

SON OF BLAKE

Blaine Lee Pardoe

Part One

***Pittsburgh
New Home
Chaos March
2 March 3059***

The Tinker family's space in the shelter consisted of four old army cots in the corner. They were lucky to be in the corner of the old warehouse that had been made into a shelter, there was less traffic of people wandering in the night to wake you up. Sleeping in the middle of the shelter lacked any remote sense of privacy. Raul was just a young boy when they first came to the shelter, after the loss of their home and their mother. No one used the phrase, 'refugee,' instead they said, "displaced." It sounded better than the reality of their plight.

New Home had the distinction of being in the space claimed at one point or another by the Federated Suns and the Capellen Confederation. Raul didn't care whose flag waved in the wind, that never seemed to matter to him. After all, flags didn't put food on the table. Flags didn't take lives.

Murder and destruction were the prevue of man.

The war started for reasons he never understood nor did he care about. The Capellans had claimed the planet at the time and the Federated Suns had wanted the world back as part of some claim that was before his grandfather's time. The Federated Suns enforced their claim with armies of BattleMechs, vehicles and infantry. The Capellans, who thought that New Home was their world, came with their own armies. Somehow, he was never sure how, the Thirtieth Lyran Guards were involved as well. In the early days of the war his father would talk about it at the dinner table...back when they had a dinner table...back when his mother was still alive. He was young then, but months seemed like years. Nowadays he felt like an old man. It was amazing how circumstances could do that to a person. His childhood had been simply another victim of the onslaught that the fighting brought

Before her death his mother would tell his father, Ramus, to not talk about war at the table—that it would upset him and his sisters. It seemed exciting to Raul though. War was something that tugged at the heart of young boys. He used to have a collection of toy BattleMechs that he played with. Young and innocent boys saw heroes, epic battles, and dreamed that songs would be sung about their deeds and that young women would

be enamored with their acts. His innocence was simply another casualty.

Raul had learned the true bitterness of war.

The night he lost his mother he remembered it was dark, rainy and thundering outside. He learned later that the thunder was really the rumble of artillery and the staccato of battle. Their home in the outskirts of New Haven quaked as the fighting grew near. Raul didn't know why the fighting came to New Haven, apparently it was an inconvenient crossroads for the armies of 'Mechs. His mother had tried to rush her family to the basement as the house rocked around them. Raul still remembered the flash, the massive foot of a three-story BattleMech crushing his home and his mother. It went through the roof, the floor and into the basement, nearly toppling over on top of him and his sisters. A *Vindicator*, dull brown with jagged white stripes. He remembered the outlines of the 'Mech in the night as the rain pelted him. It pulled its foot free and took off leaving his mother's remains nothing more than unidentifiable meat under tons of debris.

No one in the Tinker family spoke of that night out loud. There was screaming and crying, and he knew some of it came from him. His father buried what he could find of his mother in the back yard, near the footprint of a BattleMech that had charged through moments after their house had been destroyed. They had lost everything. His father's factory had been destroyed by one of the warring houses. All he had left was his children. For years now they lived in a public shelter, with other displaced people. This was simply one of hundreds of such shelters on New Home. The people that lived there were the forgotten members of the society.

The local economy had fallen apart after the war. Oddly enough business people didn't want to invest in Pittsburgh or the half dozen cities that had suffered in the fighting. Factories closed, schools closed, and the economy shifted to those cities that had been spared the most severe damage. The only organizations that seemed to offer any hope were the charitable organizations, but most of them wanted something in return.

A Davion flag waved in the wind but that was all that was different other than the loss of lives and home. His father tried to find work, desperately but it was to no avail. There were no jobs for a man with no home. ComStar, the great white hope, had come in and promised that they would protect the people of the Chaos March. Another new flag fluttered in the winds of New Home, but that flag too did not restore what was lost.

There was talk of the Star League on New Home for years, how that would bring new hope and restore the jobs and prosperity that the world claimed it once had. But that didn't happen. The Star League was a myth, a false hope to Raul as it had been to billions of other people. Another empty, unfulfilled promise. No, not a promise, a lie.

Raul too did what he could to earn money, odd jobs. At times he and his older sister Julie raided the dumpsters behind the fancy restaurants on Michigan Avenue finding discarded meals. The taste of good, non-government processed food, was a reminder of the life they once had.

Their father had insisted that his children continue their schooling, though it was difficult. There were government rules about staying in the refugee centers. Every now and then the Tinker family would have to move on. Raul and his sisters got to classes, but it was obvious that the education they were getting was far less than when they had been normal rooted citizens.

