

**BATTLECORPS**

**FOR THE LOVE  
OF BLAKE**

*Steven Mohan, Jr.*

***Desolation Freefire Range***  
***Caph***  
***Word of Blake Protectorate***  
***8 November 3067***

On Caph, night was a kindness, swallowing the world's scars, covering up its ancient tragedies. But there was only so much darkness could do. The great hulking shape of the dead city was still plainly visible, if only because of the way it blotted out the stars. The ruins of New Memphis stretched across the horizon like the carcass of some immense sea-monster washed ashore by a storm. And in a sense that was right.

If the name of that storm was "War."

Caph had been savaged during the Amaris uprising and, even after all these centuries, the world had not fully recovered.

Adept Epsilon IV Paula Tang clenched her jaw. How could anyone look upon such a sight and doubt the wisdom of the Blessed Blake?

Paula stalked her *Hussar* along the beltway that circled the city, careful not to cross that ribbon of ferrocrete. She kept one eye on the flickering numbers of the radiation monitor as she nervously fingered the small, black dosimeter she wore clipped to her shorts.

Paula wasn't sure which scared her more, the radiation.

Or the dead city's ghosts.

Midwatch outside of New Memphis. She sighed. The new kid always got the *best* watches.

The whine of hover fans jerked her out of her reverie. A sturdy hovercar was moving along a radial road at fifty, sixty kph, no doubt going slow to avoid debris. Not many people came to the ruins—mostly just archaeologists with research permits—so the road was in poor repair.

The car flashed its headlights at her as it passed and someone waved.

She briefly considered stopping the car and asking for papers, but she didn't. The exercise range was secured for the evening, so there was no chance of accidentally shooting a civilian, and

ambient radiation would surely chase the scientists away before the zero six hundred maneuvers began. Besides, her orders were to patrol her Level II's perimeter, not babysit a bunch of overeager archaeologists.

The car crossed into the poisoned city, turned, and its red tail-lights disappeared from view. Paula shuddered.

She glanced up and her breath caught. Bright streamers of cold-white light flashed across the purple-black sky. It was the Geminids, a meteor shower that appeared every year as Caph's orbit crossed the path of the great comet Quat-Briggen.

She had forgotten that was tonight.

Paula had grown up on Caph and watching the Geminids had once been a Tang family event.

Their parents would wake them up at one and they'd throw jackets over their PJs. Father would set up folding chairs in the back yard while mother made hot chocolate. Then they'd huddle together under a quilted blanket and watch the show. The meteor shower was so amazing that most of the time she even managed not to fight with Bobby.

Paula's heart pounded in her chest.

That was before her parents had taken Bobby and fled Caph. Before her baby brother had joined *ComStar*.

They hadn't even told her they were leaving. She had just gone home on leave one weekend and had found the house abandoned, stripped of every last trace of her family. Yes, she was a member of Word of Blake, but they still could have told her, *dammit*.

She brushed away sudden tears with the heel of her hand.

The height of the shower was approaching, and Paula could see a meteor every five or ten seconds, tracing incandescent white lines across the dark sky.

She blinked. One of the lights looked wrong.

Meteors hitting an atmosphere darted and weaved. They fractured, the two halves spinning off in different directions. They changed color as the heat of reentry ignited different chemicals and they bounced when ice flashed off, pushing the rock like a jet. But there were some things a meteor burning through a planetary atmosphere could *not* do.

One of them was slow down.

She watched as one of the bright sparks suddenly *stopped*. It hung in place just long enough for the bright trace of its passage through the atmosphere to fade to darkness and then it changed direction.

*DropShip.*

Paula stabbed a button on her console. “Mercy Command, this is Mercy One Eight, I have an inbound DropShip, over.”

She was answered by a high-pitched squeal overlaying static.

*Jamming*

She cycled through frequencies. All the long-range stuff—HF, VHF, microwaves—was blocked. *Blessed Blake*. The Order could send a message across the Inner Sphere, but she couldn’t even send flash traffic fifteen clicks!

Someone had been raiding the Chaos March lately. The bandits piloted unmarked ‘Mechs, but it didn’t take a genius to realize it was ComStar trying to undermine Word of Blake’s position in the region.

She took a step back towards where her Level II was camped for the night.

Then she remembered the hovercar.

And someone inside waving.

The realization hit her like a blow.

*This was an extraction.*

ComStar was pulling out a spy. It was the only thing that made sense.

She hesitated for a moment. The darkness limited her speed. She might safely do sixty kph on the main road, seventy if she pushed it. That meant fifteen minutes out and another fifteen back. Plus, say ten to convince the Demi-Precentor that she hadn’t fallen asleep and dreamt the whole thing.

