

THE BLAKE  
DOCUMENTS



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## JUST BUSINESS

**Block 40-3, Marantha City  
Dalton, Free Worlds League  
11 March 3072, 2050 hours**

The squalor was unbecoming a woman of her status.

Which made it a perfect hiding place for a safe house. *Until about a week ago.*

Specter Precentor Omega Berith stood quietly in the doorway to apartment 8C and scanned it slowly, taking in every piece of overturned furniture, every hole in the plasterboard walls, every jagged piece of glass strewn across the carpet.

Finally, his eyes rested on the lone figure in the front room that obviously doubled as an entertainment area. A thought flitted across his mind, disappearing almost as instantly as it had arrived, but in the quickness of the moment, he remembered another sitting area, elegantly appointed. A vague feeling of warmth shot through his chest even as he returned his attention to the carnage.

*Two intruders*, he decided. The evidence of their passage was abundant, though the local constabulary would not catch it all. A scuff mark here, by the door. A blade slit there, by the curtains. Bloodstains on the couch. A small amount on the baseboard. Two different blood types.

None of it interested him, however.

He stalked through the room, avoiding nothing. Reaching the body, he turned it over.

Not her. Though he could tell as much from the moment he entered the small apartment, he knew eyes-on confirmation was necessary for his report. Barely thinking, he felt the slight vibration in his true eye as he shifted through the various spectrums, recording the information, noting the deep flechette wounds. *Four meters or closer, by the looks of it.*

Still crouched, he inhaled slowly. The air smelled of death and the beginnings of decay. Beneath that—faintly—he detected the tang of propellant and the bitterness of lubricant. But not her. The familiar whiff of her mild perfume—an obsession—was absent.

*She was gone.*

Near the archway to the short hall that led to the apartment's only bedroom, he noted the hole blasted through the plaster. *Magnum E-45 revolver.* The entry was angled, the shooter firing from the back room. Berith could just see the hand of his last operative, still clutching the weapon in the gloomy shadows.

But the bullet hole held his interest. Scanning the hole, the burns and surrounding area, his true eye noted flecks of metal on the wall and floor. He nodded, once. The miniscule green-tinged dust practically telegraphed who the attacker was.

Standing slowly, Berith looked around once more, his metallic-blue eyes taking in the scene one last time as his mind raced through various scenarios and options—and the processor near his heart conferred. Nodding again, he turned and strode from the room.

He did not bother closing the door. The Frails could clean up the mess or not, for all he cared.

He had an appointment to keep.

**12 March 3072, 0839 hours**

Robert "John" Farrell checked both sides of the street with just his eyes as he left Yuri's TekShop. Finding nothing unusual or familiar, he nodded to himself and tucked his chin into the top of his coat. Thrusting his hands deep into his parka, he tried hard not to think about the bone-chilling wind that whipped up Dalton Street.

*Of all the places he wants to hole up*, he thought gloomily. *By all rights, we should be halfway to somewhere else by now.*

The job had gone well, after all. But Walt had insisted that only half of the objective had been acquired. The bitch didn't have the satchel on her, and they couldn't leave without it.

The Bounty Hunter *never* left a job undone.

So now here they were, stuck on this dreary little planet where vices cost five times the norm on Galatea. And according to the contact he'd recently left, the entire world was now under lockdown, courtesy of Irian Corporate Security.

Bob kept his eyes roaming across the sidewalk, using window reflections and polished air-car body panels to amplify his field of vision. Dalton Street wasn't crowded this time of day, which made spotting any possible tails easy.

*Assuming anyone even knew they were here*, he mused. Hell, even the bitch was disguised as some low-end wage slave when they'd come. It had been sheer chance that Bob caught her two male "observers" during the initial surveillance—not that he'd ever admit as much to Walt.

He glanced to his right—down a narrow alley, as he stepped past it—then up again at a man walking toward him, similarly bundled against the frigid air. He absently nodded at the stranger. *Gotta look like I belong*, he thought. *Walt's Rule Number Four of urban scouting...*

He'd barely started to grin at the thought when the back of his head exploded in blinding pain. Then the darkness took him.

**1010 hours**

*Too easy.*

It had taken Berith a fraction of one second to deliver the well-placed blow from his true arm, and a mere two seconds more to scoop the Frail's limp form up under his armpits and sidestep into the narrow alley. With no one else on the street at the moment, it was all too simple to disappear.

The detailed map he'd downloaded from Irian's corporate servers quickly led him through the maze of alleyways choked with trash



## JUST BUSINESS

bins and oil rats, to a nearby step-in cooler. The glorified meat locker sat adjacent to the Gilded Trumpet, a fashionable eatery for the rich Frails of Marantha City. The place was closed during the week, which guaranteed Berith and his "guest" the privacy necessary.