Raul looked up from his cot and to the clock that hung on the wall. It was late, far too late for his father. He had been searching down at the wharf for a job driving a loader for the ships there. Sometimes the work went late—but never this late. Raul didn't say anything. When his father was gone he was responsible for his sisters. Saying that he was worried would only scare them. Phreda still had nightmares of the night their mother died. Still, Raul was worried.

As the hours went by he found himself glancing at the clock more and more. His father had been late before but never this late. Someone was coughing and several were snoring in the shelter, feeding his alert state. Where was his father? He then saw someone moving through the room with a flashlight in hand. Only people in charge used flashlights. Raul felt his chest tighten. Something was wrong.

The man was tall, thin, wearing a plain gray jumpsuit. He had a reddish goatee. The man next to him Raul knew as Weems, the man in charge of the shelter. In the dim lights of the room he saw Weems point into the corner where the Tinker family lay. Raul sat up, then stood. No, this was not good.

The man came over and moved in close, to keep his voice down. "You are Raul Tinker, son of Ramus Tinker?" Raul only nodded.

The men reached out and put his hand on Raul's shoulder. "There has been an accident son. We need to talk." He gestured to

the other room of the sleeping shelter where Weems office was. Raul cast a quick glance at his sleeping sisters. He wanted to wake them, he knew they would be worried if they woke up and both he and his father were absent. Then again, as he saw the face of Phreda, he knew that he could not bear to have them hear more bad news.

In the dirty little office Weems, a portly man of odd distemper was oddly silent. "This is Adept Weingard," he said nodding to the man with the goatee. "I'm very sorry." With those words he left the room.

Weingard leaned in close. "There was an accident down at the docks. I regret to tell you that your father was killed."

Adept Weingard spoke some other words, though Raul didn't hear them. A rush like running water filled his ears and his whole face tingled with warmth, anger, and frustration. Weingard seemed to understand, his face was full of sympathy. *I don't need sympathy...how will I take care of my sisters now?* He licked his lips but couldn't seem to form words. This was all wrong. It was unfair. First his mother, now his father. Why was this happening to them?

Weingard touched his shoulder again as if to ease his pain. "Do you have any other family son?"

He shook his head. They were gone. Just his sisters.

"How old are you?"

"Seventeen."

Weingard took out a small noteputer and stabbed at it with a stylus. "And Mr. Weems has told me that you have three sisters?"

A nod was all he could muster.

"Raul, you seem like a good boy. Have you had any trouble with the law?"

He nodded. "It was a minor incident, a misdemeanor. I got off with a warning." It had been a misunderstanding, some boys near him had stolen from a store and the shopkeeper accused him of stealing candy, of all things. He had been innocent. His parents had raised him well. His *dead* parents. It was still sinking in. Even with his sisters only eighty meters away and Weingard in front of him he suddenly felt very alone. He balled his fists in anger, anger

at nothing other than the hand that fate had dealt him.

Weingard did not smile to try and soothe him, that much he was happy about...Raul didn't want to be soothed. "Raul, I am a social worker with the Word of Blake. If I could get you out of here and into a proper school and home environment, would that be good for you and your sisters?"

Raul studied the rugged lines on the mans face. It was tempting, but years of living on the streets had taught him well. "Nothing comes free. What do you want?"

There was the grin. "Nothing. We have numerous orphanages that we run for children such as you, who have lost their parents. We are doing this throughout the Chaos March – it is the least we can do to help improve this region. The complex we can have your family placed in is much nicer than this shelter and we will train you for a real job. All that the Word of Blake asks is for your support, a small tithe of your income. We are not a charity, we help those that are willing to help themselves."

He stared at Adept Weingard and his eyes fell onto the patch he wore on his chest. The down-thrust sword. Raul had heard a lot of rumors on the streets about the Word of Blake, but had never met anyone from them before. They seemed innocent enough – but what about the things he had heard of machine worship? Or was that ComStar? Was there even a difference? "This isn't a religious thing is it? You are not going to have me praying to a computer?"

Weingard laughed deeply. "I'm afraid you have heard some rumors that are more fiction than reality son. The Word of Blake is an organization dedicated to the preservation of mankind. What you are referring to is propaganda that is spread by those that seek to discredit us. I am sure that someone that has been on the streets such as you have knows not to believe fanciful rumors. We are peaceful and not some fake religion."