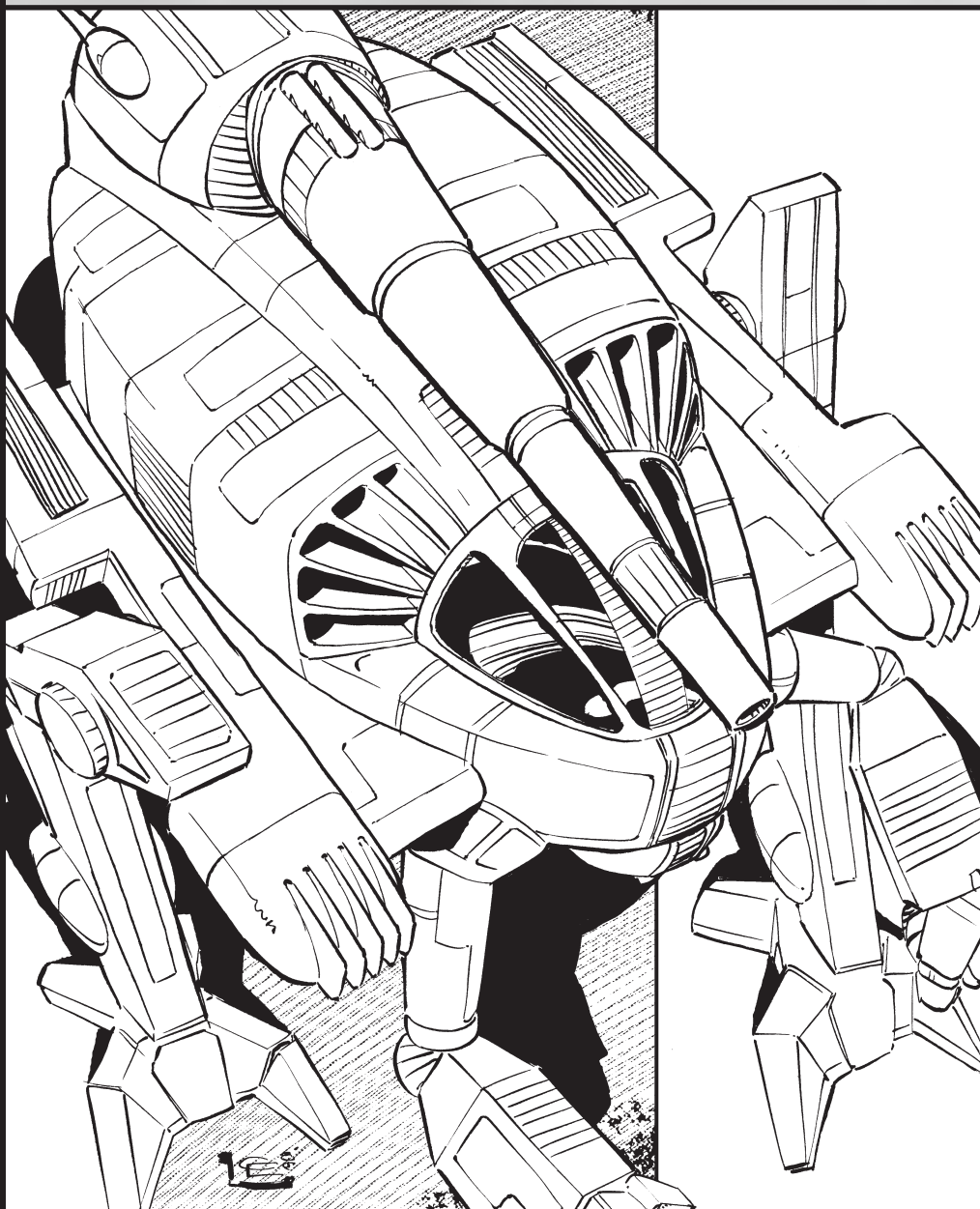
Forty minutes.

Too long.

Paula snapped off her lights and crossed the beltway.

Her HSR-400-D was a swift scout 'Mech with a long, horizontal cockpit and a top-mounted turret sporting an LB 10-X Autocannon. The *Hussar* held its stubby hands out in front of it like a boxer spoiling for a fight.

It was a good little machine, but if she ran into a heavy she was dead. The *Hussar* carried very little armor and her speed advantage would mean little in the city. But she couldn't let ComStar



recover its spy. Her best bet was to find the hovercar and crush it, then withdraw.

The numbers on the radiation meter slowly started to creep up. Her arm itched. She gritted her teeth, ignoring the phantom sensation.

She crept forward, peering intently at the road. She didn't dare run. A single fallen building across her path could bring her down. And infrared didn't help. The city had grown cold long ago.

So she didn't see the flicker of movement until it was too late.