Not that this business would take long.

Berith shrugged the Frail into the stainless steel chair he had set up earlier that morning. Quickly fastening the zip-ties on the chair's arms to his victim, he then finished his prep work at the large meat-cutting table. He paid little attention to his guest; his true senses would pick up any change in the man's respiration instantly. The augmentations allowed him to concentrate on the second phase of his plan.

Laying out his tools, he set to work.

Five minutes later, his micro-communicator vibrated at the base of his ear.

*"Planetary control shows an unauthorized orbital insertion about two weeks ago; contact lost over the Tjidian Spires. Nothing found on subsequent overflight,"* said the calm voice no one else would hear.

Berith nodded slightly. He opened his mouth a fraction and subvocalized, "Any ascension from that quadrant since?"

*"Negative,"* the voice echoed back. *"In fact, nothing unusual at all across the system. One unknown JumpShip was chased from the nadir point a week ago, possible smuggler."*

Berith smiled slightly. "That would be his transport. I doubt she's truly run off, but jumped somewhere else in-system."

He carefully teased a small chip into its electronic sleeve, working slowly. His true eye shifted magnification, allowing him to make the needed adjustments.

"Continue the lockdown and make a show of it now. Random searches, ID checks, whatever."

The voice on the other end acknowledged the order with no trace of concern. *"Very good, sir. Is there anything else at the moment?"*

"No. But I will get back to you shortly with more instructions and parameters. Berith out." With a thought, he severed the connection.

Behind him, the Frail's breathing shifted.

*He was waking.*

Scooping up the small lozenge laying on the table in front of him, he stepped over to the Frail and squeezed his cheeks, parting his lips. He slipped the pill into the man's mouth, then quickly gripped his windpipe with enough force to make him gasp involuntarily. At the same moment, while his mouth gaped open like a river trout, Berith shoved the pill down his throat with a forefinger.

The Frail gagged reflexively and swallowed. Berith clamped his hand over the man's mouth as he struggled, quickly regaining consciousness. Sure that his guest had swallowed the pill, Berith tapped him on the side of his head, above the ear.

Hard.

The Frail slumped forward, unconscious once more.

**1648 hours**

Bob couldn't stifle the groan; his head felt as though a *BattleMaster* had stepped on it, and his tongue felt like a dirty sock stuffed into his mouth. Slowly, his vision turned from dark, blurry images to sharper focus, revealing the interior of what appeared to be a large kitchen. The only light was smoky gray and came in from the long roofline window opposite him.

He tried to grab his head to press the pain away and realized his hands were stuck. Blinking away the hurt as best he could, he glanced down and found his wrists strapped to the arms of a chair.

"Good evening."

Bob practically jumped at the sound. The voice was low, menacing, and came from behind him. He craned his neck around, wincing as the strain only accentuated the pain in his head.

"Oh, don't get up, Mister Farrell."

He caught his breath, swallowing dust. *How did...?*

"How do I know your name? It's not that hard, Bob, if one knows where to look." The voice drifted to his right.

"Wah...wat..." he rasped.

"Water? Certainly. What kind of host would I be now, if I didn't offer refreshment?" Bob heard liquid being poured into a container. Then slow, measured footsteps.

Bob shook his head twice, violently, trying to dispel the ringing from his ears. He looked up as his captor entered his field of view.

The man looked ordinary. Average build, average height. Dressed in a simple civilian tunic-and-pants combination, something that easily blended with Marantha City's latest workman's fashion. His hair was fastened in a topknot at the crest of his head, but that wasn't what held Bob's gaze.

It was his eyes.

The man's eyes had a metallic blue sheen to them that practically glowed in the dim light of the kitchen.

In his hand was a glass of water, which he brought up to Bob's mouth.

"Drink," he commanded.

Bob haltingly obeyed. The water flooded down his chin and throat. He could taste the grit, but he didn't care. As it washed the dryness away, the water tasted like the purest offerings of Timbiqui's famed springs.

"Better?" his captor asked.

Bob nodded, trying to collect his thoughts. The ringing in his ears had lessened, but in place of the physical distractions came a sense of panic. *Surely Walt knows I'm missing by now. Maybe even compromised?*

"What the hell is going on, Mister?" he finally croaked out, going for feigned ignorance. There was hardly any need to guess who Blue-eyes was now. "Why the hell am I here?"

The man laughed with a throaty growl that conjured the image of a tiger about to lunge. "Don't play the innocent with



## JUST BUSINESS

me, Mister Robert Farrell," he said. "Born on Quentin, service record with the Third Dieron Regulars, currently pilots a modified *Shadow Hawk*."