Raul still doubted the man. He had learned the hard way that nothing came free. Weingard pressed his case. "Your sisters and you have been living in refugee shelters most of your life, haven't you?"

"Yes."

"You're the man of the family now. When we were informed of your father's accident unloading one of our ships we felt obligated to help. Don't think of just yourself, think of them."

He had found the weak spot in Raul's emotional armor. His sisters were all that was left of his family. They were the last vestige of the home and life that he had once enjoyed. Yes, they did need deserve something better. Even Dana...she had been just a young girl who could barely remember their mother that horrific night she died. Still, he had to protect them, that was his job now. He looked down for a moment and saw the frayed cuffs. His clothing and those of his sisters was the rubbish that other families had thrown out. How many times had they climbed, as a family, into a dumpster to look for clothing? Who was he to deny them a chance at a normal life?

"How do I know I can trust you?"

Adept Weingard paused, as if he were surprised at the response from the younger man. "You have no reason to trust me Raul. If I were you, I'd be doubtful too. You've seen armies come and go on New Home. I'm sure you think we're just like that. But know this, we didn't come with anything other than the forces necessary to protect our people. And of all of the things you've heard about the Word of Blake, ask yourself this, 'have you ever heard of us harming innocent people—of bringing war down on innocent people?'"

It was a compelling argument. He had heard some weird rumors about the Word of Blake, but then again Weingard was right. None of the rumors indicated that they were dangerous; just different. Different wouldn't hurt his sisters. If anything, he hoped that this opportunity might provide them a better life.

Raul paused then reached his hand out. "We will try your Word of Blake Mister Weingard."

The older man smiled. "You have made a wise and very mature choice Raul. You won't be sorry."

***New Home
Marysville
Washington Training School
Three years later***

Raul Tinker stared at the last question on the exam. It was supposed to be four hours long and he was done early. This was it, the last question on the last test. He checked the answer on the noteputer and pressed the submit button. In less than a heartbeat his results scrolled down the screen. Passed, with honors. A smile erupted on his face, on that he could not contain.

Not bad for someone who had been living on the streets two years ago.

He had prepared for the exam for two solid weeks. The apartment that he shared with his family and their Word of Blake host had been a perfect refuge for studying. It was a far cry from the shelters his father had led them to. He had gone on to technical training and had graduated with honors. Raul Tinker, the boy that had lived on the streets, now was qualified for college. Scholarships came in from the Word of Blake-sponsored schools.

He let the grin sink in. For the first time in years he had the world at his fingertips. He was no longer a victim, someone that had to respond to the world around him. Raul Tinker was an adult now, an adult with a future wherever he wanted. Now the universe was going to have to dance to the tunes he called. It was a feeling of immense satisfaction.

His sisters had responded well to getting off the streets, which was no real surprise. They too had managed to catch up on their education. The bad memories were almost gone. Their host, the McIvers, Ron and Patricia, had given them almost the level of support that their own parents had. The McIvers too had been victims of the battles on New Home. They too had been found by the Word of Blake and through them had been given good paying jobs in companies that the Word owned shares in. They hosted several families in the apartment complex.

Raul had endured a few jeers over the years when he showed up to school wearing the uniform that the Word had provided him. "Toaster-Lover," was the one that struck him as the worse verbal stab. He didn't understand the resentment to the Word by people on the outside. The Word had given him a home, allowed his fam-

ily to recover their dignity and lives. Yes, he donated a percentage of his pay right back to the Word. In his mind this was not a contribution, it was thanks for all they had done. The people that tried to provoke him with taunts were ignorant as to what the Word was all about. He had never seen anyone worshipping computers – like so many things, it was simply a myth that stuck with people.

He rose from the testing center and filed his noteputer while the other students continued to struggle over the exam. When he stepped outside the warm sun beat down on him. It was as perfect day, and a perfect result. He took off for home.

The apartment seemed smaller when he arrived home. Now he was a true adult. He had not even had enough time to get himself a drink when the doorbell rang. Standing in the doorway was a man that he had seen many times before, Adept Weingard.

“Peace of Blake be with you,” he said, bowing his head slightly.

“And also with you,” Raul replied.

“Congratulations!” Weingard said, grasping his hand firmly. “I am very proud of you and I am sure your parents would have been as well Raul.”

“Thank you,” he said gesturing to the chairs in the common space of the apartment.

Weingard lowered himself slowly into a large padded chair. “Have you given any thought as to what you will do now that you have passed your exams?”

