

BATTLECORPS

SHADOWS OF FAITH

Volume 6
by Loren L. Coleman

TALES OF THE JIHAD

Tharkad City***Tharkad******27 November 3067***

The Free Worlds League embassy crouched on the outskirts of Tharkad City, high walls and heavily patrolled park grounds establishing a large island of House Marik sovereignty. Designed and built during one of the Indian-esque renaissances which routinely cycled through League architecture, the walls boasted a battlement railing of teardrop-shaped arches and a few distended minarets. Inside, the collection of buildings were modernized renditions of the great Mughal Empire style, taking after Fatehpur Sikri, the *City of Victory*, than the more fluid, “royal-tomb atmosphere” belonging to the well-established Taj Mahal school of design.

For Thomas Marik, it simply felt like coming home.

Come back early from the Archon’s reception, his armored, stretched sedan turned out of the honor guard convoy which had accompanied them from the local heliport, bumped over the embassy’s driveway lip and rolled through massive teardrop gates just short of midnight. Entering the wide pavilion which often hosted a Free Worlds League cultural exchange—open to the public and free of admission three hundred days out of any given year—though not this week.

Now it waited for him, empty, save for a single Thang-Ta armored personnel carrier parked in one corner next to the ever-present VTOL ambulance. Just in case.

A few loose scraps of paper scuttled across the perfectly-sanded cobblestone pavilion, pushed around by a gusting breeze, dancing beneath the yellow glare of floodlights. A soldier showed himself in the open doorway of the *diwan-i-khas*; the hall for private audience. A prearranged signal that all was well.

Also an obvious, sacrificial target to draw fire in the case of planned violence.

"Good to see your security has not grown lax," Precentor William Blane said to him.

Him and his wife, both. Sherryl Halas sat on Thomas' right, holding his hand in an unconscious gesture of support, staring out the window. Pretending to be uninterested in the politics of this meeting.

The Captain-General smiled. "Either that," he said, "or this man is part of any conspiracy. Dear," he raised Sherryl's hand to his mouth, kissed her wedding ring. "Would you mind making certain that assassins do not wait for us in chambers?"

Sherryl smiled, sharing the long-standing joke. "Of course," she said. As if he'd simply asked her to turn down the covers while waiting for him to catch up.

The car edged to a stop at the foot of the *diwan-i-khas'* stairs. Their driver slipped out to open her door, and she exited the sedan with the formal bearing of a debutante attending her first ball. Always the picture of regal poise. As she walked up to the two-story building's main entrance another soldier appeared on the second-story balcony and two more within the forward-edge *chhatris*—the small, covered porches nested at the each corner of the building's roof.

Sherryl paused for a kind word with the on-duty guard, nodded, and proceeded inside.

"Blessings of Blake walk with her," Blane said beneath his breath. Then, more direct, "Looks as if everything is all right after all." Smiling thinly and obviously trying to get into the spirit of the joke.

Thomas nodded. Waved the driver back to the forward cab, to proceed to the garage. "Unless Sherryl, too, is part of any plot against me." He said it with deadpan aplomb. As if it was something to be considered on any given night.

A tone which obviously struck a nerve in Precentor Blane, who started. "Certainly you do not suspect..."

He shrugged. "The League's history of violence in the order of succession is not one to take lightly." Turned the left side of his face toward Blane, showing off the ruin an assassin's bomb had left him. "It is the threat we all live with, William. Every day, of every year. What else can we do but accept it with a smile, and a quiet prayer?"

A door rolled aside, hidden in the sanded cobblestone between the embassy's private and public halls, opening up a ramp on which the sedan dove down into an underground garage. Down here were several armored sedans, another half-dozen APCs, and even a Main Gauche light tank hidden behind a false wall, Thomas knew, which SAFE had managed to smuggle in under the guise of a replacement sedan for the motor pool. A rare coup.

Too bad the tank was more a field support vehicle than anything likely to be useful in a fight-and-flight run through city streets.

The stretched limousine glided easily into its place of honor, a lone parking spot nearest the ambassador's—now the Captain-General's—private elevator. After a gesture from Thomas, the driver slipped out of the car and closed the door quietly behind him.

Instantly, four protective service agents stepped out of shadowed alcoves, took up position at each fender, back to the car, facing outward.

"No better room in the embassy to talk privately than right here," Thomas assured Blane, busying himself at the sedan's private bar. "The car is swept daily. The parking spot is blanketed by a white noise generator. And no outside agent can gain a line of sight."