The man's smile became predatory and he leaned closer to Bob. "Oh, wait, that's right—you prefer being called 'Bob,' since your lowlife father was named Robert."

The pain in Bob's head spiked as he thrashed in his chair, and he discovered his legs weren't fastened like his hands were. "Damn it," he hissed through clenched teeth, "*who are you?*"

"Doesn't matter," the interrogator said. "Know this, if you must: I will break you, Bob Farrell. And you will tell me all I wish to know." He cocked his head slightly and gazed into the distance beyond Bob. "But not now," he continued. "I have other business to attend to."

With that, the man spun on his heel and gathered up his tools from the nearby counter.

Bob watched in silence, the whole situation overwhelming him. *What in Procyon's hell has Walt gotten us into?*

The man crossed the room to the steel door and turned his glowing eyes back on Bob. His lips turned up in a twisted grin. "Don't go anywhere, okay?"

And suddenly, he was gone.

The sound of Bob's thrashing filled the room as the evening light faded.

**2331 hours**

It took about eight hours before Berith finally saw what he wanted. Alerted to the intruder's presence through his true senses, he flipped the monitor over to the correct frequency and watched bemused as a figure in green armor wrenched open the door to his prisoner's makeshift cell. The Specter Precentor leaned in closer and studied his adversary as the intruder snipped Bob's fasteners and carried the unconscious henchman away from the building.

Pity Bob made so little progress with his own escape; Berith had thought for sure the Bounty Hunter—a. k. a. *Walt Urizeman, Bjorn Thomas, Barry Whitmore, Jaclav Roberts, and countless other aliases*—would've trained his subordinates better.

Berith would have.

Then again, the files did suggest that Walt was fairly new to the armor.

*No matter, Berith thought. The plan is in motion and that's the ultimate goal. His presence means he still hasn't located Parrdeau's ultimate secret. That's what counts most.*

The trackers would not activate yet, Berith knew, but he smiled inwardly just the same. He had a good enough idea of his quarry's course; he just needed to check a few more things to be certain.

He would get only one shot at this. And failing the Master was not an option.

**Marantha ISC Office**  
**Marantha City**  
**Dalton, Free Worlds League**  
**13 March 3072, 0917 hours**

It didn't take long to make Berith unhappy.

"What do you mean, it's already left?" he asked the hapless clerk assigned to him by the Irian Corporate Security office.

The short woman was unperturbed by his looming presence, or the glare he fixed her with through his dark sunglasses—undoubtedly putting up a brave front in the name of professional decorum. "I'm sorry, Precentor," she said flatly, "but the *Wind Dancer* has left its moorings. Though it was scheduled for an 1830 departure—since it was technically a private party subcontract—it can leave port at any time."

Berith frowned. *Too early.* "Flight plan?"

The Frail tapped her datapad again. "Unregistered. Normally it runs the Marantha City-Farragut route, but because it's a—"

"—Subcontracted private party, it doesn't have to," Berith finished with an irritated sigh. "Yes, I know." *Blasted Irian and their corporate bureaucracy loopholes!*

"Who was the authorizing agent?" he finally asked.

As the woman bent back to her data-mining, he held up his true hand.

"Never mind," he snapped. "It's not important. Just give me a heading and probable route information, and download it here."

Unfastening his cuff, he tugged back the sleeve of his jumpsuit around his true arm. Then he flipped up the small compartment near his wrist, exposing the data jack. The woman gasped and looked up at him, trying to peer through his dark sunglasses.

"Do it," he barked. "Now." Though his voice rose only slightly, it dripped with menace. The woman paled, then fumbled with the pad's connector cord and fitted it into the exposed jack. The data transfer was immediate; his internal processor snapped the pad's firewall and dragged in additional data on the class of the *Wind Dancer*, as well as geographic and topographical information.

Less than two seconds later, he snapped the cord out and tossed it to the Frail, then marched out of the office without another word. There was no time to waste language on Frails.

The airship's early departure could mean only one thing: The Bounty Hunter had found his prize.

*...And he was leaving.*

**Airship Wind Dancer**  
**Over the Loganwolf Badlands**  
**Dalton, Free Worlds League**  
**13 March 3072, 1642 hours**

Encased in four hundred kilos of living legacy, Walt Urizeman—he liked the name, as it reminded him of the good times with Vic



## JUST BUSINESS

Travers—stood on the *Wind Dancer's* empty bridge and absent-mindedly stroked the leather satchel strapped across his armored chest. *The real prize*, he thought, *unlike the bitch already being shipped off-world in a luxurious cargo container for the next system over.*

The Hunter had to admire his escape vehicle, though—easily the most unusual in his career. The *Corvair*-class luxury airship was favored by Irian's upper management during their infrequent visits to Dalton—three hundred and fifty tons of airborne opulence. When not being used to ferry around rich moneymen who needed luxury to feel superior, the *Wind Dancer* doubled as a routine cargo transport.