Paula looked up and saw a shadowy figure duck out from behind a building in the same instant a shrill warble told her that the ComStar 'Mech had locked on with its fire control radar.

Then bright flashes of orange light pulsed in the night.

Paula only had time to think *multiple launch* and then the missiles streaked into her, rippling along her cockpit and her left side, knocking her back and cracking her ferro-fibrous armor.

But not exploding.

*LRMs*. The ComStar 'Mech had fired at her with long-range missiles and she was inside his firing arc. The missiles never had time to arm.

Lucky break.

She stepped up and let loose with her LB 10-X along the threat vector. Just as the other 'Mech ducked back behind the building. The rattle of the autocannon filled her cockpit, but she couldn't tell if she'd done any damage to her opponent.

She glanced down. Her warbook marked the enemy with the designator RTX1-O.

Great. She was up against a *Raptor*.

She squeezed off another gout of autocannon fire and stepped down a side road, finding her own building for cover. *Where was that damn hovercar?*

Sweat glued a strand of dark hair to her forehead. She pushed it back. A malfing *Raptor*.

The *Raptor* was a Combine-built OmniMech modeled off Clan weapon pod technology. It was a non-humanoid 'Mech, a type

Paula called a chickenoid: a blocky machine carried along on bird legs, but fast and versatile and it packed a punch.

The LRM attack told her it was probably standard configuration, which meant—what?—three sets of LRMs and a quartet of lasers.

She closed her eyes. OK, *think*. The hovercar was gone. They probably landed the DropShip in the plains beyond the city. So the 'Mech was there to cover the spy's retreat in case something went wrong. Why a *Raptor*? Because with its LRMs it could stand off and hit approaching 'Mechs from range. And when the extraction was complete, it could run like hell.

And it wasn't a ComStar design.

So the ComStar pilot had no reason to press his advantage. Every second that ticked by was a victory for him. If she wanted a fight, she'd have to go to him.

*Fine.*

Even with the city's radiation interfering with his sensors, he had to know roughly where she was. She flicked on her lights for a second, then quickly flicked them off again. Then she accessed her gun cam footage and pasted a still up on her main screen. Except for three, four overturned cars, the side street was clear for a couple blocks. Midway through the third a building had collapsed in a pile of rubble.

She moved down the street and turned left at the second intersection—toward the enemy 'Mech's last known position. She moved north for a block and then quickly ducked right. Crouching down behind the blackened, hulk of a gutted department store she flickered her lights on again.

She was in luck.

This street was clear for at least six blocks.

She moved down the side street. Her opponent had to wonder what she was doing. Since the answer was fairly obvious, she didn't want to give him too much time to think.

It occurred to her that while the DropShip was jamming long-range comms, the *Raptor* would have had to been able to communicate with the hovercar. That meant they weren't jamming line-of-sight. She thought for a moment and selected a frequency.

“How are you doing this evening, my ComStar friend?”

She heard a burst of static and then a familiar voice said, “Paula? Is...you?”

Paula gasped and brought her *Hussar* to an abrupt halt. *Bobby*. Was that her brother? “Bobby? What are you doing here?”

“I grew...on Caph. So...chose me.”

She sucked in a deep, shaky breath. Made herself push her ‘Mech forward. Curved around toward

(her brother)

the enemy *Raptor*.

“Paula, you still—”

*There?* She heard the ghost of the word through the static. Their connection was getting better as she drew closer to the ComStar ‘Mech. Would Bobby notice that, too?

“I’m still here. I’ve always been right *here*.” She couldn’t keep the hint of bitterness out of the word.

“I’m sorry, Paula. We watched Word of Blake’s influence growing...” His voice trailed off.

She suddenly understood. Mom and Dad had seen Word of Blake take one of their children, and they couldn’t bear to lose the other. That’s what he meant.

“You didn’t even tell me you were leaving.” Her throat closed painfully around the words.

Down another block then up two streets, take a left. Moving towards the *Raptor*.

Unless Bobby was playing the same game she was.

“How could you have joined the Wobbies, Paula?” he shot back. Same Bobby, using an attack to cover up his guilt.

“How could you *not?*” she shouted. “Blake invented the hyperpulse generator, saved Terra from the Succession Wars, preserved the wonder of the Star League.”

She came to a massive rail yard. The dim light revealed a jumble of unnatural shapes: dark box cars turned on their sides, a man-

gled gantry crane sitting atop a pile of the girders that had once supported it, a massive crater half-filled with black water shimmering with the cold, white light of the distant stars.

So Bobby hadn't picked his *Raptor's* perch by accident. Paula couldn't move north after the fleeing hovercar. And if she moved south, she'd have to pick her way through the yard. She took a careful step forward.