The Word of Blake precentor shifted uneasily. His white robes looked more a dingy yellow in the passenger cab's muted lighting. "Certainly the same could be said for many rooms inside the embassy hall."

Thomas shrugged. Poured a healthy splash of ouzo over ice into one thick-bottomed glass, and lemon-flavored Perrier into another for Blane. "We discovered another passive listening device the other day. Smuggled in through the League, if you can believe that. Built into a marble statuette carved on Oriente, which had been ordered for redecorating one of the conference rooms. We

walked it in the door ourselves." He handed over one of the heavy glasses. Shook his head. "Lyran merchants probably gouged us extra for the shipping as well."

This seemed to bother Blane. A lot. His face, already drawn and haggard, paled noticeably. "Could they have learned anything compromising?"

A dark stir of thought at the back of his brain. Define *compromising*, Thomas almost asked. Then did not.

"Of course not. In fact, I have ordered a playacting session for that room every day this week, to drop false hints of our political agenda for this year's conference. Let them parse that."

The precentor settled back in his seat, the leather protesting softly, his eyes closed. He looked aged, and more than a bit run down. "So close," he whispered, to no one in particular. "So very close now. The third transfer of power is upon us, when we shall unseal the great Court of the Star League at Unity City." Opened his eyes to stare across the roomy passenger cab at his ally.

"Thirty years." Blane shook his head. "It is amazing what you have helped accomplish, my friend."

That glimpse of phantoms, again. A black whisper. Thomas settled back with his own drink and took a small sip, letting the licorice flavor, dark and soothing, roll off the back of his tongue, warming his throat all the way down.

"It is," he finally agreed, and no show of bravado. More so than the close ties he'd managed to develop between the League and ComStar, and then with Word of Blake, far and above the stability he'd brought to one of the Inner Sphere's most troubled Successor States, was the incredible secret he'd managed to keep for those thirty years.

That he was not truly Thomas Marik.

That truth, thrusting itself into full form, staggered him as it so often did. He had thought himself Thomas, lived with the memories and the role for so long—had given up so much!—that he rarely noticed the lie. Just a dark stir of memory, occasionally, at the back of his mind. Reminding him that he had not, in fact, been born to this role.

He was—or had been, at least at one point—a ComStar double. A volunteer. Prepared against need and then suddenly advanced in

3036 as a short-term means for keeping peace in the League when the real Thomas Marik had *nearly been* assassinated in a bombing. In those early years of the mighty Federated Commonwealth alliance, a stable and viable League was seen as key to keeping the balance of power within the Inner Sphere. An imperative. But his rule saw such progress that over time ComStar decided to leave him in place.

And the real Thomas Marik? The man he so rarely thought of, except when forced to confront the truth of things? Once recovered (as well as could be expected) Marik had preferred to secret himself away deep inside ComStar. Out of the light of day. The replaced leader had provided some political direction, at first, ruling by proxy. But succumbing to his own needs and his research had finally severed that link as well. Leaving the new Thomas Marik to thrive or whither on his own merits.

He'd thrived. Obviously. And when a schism slashed through ComStar, he'd offered refuge to those true followers of the teachings and prophecies of Jerome Blake. And the Word had been born.

For a time, they had even named him their "Primus-in-exile," an honor he had not sought and had recently given up. Clearing the path for William Blane—hopefully—to ascend to that position. His friend. Possibly the only man left alive who knew the truth of his identity, and kept the secret well.

Thomas stared down into his glass. Melting ice turned the ouzo cloudy. He swirled the drink, listened to the ice rattle softly, like distant chains, as he resettled the ghosts from his past. "Do you think Focht had any appreciation for the gravity of his actions in 3052?" he asked.

"When the heretic killed our true Primus and installed Mori?" Blane grimaced at the taste of the memory. Sipped his flavored seltzer water. "It was a military coup of the highest order. He knew exactly what he was about."

"And yet," Thomas said. "And yet, Primus Waterly's death released me from any final reins ComStar held. Allowed me to work as an equal with Demona Aziz to establish a home for the Word of Blake. How could any man foresee such chaos?"

"I believe prosecutors call it 'depraved indifference,'" Blane said. "A reasonable expectation of harmful circumstances which may be brought by one's actions. If that does not describe Focht's actions,

I do not know what else could." A shrug. Another sip. "Which has led us here, tonight, on the verge of acquiring that which we have most sought. Formal recognition, and the means to champion Jerome Blake's vision for the future. Tomorrow, Word of Blake will be inducted as a full and formal member of the Star League. And you, by week's end, will be First Lord."