With all the spaceports closed across the planet and Marantha City's main highways shut down by thorough roadblocks and random ID checks, using a corporate fat-cat's tax write-off was the next best way to slip past the city limits undetected. Thanks to some deep contacts in Irian, Walt had managed to subcontract the *Dancer*—a none-too-uncommon affair between local corporations—for the least conspicuous escape route to where his DropShuttle hid.

*It even fooled the ROM tail, after all.*

Walt frowned inside his helmet. *Or so it seems*, he amended.

From Bob's description, the Blakist ROM agent who'd snagged him was obviously augmented, at least in the eyes. Anyone worthy of that kind of hardware was generally not the type to be easily deterred by a few computer tricks.

But there had been no sign of the agent after Walt busted Bob out. All things considered, that was pretty damned fortunate, since Pardeau had only cracked the day before and given up the location of her journal pad.

*Worrisome*, the Hunter told himself, *but not dire.*

Walt had snatched up the prize even before he went back for Bob. Ideally, he would have waited longer to check for a tail, but once he had the prize, he knew time would be of the essence, or Irian Security and its Blakist masters would've locked down every means of transportation and searched every house and sewer to find them. There was even word from his JumpShip out at a pirate point that a Word of Blake cruiser had shown up and was currently burning two gees for orbit.

No time for the slow and subtle escape now.

Despite his armored shell, the Hunter sensed a presence behind him. "What is it, Bob?"

"Um, we seem to have garnered some attention..." Bob said uneasily.

*Shit!* "Show me," Walt said.

Bob stepped around him and activated the sensor station monitors. "It's intermittent," he said, pointing, "but definitely there. A contact, most likely a small conventional."

The screen lit up again as Bob spoke, data scrolling in a window near the new contact. It was on the extreme edge of range, but slowly closing.

The Hunter immediately knew it was the ROM agent. "How in the Sphere...?"

Suddenly, it hit him.

He swung his armored visor around and glared at his partner. "Bob," he snapped, "do you remember anything unusual during your captivity? Did this guy touch you, or prick you with anything?"

"No." Bob's eyes grew wide. "No! I swear to Krishna, Walt, I'm clean! Hell, you did the scans yourself!"

Walt nodded. "I know I did. But there's no way this guy could've not only known we were on this ship, but where in hell we are. Something's wrong, Bob."

Flipping open a pouch at his side, the Hunter produced a transceiver. "Stand still," he muttered.

Bob's eyes practically popped out of his head as Walt gently waved the device around him. With a soft "ping", the display lit up.

"Shit," Walt growled. "Didn't even use the scramblers because someone might pick up the signal noise. Vic would never let me live this down..."

"Those signals weren't there before; must've used chemical timers or something." He looked up at his aide. "You're transmitting, Bob. And it's not just one bug. There are at least seven of them in your bloodstream and organs." His hand dropped to his side, sliding the transceiver back into its pouch.

Bob's gaze followed Walt's hand. Tears formed in his eyes. "Damn it, no, Walt. I'm... I'm sorry."

"I am too, Jack." Walt raised his Sternsnacht, in line with Bob's head.

"One request, Walt, please." Color drained from his face. "Take care of my wife and kid, ok? Make sure they make it through this mess."

The Bounty Hunter nodded, once. "Deal." The Sternsnacht boomed.

Bob's lifeless body hit the deck.

## 1757 hours

Getting on board was easier than the last ROM obstacle course he'd made for his students. Jumping from a tiny Rodell onto the broad surface of the *Corvair* was a piece of cake; the stunt plane's smoking wreckage was now a smudge in the distance, kilometers away.

As he navigated the cavernous rooms of the luxury airliner, Berith considered the effort more of an exercise in stealth.

By now, the Bounty Hunter had to know he was here.

Especially since the tracking signal had ended up on the desert floor an hour ago.

Using the blueprint schematics, he'd made his way forward to the control deck, though he doubted the Hunter would be there. Given this Frail's profile (whatever he called himself today), and Berith's own ability to "read" people, Berith knew his opponent would be in the spacious dining area.

Waiting.

## JUST BUSINESS

As he approached, Berith smiled when he found the doors closed. The Specter Precentor knew his quarry was in there; his hyper-advanced hearing could pick up the minute sounds of armor plates tapping each other. As ever, the Hunter was armored, armed and ready.

Probably with a weapon pointed right at the door.