Raul still wore the remnants of the smile that started in the examination room. “I have been thinking about going to college. My counselor told me that the Word of Blake maintains seats on several universities. I was thinking of going onto college.”

Adept Weingard nodded. “That is a good option. I noticed that your physical coordination test results were fairly high as well. Have you considered a career in the military?”

It was no secret that the Word of Blake maintained a military...they had reclaimed Terra after all. People outside of the order seemed nervous over that fact. Raul didn’t understand that thinking. Raul had never heard of them recruiting however. He assumed that it was something that was kept private and quiet, to avoid stirring the paranoia of the citizens that were not members of the Word. Just like any large organization, the Word had a need to protect its

people. "I have thought about it, but I am not sure. My memories of the military are not good."

"You and your sisters have been through a lot. You've suffered under the heels of the military might of the Great Houses. The Federated Suns, the Lyrans, the Capellans, they all have left their mark on this world. You have seen the dark side of war and what a military can do in the wrong hands. I'm not suggesting that you enlist in one of the House militaries. The Word of Blake is always looking for good, sound leaders like you."

"I have never heard of the military as a career path in the order."

Weingard shrugged. "There's a lot of people out there that would like to paint our order as some sort of a great evil." He didn't say 'ComStar' but Raul knew who he was referring to. "We have a small military force, I'm sure you know that. For special loyal supporters arrangements can be made for those that wish to serve."

"What kind of commitment would the order expect?"

"A few years to start. If you want, you could be given a much longer stint. I'd recommend you take your time, see if it's something you are interested in."

"What about my sisters?"

"The McIvers will continue to assist them. Julie, as you know, takes her exams next week. From what I have heard, unofficially of course, that Seuder Chemicals is going to tender her an offer to join them as a chemist. Phreda will graduate in a year, and from the looks of it, with high honors. I took the liberty to send her files to some friends I have in the Order and I think its safe to say that she will be receiving several opportunities to work in our communications systems. Dana is young but the McIvers feel like she is part of their family. She could easily test out of high school next quarter. The bottom line Raul, I don't think you have any reason to not consider this as an option."

"Would I be posted to a Word of Blake military unit?"

Again a shrug. "The order maintains a number of contracts with mercenary units. From what I understand we've found that some of our enterprising officers do better starting out working in those units. It gives you some real combat experience and can help fast-track you in our own military when you transfer back. If I were you, I'd explore that option."

An officer? Raul had not thought of that. "That sound interesting."

"There is a catch Raul. Up until now you are not a member of the order. If you are going to want a military posting with us, you will have to join The Word of Blake officially."

Raul Tinker and his sisters had never been pressured to join The Word of Blake, though they had prospered off the kindness of the order. His sister Dana had said that she wanted to join the order on more than one occasion. Raul didn't try to sway her one way or another. He had nothing but respect for the Word of Blake. They had reached out to him and saved him and his sisters at the lowest point of their lives. To him, The Word of Blake was nothing more than an entity that helped people. It was like being asked to join a political party much more than joining a church, which is what most outsiders thought.

I can't think of any reason that I wouldn't join. After all, these people allowed me to turn my life around. Don't I owe them something?

Weingard was obviously sensing his pause as he pondered the issue. "Raul, we're not asking for anything more than a commitment on your part. It is like joining any political party, nothing more or less. Nothing will change in your day to day life by joining other than we will count you in our ranks as a true ally."

Just like joining a political party? How bad could that be? Besides, he could always quit if he found himself in disagreement with the Order – though it was hard to imagine what could lead to that. "I don't see that as a problem Adept Weingard," he said calmly. "I was living on the streets, orphaned, scrounging garbage dumpsters to stay alive. The Word of Blake changed all of that. Why wouldn't I become a full blown member?"

Headwaters of the Owens River
Andwari Province
Bryant
1 May 3066

The BattleMechs of Aaron's Eradicators moved along the ridge-line that overlooked the Owens River. The valley was lush and green, filled in with old tree growth and dense forests. From Raul's cockpit of his *Huron Warrior* he could not see the rebels that were in the area. His sensors told him what his eyes could not. They were down there, hiding among the trees, moving along the fast cold waters of the Owens River.

Not for long.

The Chaos March had been a cluster of war-weary worlds. Over the years, only The Word of Blake had made any headway in repairing the damage that warfare over the centuries had caused. In the last few months, the feeble governments of a number of Chaos March worlds had formally asked The Word of Blake to step in and try to establish order and security.