"There will be no surprises." Thomas waited. "You are sure."

It was not exactly a question, but Blane answered regardless. "You have seen a preliminary report from ComStar's audit. We allowed them to discover a small discrepancy. Enough to let them feel morally superior. A small measure of graft, not even totaling one percent, which was skimmed over and above our commissions. They can in no way prove any undue influence exists between your Free Worlds League and Word of Blake."

Thomas sighed. Rested as he sipped from his licorice drink. Not content—never that—but with effort able to lay those phantoms back to rest for a spell. "If they had discovered the true records..." He trailed off.

"Blake forefend!" If Blane had been a true zealot, like so many who staffed the Word of Blake, he might have genuflected in a manner similar to a pious man crossing himself at mention of the devil. Thankfully, it was the Word's more pragmatic believers who tended to rise in the ranks. In general.

Still, the precentor shuddered violently. "A blessing, perhaps, that we have not even penetrated the full depths of this problem ourselves. Not yet, anyway."

This caught Thomas' attention. He sat up. A cold prickling at the back of his neck. Someone walking over his grave, as the old saying went. "You have not? But you made it clear to me that—"

"I am still investigating, Thomas. It has been slow-going, especially with Cameron St. Jamais dogging my every step. If that man is not *his* puppet, certainly he is a pawn."

His...meaning *him*. Meaning *Marik*. Still alive, and sitting at the center of a web buried deep within the folds of Word of Blake. So deep, so carefully secreted away, not even Blane could dig him out now.

The dark stir of conflicting memories spun inside Thomas' head like a whirlwind.

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"Three years ago," Thomas reminded Blane, "at the last Star League conference. We discovered that the true—" *skim* was such a crass term—"the *misallocation* ran much deeper than either of us had planned. *Fifteen* percent, William. I've seen the dollar figure, adjusted for League eagles and ComStar bills, and the raw amount is staggering. We still agree that it can only be *him*, funneling away so much?"

Blane nodded wordlessly.

"Enough to fund Word of Blake's enterprises fifty percent over! What is *he* doing with such a depth of resources?"

"I have my best and most trusted adepts digging into this, Thomas. Trust me. I can tell you what we've tracked seems to have no direct bearing on the Word's ultimate plans. As much as three percent obviously went into new research and the procurement of material. Upgrades in our front-line regiments as well as inside our WarShip fleet. And the Terran Defense Programs, of course. *He* has built quite a wall around himself. Which protects us all, in the end. New weapons. Breakthroughs in guidance and power distribution." Blane ticked off these examples on his fingers. "And, I personally discovered as much as point-four percent being routed into League charities. Supporting the family interests back home."

"Resources have been spent back inside the Free Worlds League?" Thomas asked. His voice tight.

"That is a problem?"

"Likely not." He considered. "No. I was simply under the impression that *he* had severed all ties, and all interest, in the League." Another black whisper, churned up into a sinister laugh. He frowned. Held up his glass, studying the milky cloud which it had become. The swirls of ice and mist. "Oh, what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive."

"Sir Walter Scott?"

He nodded. Something inside that quote. Something important...

"I will keep up my investigation," Blane promised, interrupting Thomas' train of thought. The precentor set his own glass aside, barely touched. Folded hands together in his lap. "I've made many inroads lately into the other Word of Blake factions. Feeling out *his* network. Unless my own adepts are compromised and part of a larger conspiracy."

Obviously reaching for the same humor Thomas had shown earlier. Falling flat.

Blane continued. "I'll admit, I was surprised to find so few agents placed close to myself or others on the Ruling Conclave, but perhaps I shouldn't be. Paranoia takes many forms, and *he* has always felt comfortable among true believers. If there was any one thing of significance..."

Thomas sipped at his ouzo. Washing away the bad taste of politics with the bold, licorice flavor. Whatever he had been reaching toward a moment ago was lost, lost.

"Yes?" he asked, finally sensing Blane's hesitation.

"It is nothing. Nothing." Blane started to wave it aside. Sighed. "A contradiction I uncovered which makes no sense. Something we thought we understood, but perhaps not so well as we hoped." He paused, collected his thoughts.

"How much do you remember of your training? The hyperpulse generators' core diagnostic programs?"

The real Thomas Marik had been a ComStar adept in his day, as well. It was no disconcerting effort to dig back through the training, to dredge up the old lessons. A relief, in a way.