Calling up the blueprints, Berith overlaid them faintly over his true eye's HDR view. *Joists here, here and here*, he reckoned. *And the bar is here...perfect.*

He quietly stepped twenty meters to his right and crouched down near the wall, drawing his Sekkaris needler in his right hand.

Putting his left shoulder—his true arm—against the thin wooden spacer, he shoved and pistoned his arm, breaking through the wall and rolling behind the bar on the other side. The walls were expandable; only a few sections—such as the one near the room's main entrance—were fixed to the bulkhead.

Berith heard, then felt, the booming blasts of a Sternsnacht Claymore punch through the bar's front in two places. Then two more. *He's quick*, Berith noted and swiftly processed the situation as he pulled the needler close to his chest.

"You know, I'm kinda pissed at you, Mr. ROM," a synthesized voice echoed. The Sternsnacht slammed two more rounds into the hard oak surface, sending wooden splinters flying. The bar would only offer cover a few more seconds.

"Glad to hear it, *Walt*," Berith tossed back out, stressing the man's name.

The shots ceased. "Well, fuck you too, Blakie." Berith heard a new clip slam home. Twice. Three shots each; Berith was half-surprised that the magazines were unmodified.

"Sorry," Berith riposted, "I don't swing that way." He crouched forward as he spoke. He could hear the tread of Walt's armor approaching the center of the bar. *Closing in.*

Berith rolled past the bar's end post, needler extended as he heard the whisper of the Hunter's armor servos. The Hunter landed behind the bar and twisted left and right. "Where the fu—?"

Berith stood up impossibly fast and drove his true arm forward. "Right here!" he barked as he caught the Hunter's left wrist and jerked it back hard.

The Claymore flew across the room, clattering across an empty table and onto the lounge floor beyond.

The Hunter wrenched himself free and swung his other arm low. The loud report of his second pistol was nearly deafening at point-blank range.

But Berith was already gone, flipping himself back and over another oak-topped table, which toppled with a crash to form an instant shield.

"Have to say, *Walt*," he called out as he rolled over and readied the needler again, "I can't believe you did that to poor Bob, dumping him out of the airship without even a chute."

"Bastard," the Hunter spat as his remaining pistol blew another hole through the table, mere centimeters away from Berith's head.

Berith grinned in spite of himself. *Fast, but hot-headed; still too new at this.* "Did you really think that would fool anyone at this point?" he jeered.

The Hunter fired again, the blast tearing through the table and nicking Berith's true arm. Berith winced, rolled sideways and sprang back to his feet.

"Given how much you toaster-humpers love your gizmos," the Hunter snapped as he took the shot with another ear-ringing boom, once more narrowly missing Berith. Somewhere across the room, the sound of shattered glass and the whistle of rushing air betrayed a hit to the lounge's observation windows. "Figured you'd at least want to sniff over your beacons."

Berith flashed him a predatory grin. *Feeble comeback, Frail! And you're empty, too!*

He vaulted forward, leaping over the overturned table and landing on the bar, still clinging to his Sekkaris. The Hunter swung his free hand for a blow that almost caught him in the leg, but Berith managed to turn the impact into another backward leap that placed him just behind the armored mercenary. Before the Frail could react, he reached out his right hand, placing the needler's muzzle against the soft neck joint just below the helmet. For a moment, he noticed the bulky contraption strapped to the armor's back. *What the—?*

The Hunter stiffened for only a moment, but Berith caught the imperceptible movement of his shoulder just before he swung around. Reflexively, he fired as the Hunter's torso came about, dimly aware of the warrior's now-empty hands.

With a high-pitched shriek, the needler's darts showered and ricocheted off a shoulder of green armor, but a few on the edge of the blast cone speared into Walt's collarbone. To his credit, the Bounty Hunter barely flinched. Instead, his backhanded punch, augmented by the armor's exoskeleton, sank a hand's breadth before slamming into Berith's right shoulder, numbing his arm.

Berith laughed.

"Wise guy, eh?" Walt mocked as he completed his turn, planting his now open right fist on the bar and using his momentum to pivot and leap over its shattered surface. His armored boot aimed squarely at Berith's undefended chest.

Until the Specter's left hand came up and seized the onrushing foot in a steely vise, twisting clockwise.

"No," Berith hissed, "just your better!"

The Bounty Hunter's spin flattened out and he spilled to the ground on his back.

Only then did Berith recognize the brown leather satchel strapped across the armor's chest for what it was. *The journal pad!*

Walt rolled backwards and to his feet with an easy motion, while Berith turned his left side forward, shielding his still-numb Frail hand. He settled into a *kanti-gzoz* stance, his true arm rising in defense, his feet spread apart.