The other House governments were less than happy with that arrangement. While officially they did not want to interfere with the affairs of the Chaos March, they did encourage local rebels to resist the arrival of The Word of Blake. On some worlds, like his own home of New Home, the efforts were wasted. The Order was considered a guardian angel to many of the people. Insurrection was kept to a minimum.

Bryant had not been so easy. Provided hardware and expendables from the Federated Suns, a band of Davion loyalists, dubbing themselves the Howling Foxes, had emerged as one of the many "bandit" groups operating on the planet. The local government had been raiding other worlds spawning several bandit groups; though this one seemed to be supported financially, if not overtly, by the Federated Suns. They had declared that Bryant would never succumb to the 'evil' of the Word of Blake. Raul had another name for them—'Idiots.' While publicly the Federated Suns denied any involvement with these rebels, the truth was plain and clear. Hypocrites; that's what all of the so-called Great Houses were. Liars to the core.

The Howling Foxes had attacked one of the supply warehouses run by the Order. They blew it and most of a city block up.

Munitions slated for Aaron's Eradicators had been in the supplies, but most of the goods were food supplements, medicine, and other materials slated to help the same people that the Foxes claimed to be supported by. Two dozen innocent people had died in the raid. Even the grizzled Captain of the Eradicators said that the attack could not go unpunished.

It was another example of what Adept Weingard called, 'the oppression of our people and our destiny.' Raul didn't pretend to fully understand some of the more hard-line followings of the Order. They stood out in meetings and in the media, calling for a tougher stance against ComStar or any one of the House governments. Raul didn't allow himself to get sucked into their propaganda. At the same time he did not speak out at all against what they said. While he agreed with some of what they said, at times they seemed simply too passionate about their beliefs. He had learned how to survive when living on the streets. You simply followed the rules and life was much easier. It was much better to avoid rocking the proverbial boat.

The Howling Foxes fielded about a company of troops, some older model BattleMechs, leftovers that even planetary militias wouldn't have wanted. In that way they appeared much like bandits, but the similarities ended there. Their newer equipment harkened that they were indeed getting support from the Federated Suns. They had been striking at the Order in an insidious way, hitting a dam construction project up-river, then a plant where the Word of Blake maintained an industrial tool manufacturing line. Sniping attacks – the attacks of unworthy cowards, but annoying. The Word of Blake had used the attacks to swell their own ranks of volunteers after they moved in and rebuilt the homes that had been destroyed as collateral damage. It had cost the Foxes their local support, hamstrung by their own arrogance.

The Word of Blake had military units that could have easily blasted the Howling Foxes into dust, but that kind of excessive force would have only validated some of the claims of the House Governments as to the intentions of the Order. No, the solution had to be subtly handled. In this case, the Word ordered in Aaron's Eradicators.

The Eradicators were a mercenary company of dubious background themselves. Half of the members of the unit were like Raul, men and women that felt obligated to the Order for one reason or another. Thanks to the funding by the Order, the Eradicators had managed to rise out of the sea of low-level mercenary units

and develop itself into a respected company. The public had no idea that the Word of Blake was heavily invested in this venture... something that Raul and the other officers were encouraged to keep secret.

"Tinker-man," crackled the voice of Randy Aaron, the commanding officer of the Eradicators. "I'm showing the drooling foxes just north of your position. Do you confirm?"

"Roger that," he said in the most professional tone possible. Discipline was lax at times in the Eradicators but that was a personal choice, one that Raul was not prepared to make. The Order had spent a lot to make him the MechWarrior he was today, and he wasn't going to pay them back by being unprofessional. "I confirm seven BattleMechs with probable vehicle emissions and infantry support."

"Geezer," Captain Aaron asked. "What does G2 tell us about the river depth in this area?"

Geezer was Andrew Hartman, in charge of the unit's military intelligence. Hartman was a volunteer with the Word of Blake that had been convinced, like Raul, to join the Eradicators on extended duty. It was a brilliant strategy; allowing the Word of Blake to hone its MechWarrior's skills without panicking the so-called Great Houses with the knowledge that the Word of Blake had a clandestine army. "Captain I show the river to be only eight meters deep in this area but the currents from the winter melt off are going to make it nearly impossible for anything short of an Assault-class 'Mech to cross. No fords in this area, and the nearest downriver bridge is twenty-four kilometers away and is an abandoned mag lev bridge."