"I remember they have been in place since before Jerome Blake reorganized the entire HPG network and ComStar was charged with its divine mission," Thomas said, slowly. Reaching back. Three hundred years and a great deal of forgotten history stood in between him and the era of ComStar's founding. "Part of DeBurke's original COMNET system, which assigns every station a unique identity." Now he had it. "The Blessed Blake and then Conrad Toyama layered more functional programming over the top of that, but still, if I recall correctly, all of modern our security and routing stamps tie back into that core diagnostic?"

"Yes. And the only way to make sure our routing stamps are not being wholly compromised is to spot-check them against the diagnostic interface. Which acolytes do, daily, as part of *matins* and again at *vespers*. And have never seen a problem. Except..."

"Except?"

"Except. When you dig into the diagnostic system itself, and run an overall interpretation of the network. *That* we do not do on a regular basis, except when a chosen adept fulfills yearly mainte-

nance rituals as mandated in selected verses from *The Teachings of Toyama*. There is a cipher key—based on the old Mayan calendar for reasons beyond our understanding—but when you run it, the system outputs a graphic representation of the Inner Sphere network with regards to the network's prime focus, the Class A stations, and all routing priorities."

"The *ComStar Clock*," Thomas said, remembering. "Adepts used to refer to it as the 'Hand of Blake.' It divides the Inner Sphere up into a perfect, well-ordered system. ComStar used to base military postings on the clock design? For efficiency?"

"Yes! But think about the schism, and the shift of power when Word of Blake established itself on Gibson. Our network, at the 'clock' level, does not base itself entirely on physical locations, but on those locations *in relation* to the network focus. During those years—"

"There were two focus worlds," Thomas said. Nodding. Stared up at the roof of the sedan, considering the intellectual challenge. Frown lines pulled across his forehead. "So our system might have redesigned a second clock diagnostic, separate from ComStar's. Or, possibly, warped the common diagnostic into a new interpretation. I'm not sure."

"No one is. Not everything known to Jerome Blake made it into ComStar's dogmatic teachings. We've lost so much divine guidance that no one could be certain. Not anymore. But those who have some understanding of the system all agree on one thing: *there should have been some change.*" Blane shook his head. "And there was not."

Now Thomas set aside his own drink. Sat forward, hands on his knees. The atmosphere inside limousine had drawn out fine, like the edge of a knife. Tense and sharp and very dangerous. Precentor Blane looked ashen—more so than usual—now that the subject had been broached. Here was something he had discovered which threatened his knowledge on how ComStar—and Word of Blake!—operated. The very center of his universe.

And, once upon a time, Thomas' as well.

"Is this possible?" he finally asked.

"Well, it must be, because I've personally reviewed the diagnostic. Tracking the flow of lost monies through our own system, I worked hard to make certain there had been no corruption of our

routing stamps. According to all logs, the stamps are coded to show that Gibson was the center of our network. Our clock.' But the diagnostic's graphic interpretation differs. During those years it continued to represent Terra as the center of our universe."

"A conundrum," Thomas agreed gravely. "But explainable? We simply do not have a full appreciation for how this system works. Not at that core level. Faith had always been central to ComStar's mandate, and that faith is what Word of Blake brought with them after the Focht heresy. We trust the system to continue in proper operation. The diagnostic must not be dependent on the prime focus world, as we thought."

Blane nodded slowly. Unconvinced. "Then can you explain a report I've seen, gleaned from Kernoff's guarded files, which hints that ComStar's diagnostic *has* shifted since we retook Terra and ComStar moved the focal point of their network to Tukayyid?"

It caught Thomas flat-footed. "No," he admitted. "I can't."

And at this, Blane collapsed back into his seat, as if utterly spent. "Neither can I."

Hardly a satisfying end to their meeting. But afterwards, there didn't seem to be much else to say. Blane had discovered an anomaly, perhaps. Or a puzzle, Thomas supposed, intentionally dropped in the precentor's way to distract him from his true investigations. Regardless, it did not appear to have a great deal of bearing on the next day's activities.

Voting Word of Blake into the Star League.

Diving into the politics of an inter-nation, overseeing government.

In fact, as Thomas saw it, the only conclusion one might draw from this suspect data was the idea that the schism simply had not happened, and Word of Blake had never existed. Not until ComStar was forced from Terra, at least.

A conclusion in complete contradiction to all known facts.

Another tangled web...