The Bounty Hunter set himself into a classic *kempo* stance, and began moving slowly toward his dropped pistol.



## JUST BUSINESS



"I'll give you a little credit, Wobbly man, which I don't often do. Not many people can outmaneuver me." The synthesized voice carried no emotion.

"I'm surprised there are that many stupid people in the universe, then," replied Berith, his gaze firmly fixed on the center of the Hunter's torso. "But then again, you're all just simple Frails."

"Interesting choice of words, there, cyber-boy." He was three steps from the pistol.

But Berith knew he wasn't going for it. *He knows it's empty. He has something else in mind.* Berith settled back on the balls of his feet. *Come on, Frail...*

"You know," came the voice, "this whole thing wasn't even personal." A muffled "whump" somewhere deep below them followed instantly. The airship shuddered as if it had run aground, throwing Berith off-balance and tumbling him to the floor. As he scrambled back up to defend himself, he noticed the Hunter running flat-out toward the cracked bay window nearly ten meters away. Suddenly, Berith recognized the bulky object on his back.

*A jump pack.*

Berith lunged forward, his processor calculating two seconds to intercept.

A small canister tumbled to the floor from the Hunter's right hand, landing in Berith's path, where it exploded in a violent flash. A wave of nausea and blinding light overwhelmed his senses and threw off his balance as he felt his true vision, hearing and even his processor flicker for an instant.

*Mag pulse!* his outraged mind screamed, even as the circuits restarted and the blindness faded.

But the momentary disturbance upset his balance, and Berith fell once more.

He shot back to his feet, but it was already too late. With a loud crash and a howl of screaming wind, the Bounty Hunter dove through the over-stressed bay window, hurling himself into the sun-blasted sky. Berith's true hearing picked up the faint sound of laughter over the din as the Bounty Hunter looked over his shoulder and fired his jump pack to get clear.

"It's just business, Blakie!"

Then the bombs exploded below-decks.

**1809 hours**

What seemed like an eternity was in reality less than a minute since the explosion. Walt watched over his shoulder as the airship died, its frame breaking up as the charges he'd placed two days ago took their toll. The crash was pre-planned, from the moment he'd secured the vessel and rigged it for autopilot. After all, a private airship that crashes in the middle of the desert doesn't invite too many questions right away.

His HUD scanned the falling wreckage for signs of life and failed to find any.

But he knew better.

While the charges had blown the engines, it would still take a while for the airship to completely crash, especially as the damage simply separated the airship's lower half—its crew and passenger spaces—from its helium cells and fan motors. The wreckage would scatter over more than a kilometer, plunging from nearly three kilometers up.

He watched for nearly a minute as his controlled free-fall took him to safety. Soon enough, his sensors would warn him it was time to start braking maneuvers. Yet as the doomed airship continued to rain debris down on the desert sands and the rocky crags of the canyon below, he shook his head with disappointment and spoke to the whistling wind.

"That's for you, Bob."

He frowned.

**1809 hours**

As the explosions drowned out all other sound, Berith scrambled for the far wall, where the safety equipment was stored. Accessing the system's failing database from a wall panel, he immediately learned that none of the *Wind Dancer's* aerial lifeboats were functioning.

"Figures," he snorted.

With his true hand, he ripped open the secured panel on the side wall, where his schematics claimed the emergency parachutes were stored. With a dry laugh, he found only one left in the cavernous space designed to hold ten such airborne life preservers. With a little magnification, his true eye spotted the C-bill pinned to the top strap. A heavy scrawl—obscuring the old ComStar logo upon it—read simply: "With my blessings."

Berith shook his head and snarled. *No way in hell, Walt.*

The *Wind Dancer* lurched again, her steel spars screaming as Berith felt the airship's lower section tearing free from its mounts. So far, the airship's main cells remained more or less horizontal, but he knew that would change very quickly, once the cells began to rupture in sequence.

He had perhaps a minute left before he was in freefall, maybe less.

Using his true hand for most of the work, Berith climbed toward the shattered bay window and scanned the nearby surroundings, watching with clinical detachment as the rock spires along the canyon walls below loomed ever closer. The *Dancer* was sinking rapidly.

Flexing his true arm, he calmed himself as he measured distances, speed, airflow and the onrushing rocks. Steadying himself in the broken window's opening, he gripped the frame tightly with both hands, ignoring the jagged glass that cut into his fleshy palm.

*Got to time this just right,* he told himself...



## HOW DID IT BEGIN?

Many questions exist within my own organization about the nature of this “Jihad” engulfing humankind, Kisu, and it seems as though even those I’ve entrusted to gather information about the current doings of the Word of Blake are being biased by wartime propaganda.