There was a pause as Captain Aaron pondered his next act. Raul didn't need that kind of time. The Eradicators were spread out in a narrow column along the ridge with his lance in the lead. If they could sweep down the hillside towards the river, they could entrap the Howling Foxes with their backs against the river. Done right, they would slaughter the unit. If any survivors did get out, they would cease being a functional military threat.

Randy Aaron came on the line. "This is as good a place as any. We wheel left now and move through the forest we should be able to wedge them up against the river."

"Excellent sir," Raul replied. "Is the word given?"

"You've got the lead Tinker-man.

A thin grin of confidence rose to his face. "Strike Lance, divert on a heading of 150. Preheat your weapons and prepare to engage the enemy." He reached out and patted his main display. "Come on old girl, let's teach these bandits a lesson or two." For him, it was his first true test in battle, his first chance to pay back the Order.

The forest was old growth, thick trees and cable-like vines hung in the path of the advance. Even the powerful BattleMechs were forced to slow their gait to navigate the trees and rocks as they moved down the hill. Raul was at the far end of the line and should have reached the front of the Foxes line first. They were ahead and from what he saw on his short range sensor display, they knew he was coming. Some of the 'Mechs paused along the shore of the river – no doubt testing to see if it could be forded. That cost them time. Two lead 'Mechs turned to meet the threat, trying to push back from the river to give them some room to maneuver.

Raul rounded a massive pine tree and was nearly hit by a wave of long range missiles that roared at him. Some hit the tree, splintering wood as they erupted. More than half of the missiles that had been fired at him never made it, their flight paths disrupted by the growth of the old forest. He brought his Grizzard Gauss rifle up and looked in the direction of the assault.

Through the smoking hole of the brush he caught a glimpse, a quick one, of a BattleMech—a *Vindicator*. The image burned in his mind as for a moment he remembered the night his mother had been killed. *My aim must be more true than ever before.* He fired. The gauss rifle's recoil was sharp but the mag charges hurdled the silvery sphere downrange. It hit the *Vindicator* in the right side, tipping the 'Mech back as the forces of physics tried to take it down.

The Howling Fox arrogantly held his ground. That was a mistake. Raul fired his large laser. The brilliant beam of energy lashed down at the *Vindicator*, cutting a long nasty gash across its chest. Armor plating seemed to peel back from the assault, as if the BattleMech were trying to burst out. The MechWarrior dodged behind the foliage, out of line of sight. Raul growled in anger, a guttural noise. The large trees blocked his fire and line of sight. He darted towards the river. He would catch that *Vindicator* there.

A plume of sickening black and orange came from the west – the death pyre of a BattleMech or vehicle rising up high enough into the sky to be seen from the forest. One of ours? He checked his

tactical display and noted that the number of colored symbols was reduced on both sides. Men and women were dying, and for no reason other than foolish pride on the part of House Davion to keep a toehold on Bryant.

He stepped around a massive tree trunk and stopped. He spotted an older-model *Archer*, easily the largest 'Mech that the Howling Foxes had. It was already battered. One of its torso missile bay doors was sprung open, twisted into a blackened piece of metal. Raul paused and carefully lined up the 'Mech. The Fox 'Mech detected him as well, his torso twisting to bring his long range missiles to bear. It was going to be a race. On almost pure instinct, relying on his training and reflexes, Raul toggled his gauss rifle and then leaned back, using some of the massive tree for partial cover.

The silvery slug of the rifle round looked like a silvery laser beam as it moved downrange at hypersonic speed. It hit the *Archer* high, near the center chest. Raul couldn't tell for sure but it could have been the cockpit. The missiles the *Archer* fired went high as the Fox BattleMech listed back under the kinetic impact of the rifle round. Above him the massive tree rattled and shook. Limbs broke loose and fell around his *Huron Warrior*, some landing right next to him in the cockpit. This was not something he had expected—something that all of the simulations that the Order had put him through had not prepared him for. He primed his large laser. Raul was planning to jump out once again and hit the *Archer*.

When he juked out he saw the Fox BattleMech laying feet towards him. It was not moving, not struggling to get up. Just beyond it lay the river bank, oddly serene given the wisps of smoke that snaked out of the cockpit of the shattered *Archer*. His shot had been deadly true. Raul moved forward. Where was that *Vindicator*? The image that was seared in his memory, of the night his mother died, seemed to reach out and control his actions.