"Sure, Blake was a great man, a *brilliant* man," Bobby was saying, "but he wasn't a prophet. And even if he were, that doesn't give you some holy mandate to force your views on the rest of humanity."

"You grew up on Caph. Look around you, Bobby. *This* is what man accomplishes when he tries to rule himself."

"Yes," he said dryly, "and Word of Blake is made up of men and women just like the rest of us."

She stepped over a twisted section of rail and glanced into the city. There was the main road and *there*. A glint of metal in the starlight. A lump caught in her throat.

It was the *Raptor's* right arm.

So Bobby had been moving too, but he'd been moving left. If she could work her way a hundred meters over, she'd have his vulnerable back in her gun sights.

"Please, Bobby, let's not fight. You can't win. My Level II is coming. Surrender now."

He laughed, actually *laughed*. "Your Level II isn't coming, Paula. The *Free Will's* jamming all long-range comms. Why don't you back off? My package is almost retrieved."

"Who is it?" she snapped.

"A friend."

She carefully shifted her 'Mech one step to the right. She didn't dare switch on her lights now, not with him so close. Nor could she afford a fall. All she could do was study the dark ground to her right and take small, cautious steps. Edging into position.

"Someone in my unit," she guessed. "That's why you had to come here." Not someone with a 'Mech, otherwise the spy would have just have taken her watch. But still someone important, someone

whose value justified this kind of op. Like... “Intelligence officer,” she hissed.

“I can’t confirm that,” said Bobby, but she heard the truth of it in his voice.

Sweat burned her eyes and dripped from the tip of her nose. She wiped it away with the back of her arm. She took another cautious step.

“Don’t do this, Bobby,” she whispered. “I couldn’t bear to see you get hurt.” She was surprised to find it was true.

“You’re so sure you’re right,” he said bitterly.

She could see the right half of his rear torso now. “I have no doubt.”

“That’s what terrifies me, Paula. People who have no doubt are capable of terrible things.”

She took another step to the right and dropped her reticle over the *Raptor’s* vulnerable back. It flashed gold.

“That’s right,” she said. “Great and terrible things.”

She pulled into her triggers.

Her cockpit shook with the powerful rattle of the LB 10-X as it pounded the *Raptor’s* back. Bobby’s machine staggered forward under the sudden assault, but Paula moved with him, keeping her weapon targeted on the same spot, the sharp edge of the trigger cutting into the flesh of her index finger as she fired and fired and fired.

The *Raptor* stutter-stepped forward, a sure sign that she’d cut through to his gyro, then smashed into the building he’d been using as cover.

Twenty-five tons of BattleMech tore through the brick wall like it was nothing, the *Raptor* fell, taking out the building’s walls as it did, and then suddenly the building was going down too, an avalanche of stone and sheet rock and steel bracing raining down on her brother.

She took a step toward the downed *Raptor* and then stopped. Something made her turn north, toward the direction the hovercar must have fled, her need to save her brother warring with her duty.

At that moment, something inside of her broke. She felt it, some part of her soul just *gave*. And then she was running north after her unit's treacherous intelligence officers, tears streaming down her cheeks.

She hadn't made it more than five or six blocks before she saw something moving against the golden glow shadowing the eastern horizon. The object was doing the other thing meteors couldn't do.

It was rising.



Paula wasn't really sure when they found her. Couldn't have been much longer than an hour she figured, because when the Demon heavy tank parked itself next to her *Hussar* the sun was just an molten orange wedge peeking above the horizon.

She sat next to her 'Mech's right foot just a meter or two from a massive pile of brick, feeling the cold, deadly wind rifle her hair.

A figure dressed in a canary yellow radiation suit climbed out of the tank. "*Blessed Blake*, Tang. What the hell are you doing out here without protection?" She recognized Demi-Precentor Kepner's voice as if it were coming from a great distance.

"ComStar extracted a spy last night," said Paula dully, not looking up. "Tried to stop them." She shook her head.

A second officer in a yellow suit was inspecting the brick pile and came to the *Raptor's* stubby, wing-like arm. "*Blake's Word*," she snapped. "What's this?"

"That," said Paula matter-of-factly, "was my brother."

She looked up.

The Demi-Precentor looked down at her, his face twisted into an unnamed expression that was one part puzzlement and another part horror.

He bent down, grabbed Paula by her arm, and pulled her to her feet.

Kepner turned to the second officer. "Get her out of here."

The second officer guided her toward the tank.

She pulled free and stepped away from him. Stopped by the *Raptor's* arm.

"You were right not to tell me you were leaving," she whispered.

Then she spat on the 'Mech's arm.

The other officer quickly grabbed her, and rushed her toward the tank. She was suddenly glad for his assistance. Paula had just decided that she wanted to live.

To continue the work of Blake.