I had thought the matter relatively clear, but upon review, even the recent *Jihad Hot Spots* compilations have not laid out a clear picture of just *why* and *how* the Word has lashed out so viciously at all of humanity.

Indeed, these volumes seem to suffer the same taint of bias as all other public sources, working hard to paint the Blakists as mindless fanatics. The samplings of Blakist propaganda they provided, by and large, have been the worst tripe produced by the Blakist zealots. You scarcely saw the eloquent info-web publications and editorials—and not one whit of the Word’s more stirring call, to save the Star League. The latter is understandable. After all, what House wants to be painted in a bad light for killing the Star League (again)?

But I digress. What I intend to do here is to explain the Word of Blake’s actions since the Star League conference of 3067.

## ROOTS OF THE JIHAD

The spark behind the Jihad was ignited long before the birth of the Word itself, and has been well explained by the somewhat questionable “unedited” ComStar archives released by then-Precentor Martial Anastasius Focht in 3052. Produced in the name of forming a new, more transparent and trustworthy ComStar, those archives prove invaluable for any insight we may gain about where this war comes from.

While pre-Schism ComStar preached salvation for humankind from the inappropriate use of technology and publicly deplored the Succession Wars, Focht’s “revelations” suggested that ComStar was not one to passively wait for its founder’s Word to be accepted by the Inner Sphere. Rather, Focht contends that ComStar worked to hasten that day by helping the Houses to batter themselves into submission, at which point their Order would step in and become humankind’s savior. Indeed, Focht’s archives go so far as to suggest that ComStar sabotaged the peace talks that failed at the end of the Second Succession War, ultimately instigating the 150-year Third Succession War.

While some details may be suspect, I am inclined to believe the gist of Focht’s revelations about ComStar perfidy, if only because it would be difficult to find another single explanation that binds together so many facts so well. ComStar’s more overt actions against the Federated Suns beginning in the Fourth Succession War only reinforce the theory that the Order actively worked to cripple humanity.

And when the Clans came, what was ComStar’s first action? To befriend them—reportedly in hopes of bringing down the Houses even faster than ComStar had thus far been able to. This alliance, of course, ended abruptly when ComStar learned that the Clans’ medium-term goal was Terra, but elements of the Order’s

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leadership still hoped to cripple Clan and Inner Sphere alike after Tukayyid with the ill-conceived Operation Scorpion.

And in that chaos, ComStar fractured. Its bold Operation Scorpion failed because the insanity it called for was too much for many of ComStar’s membership to tolerate, much less implement—including Focht. But Focht’s own actions to reform the Order from within proved equally difficult to stomach where those raised on old ComStar dogma were concerned.

And so, those disenchanting by the new regime left to form the Word of Blake—creating a much truer successor for the original ComStar than the organization retaining that name today.

## WORD OF BLAKE AND TRUE PEACE

After the Schism, we saw in ComStar an organization that was still deeply interested in saving humankind from its abuse of technology and warlike ways. Remember, Blake’s Words—or, rather, Toyama’s liberal reinterpretation of Blake’s diaries—were drafted by a man who worked alongside Aleksandr Kerensky through the wreckage of the Terran Hegemony, a man who watched the Houses descend all too quickly into the madness of the Succession Wars. It is a shame such ideals were so misapplied by the pre-Schism ComStar.

And what of the post-Schism inheritor of ComStar’s ethos, the Word of Blake?

Until about 3058, we saw an organization with a great cause, yet no overarching goals. The Word simply acted to build a power base so it could continue its work. It also held a great hatred for the new ComStar, whose people had abandoned The Cause in the most heretical of ways, by declaring a centuries-old faith to be a joke. But still, the Blakists had no focus of their own.

Then, in 3058, something happened: the Star League was reborn.

However misguided, Blake’s disciples—in any era—have always striven to rebuild the Star League. At the Whitting Conference of 3058, their centuries of hopes and dreams were suddenly achieved. The Star League was reborn, and now it would be possible to enlighten humankind without hypocritically resorting to the destruction of civilization.

If you wonder why the Word would embrace peace over continued subversion, remember why Operation Scorpion failed: too many of ComStar’s personnel believed in Blake’s teachings to countenance such actions. A Star League reborn though measured, peaceful means was always preferable to one risen from chaos—even after centuries of studious manipulations.

The Word of Blake’s activities in the following decade do not offer great insight into their overall goals for this new League. Their aid to various nations could serve any number of purposes, anything from securing allies in the Star League to acquiring the funds for their expensive “extracurricular activities.” The Blakists’ activities in the so-called Chaos March could truly have been the enlightened protection of the defenseless—a point that the



## HOW IT BEGAN

Word's propaganda still makes at length—or it could have been the pragmatic creation of a buffer zone and industrial base around the Word's crown jewel: Terra itself. More than likely, all of the above were true to some degree.