He moved towards the steep muddy bank of the Owens river. It dropped down a good five meters to the water. From the high bank he looked upriver and saw the image that drove his actions—the *Vindicator*. It was in the river, up to its waist, moving painfully slow towards the center of the river. Steam rose from the lower torso where the cool waters hit the hot 'Mech.

It turned and unleashed a PPC shot away from him, back upriver. The brilliant blast of blue energy lashed out at a target unseen, one of the Eradicators. Raul gritted his teeth and leveled his large laser at the exposed flank of the *Vindicator*. *For mother...*

He fired as the wave of missiles rained into his field of vision at the *Vindicator*. His laser beat them, but by a matter of milliseconds. The beam did not cut a gash this time but hit and bored a deep hole into the tender rear of the Howling Fox. When the beam cycled down he saw a hot red hole at the rear of the shoulder. The missiles erupted all across the front of the 'Mech. Black smoke rose as pieces of armor splashed into the waters around the wounded *Vindicator*.

The Howling Fox MechWarrior tried to keep upright, but the damage he had taken was far too much for his skills and predicament. He slid into the waters of the river, not quickly, but slowly, dropping on his back. The light brown mud of the river stirred up by the crash spilled like blood in the water, rushing down past the bank where Raul stood. The *Vindicator* did not get up nor did it move.

The communications channel cackled to life. "That was the last of them," came the voice of Captain Aaron. We have two tanks down here that have surrendered and what's left of three platoons of infantry. The rest are down or dead."

Raul's anger did not subside with the dropping of the *Vindicator*—he had thought it would but the rush did not disappear. "What are we supposed to do with prisoners sir?" Raw anger tore at his words as he spoke. There had been no provisions for taking prisoners.

"I'm not sure I know, Lieutenant," the Captain responded. "We could take them back to Fosterville and turn them over to the civilian authorities I guess."

Raul's face burned hot inside of his neurohelmet as he heard the words. Yes, they could be taken back, and in six months they would be free, stirring up trouble. Their trials could possibly serve as a rallying point for anyone who was against the Order's being on Bryant. He hated the thought of it. "If we take them back they will simple encourage other bandit groups."

"What are you suggesting, Lieutenant?"

Raul paused. What was he suggesting? Was it murder? No. This was going to bring peace and stability to Bryant. The Howling Foxes had brought war to the planet when they had struck at the Word of Blake – his family. This was not killing, it was war. In the end, the deaths of these men would save lives. "I think you know what I am saying."

"Sonofabitch," came a low moan from Captain Aaron. "Do you realize what you're implying? You're talking murder."

"To bring peace to an entire world? I am talking about necessary actions. The Federated Suns was meddling here, playing a game. They were looking to find a way to keep a presence on this planet, for God-only-knows why. It will end here and now."

This time it was Captain Aaron that paused. "You Word of Blake boys will handle it?"

He's afraid to get his own hands dirty, but he knows that I'm right. Mercenaries...it spoke to him measures. "We will handle this, in the name of Blake." Raul's rage didn't subside as he gave the orders.

Fosterville
Andwari Province
Bryant
20 July 3066

Raul stood in his tent dome and saluted as Captain Aaron handed him the data cube. "This came in for your Lieutenant, along with your transfer orders."

"Transfer?"

"I sent a message to your superiors in the Word of Blake, outlining for them what happened with the Howling Foxes. They sent you a private message and told me that all of my personnel from the Word of Blake were being transferred to new units. I'm getting some new recruits."

Raul felt his face flush. He had been turned in for what occurred in the forests along the Owens River. Now he was being transferred. Had he let the Order down? Had he failed them? For all that the Word of Blake had done for him and his family, he suddenly felt ashamed that he had let his passions get the better of him. *I owe the Order much more than what I gave them.* He felt his jaw tense as he and Captain Aaron saluted each other and parted ways. He was alone in his tent, standing erect, with the message cube in his hand.

Carefully he made his way to his noteputer and slide the cube in. The screen flickered to life and he saw the symbol of the Word of Blake, only to have it fade out to be the image of Adept Weingard. It was worse than he thought. The one man that had personally saved his family now was here at his lowest moment. There was no end to the shame that he felt. Raul would have cried, but he had not cried in years, not since the loss of his mother and his former life...his life before the Order.

"Greetings Raul. Word of your actions reached the high command here and they asked that I convey this message to you.

