signals from “nowhere” tend to be quite the giveaway.

Forget about trade. Even local commerce must be strictly regulated, and your communities need to be self-sufficient. A communal structure is necessary, as commercial competition breeds industry, which breeds waste, which breeds more chances to be detected from orbit.

**Step 2: Radio silence.** You also want no planet-bound wireless communications traffic, at least nothing that a passing ship can detect. This means no satellite network at all, and no high-capacity broadcast towers. ECM won’t work, as it has its own electronic signature that gives away something afoot. Your people will need to stick to old-school fiber-optic lines, low-power relays or laser-LOS transceiving. Tin cans and string work too, in a pinch.

**Step 3: Population control.** This is the fun part. You see, you just can’t hide a heavily populated planet. Big cities, sprawling over continents, with intricate highway and aerospace activity are going to get noticed from orbit. Moving them underground (or underwater) may help, but that kind of thing stifles growth and, frankly, the waste of your population’s activities will be noticeable.

Smaller cities—we’re talking colonial-village scale—are more doable, but have to look like ruins from orbit, heavily overgrown

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with vegetation and the like. And you can't have many of them, or connect them with roads more sophisticated than a dirt path. This means communities have to stick close together, or it'll take days to coordinate a population when it's endangered. Underground mass transit could help, but if you're going that far, you may as well build everything and call it a day.

Any farmlands need to be disguised as random growth, looking sparse and untended at all times. Once more, underground is an option, but optimum produce is always best achieved the old-fashioned way.

Population control allows you to centralize government and whatever industry you must have into small areas, but you must keep it controlled at all times. A good size Torhanssen recommends is about, oh, ten thousand—all of whom must contribute to daily life, like an early Terran Exodus colony. But unlike the early colonies, which encouraged growth and reproduction, a hiding population can't allow itself to spread out on the surface. And extensive digging or manufacturing of submerged expansions may draw attention. So, be prepared to get draconian to maintain an almost zero-growth population.

**Step 4: Get help on the outside.** Even after all the trouble you've gone through, you still need to make sure the secret is kept way more proactively than simply hiding on your world with no radio or holovids to speak of. You need to make sure someone erases you from the maps, seeds your system with warning buoys (if it was once part of the Star League general census, anyway) and discourages all traffic from coming anywhere near your hidden planets. This kind of task takes a generation or more of diligent work, perhaps, followed by decades or centuries of casual observation.

The goal here is to erase your world from the collective consciousness and maybe even from every printed historical record out there. Naturally, this part takes the real conspiracy, and to hold the secret for so long, it would have to be the kind that has a life all its own—a secret society, like a cult or a brotherhood.

Know anyone who fits *that* bill?

## THE BIG PICTURE

Aside from the restrictive population demands—which mainly apply only if the locals on the hidden planets enjoy a surface-dwelling lifestyle—the refugees of the Rim Worlds Republic could have done most of what Torhanssen recommends for concealing worlds, so long as someone helped them disappear in the chaos of the early Succession Wars. Why anyone would assist them in

such a fashion is fair game for speculation, though it could be that some of the falling Republic worlds might have been research centers or techno-warehouses.

At the time of the Republic's fall, the big culprits for helping to hide the Rimmers could only have been ComStar and House Steiner, or else the Republic had way more help from outside sources than we ever could have dreamed. Of these theories, only ComStar comes close to fitting the bill. But why?

One reason stands out: As of the Order's foundation, it claimed only one ace in the hole, one means to avoid a House Lord's invasion of Terra: the monopoly over HPGs. If a House dared such a venture, however, could HPG dominance truly have spared Terra from a full-scale invasion? In the post-Star League era, Terra was the ultimate prize, yet the House Lords knew that assaulting the planet would as likely undermine their claim to the First Lordship as validate it. So the odds were running fifty-fifty that Terra would eventually come under some House's crosshairs.

If you were ComStar, and you had only one planet to claim sovereignty over, and that planet was the biggest prize in the universe for a greedy House Lord, wouldn't *you* want a contingency plan? And here were the remnants of the Republic, desperate for salvation. What better way to ensure your survival than to gather these refugees, promise them that salvation, and set them up on a host of worlds at the heart of the Inner Sphere, where nobody would ever think to look for them?

Elaborate? Maybe. But if anyone in this universe of ours has been playing the long game here, it's ComStar.

...Or is it? Remember that the post-Schism ComStar has acted completely unaware of these worlds in the present day, and that the investigation into Jardine recently ended with the murder of its discoverers by operatives apparently from the Word of Blake. Could it be that ComStar, so intent on protecting their Rimmer friends, formed a secret society around the concept that actually went over completely to the Word of Blake? Or could the Rimmers have come out of hiding among the Blakists' ranks by themselves, poisoning the breakaway "Order" from within?

Cogitate on that, dear readers, and remember that the monstrous behavior and terrible weapons of the Word must have come from *somewhere* that no Spheroid intel agency could find. Remember that, only months before this war, did we first hear the names of Gabriel and Jardine in the present tense rather than the past. Shortly before her death, Stevens released one last clue to these hidden worlds, a clue as succinct as it is dramatic:

There are at least five such worlds out there.