But no, the real signs of the Word of Blake's plans only became clear after their hopes for the future were dashed in the winter of 3067. What are those signs?

First, I have been able to confirm that the Word knew in advance of the 3067 Conference that the Capellans planned to withdraw from the Star League, and their only reaction to this news—before the delegates even gathered—was to withdraw their own material and technological support from the Confederation.

Second, most House intelligence agencies were very well aware that the Word had built up its military strength, and suspected as many as fifty regiments of various types (or up to two hundred, in "worst-case" scenarios) had formed to fight for Blake's Will. Not the twenty or so alleged by ComStar's *Field Manual* publication. Of course, we now know for certain that the Blakists managed to field just over one hundred regiments at their peak, though many of these may have been only semi-operational when they were first called into action.

Finally, once the Star League was declared null and void, the Blakist reaction was swift, brutal—and very poorly executed. For the successor of an organization that once infiltrated intelligence agents into every level of every House, the Word of Blake brought very poorly chosen retribution to "the apostates" who destroyed its hopes and dreams. In fact, it took the better part of a year before the Word's attacks began to demonstrate proper military planning and full use of its impressive force. The attacks on Tharkad and New Avalon were absolutely not suited for their task. Indeed, as some have claimed, our own sources have found that the attacks were executed using assets originally intended as "olive branches" to the Lyrans and Suns.

What those signs show is a quasi-religious organization that reacted badly to seeing its dreams dashed by foolish foreign politicians. There was no grand plan for a Jihad—not against the Inner Sphere, anyway.

### THE POINT OF THE JIHAD

Since 3067, the prosecution of the so-called Jihad has been prosaic and should be obvious. The Word first sought to cripple the perceived foes of the Star League and did so using methods that must have seemed satisfactory to the ideological "hard core" of its leadership. Indeed, the Blakists' efforts to "save the Star League" by killing the unbelievers were actually drowned out by the greater conflicts raging between and in the Houses through the end of the 3060s.

Somewhere around the time the Word's leadership realized that they could not bring the Houses directly to their knees—about the time the Houses began to focus on the Word itself—

## DEADLY GIFTS

Based on access to captured information from the evacuated Word field bases on New Avalon and its satellites, we have learned that the Word of Blake's first strike there was actually conducted by a force intended as a "gift"—possibly in gratitude to the Suns for voting the Word into full membership status at the 3067 Star League Conference. This olive branch consisted of military and industrial supplies for the Suns, which had just been battered by the Federated Commonwealth Civil War, escorted by an honor guard of venerable WarShips and a single parade Division. This was not a force meant to bring New Avalon to its knees, but the ample supplies did enable the Word's task force to make a go of it during the First Battle of New Avalon.

And Tharkad? Contrary to the lamentably over-played confusion of the *Invincible's* arrival in Tharkan orbit, the Lyran planetary authorities were actually well aware that the Word of Blake had brought a large WarShip to Tharkad. They were, after all, hosting a conference of House leaders and security was extremely tight. More than a few participants of the Conference arrived by WarShip—including Precentor Martial Victor Steiner-Davion, whose role in a civil war left scars on Tharkad that remained fresh on the eve of the historic gathering.

The LAAF had ordered the *Invincible* and her escorts in a Tharkad-following solar orbit, just like other visiting foreign WarShips, where they would be hours away from mischief. The oft-repeated record of confusion in Tharkad orbit was a result of the *Invincible* and her escorts entering a new space traffic control sector without a pre-filed flight plan; the traffic controllers were understandably caught off-guard when a behemoth WarShip plowed through their busy traffic corridors without warning.

And the LAAF? They knew what the *Invincible* was; she simply would not have been allowed in-system otherwise. They even knew the Word of Blake claimed it intended to hand over the *Invincible* pending the conclusion of the Conference. This knowledge, in fact, likely paralyzed the LAAF's response when the ship made an unplanned visit to low Tharkan orbit. Admittedly, we are still missing some of the details on everything that allowed this approach, but then, the Lyran's fragmented internal records on the incident have only been unlocked recently, and come from archives on a planet that was under Blakist blockade and occupation for years.

these same leaders also seemed to realize that their disastrous impulses had committed them to a fight to the death. Today, the Word of Blake no longer fights to save a dying Star League, but because it faces destruction on all sides, and so its tactics have now shifted to those that will prolong its life.

Of course, there is the question of, "If the Word of Blake was such a believer in the Star League's promised peace, why did the Word possess such a monstrous army lurking in the shadows?"