"Word has reached me of the actions you undertook," his voice said in a low tone. Raul wasn't sure but he felt as if he were going to be scolded. "What you did was place our Order at risk. Matters could have easily backfired on us. Any lesser man would have taken the safe course of action and taken those Fox troops as prisoners. You did not. You had the personal courage to do what was

necessary, what was right, not just for the Word of Blake but for the people of Bryant. While distasteful and not something we would ever want made public, it was the kind of decisive action that we have come to expect of someone of your caliber. I would hope that all of the men and women I have met and helped over the years would have the mental fortitude to make this kind of decision.” He did not use the word ‘massacre’ or crime. If anything, Weingard seemed almost divorced of the fact that Raul had taken the lives of the prisoners.

“As such, you are hereby promoted to the rank of Demi-Precentor.” He paused for a moment and flashed a quick smile. “I cannot tell you how proud I am of what you have accomplished since we met. The greatest honor someone in my position can have it to see his pupils rise through the ranks beyond him.” He had been called “Lieutenant” so much in the last few months that he had forgotten his rank as Adept in the Order. Hearing “Demi-Precentor” sounded so formal, so prestigious, he felt his face redden.

“After some well-deserved leave, you are being brought to Terra for some additional training until an appropriate command becomes available for you. At that time you will be given a new posting.

“Congratulations Raul. I am proud of you and I know your sisters are as well. It took the liberty of informing them of this promotion. I look forward to seeing you when you arrive on Terra.”

Raul stared at the screen long after the image had cycled off, his mouth hanging open in disbelief. He had not let the Order down. In fact, he had been promoted for his actions. His heart pounded in his ears. He couldn’t believe it...he had been right all along. All pangs of guilt fled from his mind. He had been right, and he was being rewarded for it.

And Terra – of all places. The cradle of mankind...and he was going there after his leave. The orders were there, on the data cube. Terra. Raul was unsure what a religious experience was, he had read about them but didn’t know what they really were. But going to Terra, to the place where mankind had emerged from, that was something unique. Perhaps this was a religious experience. Perhaps this was what it was like.

In the end, it didn’t matter.



Francis Lyman stood on the banks of the Owens River and studied the blackened streaks of errant laser fire in the sand. There were three trees that had been blasted part, gnarled splintered all that remained at the stumps, jutting up towards the stormy sky. The burned out tank, a Demon, had been effectively stripped of any usable parts, stripped as if vultures had pecked away at its metal carcass.

Lyman moved slowly around the debris. His nose told him he was close. The stench of death turned his stomach slight, but he suppressed the urge to vomit. He moved along the edge of the river and saw the shallow graves. Wild boars had rooted out the dead. Flies moved along the remains of limbs poking out from the dead remains. Most showed signs of having been burned before they were buried. Lyman held up his camera and recorded the holographic images from a distance. Each one would have to be exhumed, and recorded. He would have to have his team come in and make sure that the bodies were properly buried when he was done.

This was the work of the Word of Blake. These men had been slaughtered, the final transmission that had reached him used the word, 'massacre.' Now that he saw it he knew the full depth of his enemy.

The Federated Suns involvement in the banditry on Bryant had been more of a folly than a concerted effort. There were no illusions being harbored about the world ending up in the Suns control, that was simply not in the cards. Stirring matters up, keeping the world destabilized, *that* had been intention of setting up the bandit unit. Now that was over. These operatives were dead—no *slaughtered*.

The bodies alone would not provide evidence. The Eradicators would simply claim that they had buried an enemy that had chosen to fight to the death. For Lyman it gave him a glimpse into the guile of his foe. While he lacked solid data that Aaron's Eradicators were fronted by the Word of Blake, he was sure they were. That put the blood of these troops on that militant order.

A number of analysts were mulling over why the Word of Blake was funding mercenary units, why they were rotating troops through them. To him it all pointed to something larger...but so far there was nothing tangible he could act on. He would draft reports, do what he was supposed to, perform the analysis and send it on to his superiors. Someone had to see these people for what they are. He only hoped that someone in his chain of command

had enough intelligence to see the big picture. If this was part of a bigger pattern of the Word of Blake beefing up its military muscle, you had to wonder, why?

Which one of them had done this? Which Wobbie had blood on his hands? Agent Lyman had his work cut out for him, that much was evident.

As a member of MI5, he would make sure one day that everyone knew just how vicious the Word of Blake was. They may cater to the needs of the masses, play themselves up as humanitarians, but Agent Lyman knew the truth. He only hoped that he could one day find the bastard or bitch that had done this crime—find them and make them pay.