

BETRAYAL OF IDEALS

Book III: The Switchback Directive

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BATTLECORPS

The Grand Council Chambers
Strana Mechty
Clan Space
8 October 2823

The usual murmur of low voices went silent as Khan Sarah McEvedy entered the Grand Council chambers. All around the massive, circular table the Khans of the twenty Clans stared at her as she limped in, aided by a cane. Each step was labored. Her Trial of Refusal against the Grand Council over their decision to open possession Trials over a Brian Cache in the Wolverines' territory on Circe had been controversial. Defiance over the word of the ilKhan, Nicholas Kerensky, was all but unheard of on this scale. McEvedy felt the eyes of her peers burrowing into her face as she made her way into the chamber to her seat. She sat slowly, painfully.

The inlaid symbol of his Clan faced her on the table, silent and defiant. It shimmered in the white light of the massive room. The silence hurt more than her broken ribs and damaged knee. She ignored her fellow Khans' gazes upon her bandaged and battered body. McEvedy was furious over the actions of her fellow Khans, especially Khan Jason Karrige of Clan Widowmaker. Like his namesake spider, Khan Karrige was weaving a web of lies and deceit, apparently endorsed by the ilKhan. It infuriated Sarah, but not for the reasons that her agitators would understand. *It bothers me more that they think I am a fool; that I do not know what they are doing.*

McEvedy paused for a second to reflect. *How will history judge my actions in the coming days? Will I be painted as a patriot or a cancer within the Clans?* She knew her peers thought that she was not as daring as she was willing to be. *I will save my people, no matter what the cost.* She glanced at Nicholas Kerensky, then looked away. *He seeks to scare the others into line. We are to be made an example of his darker side, what will become of them if they do not play along with his plans.*

To hell with history!

There was more to the matter than that. Nicholas Kerensky was revered by the people of his father's Exodus. He had brought order after two decades of vicious civil war on the Pentagon Worlds and created a new society in his own image, an image that seemed to evolve and change. *Some think of him as a god already. I do*

not. I know him as a man. I have seen him bleed. There was more. Nicholas was known to be wildly temperamental. He threw things, screamed, berated his Khans, then could become an almost fatherly figure a moment later. Most of the other Khans chose to look the other way during such tirades. Others wrote it off as part of his ritual of fasting and exploring his inner self, as he had done when he had come up with the concept of the Clans. *Nicholas wants to be remembered to the future as a god. At times, he is less of a man than me because he holds himself in such high regard.* The ilKhan stood at the Wolves' seat in the Grand Council chamber and surveyed each move that the clearly pained McEvedy made as she carefully lowered himself into her seat.

"Khan McEvedy, it pleases us that you are here. Clearly you are in pain. Perhaps it would be best to cancel this session until you are more fit to perform your duties," Nicholas said.

"IlKhan," she said casually. "Whoever has told you that I am unfit for my duties is incorrect. I am a Wolverine." She refused to admit her weakness, though clearly some of her peers were enjoying her condition. Sarah had to be here today. This was the first Council session since the Trial of Refusal. If she did not attend, the tradition stood that the Grand Council could not meet. She would not be the one that held up the meeting. *Not when so much is at stake.*

Nicholas shook off the verbal barb with a pleasant grin. "I was simply looking out for the health of a valued friend and ally."

"It is appreciated then."

"It appears that all Khans are present. If that is the case, let us convene to discuss matters that are of importance to us all." Nicholas extended his arms and the Khans moved in and assumed their seats around the great round table. McEvedy looked at each one of them. Some did not make eye contact, and seemed to ignore her. Others made a point of locking gazes with her, as if daring Sarah to say or do something. The tension in the air was palatable. *Once we were like family...now there is only hate.*

"IlKhan, now that we have representation from the Wolverines," Khan Karrige said in a snide tone, "Perhaps it would be a good time to bring the Trial of Refusal to a close." The comment was appropriate. With saKhan Robertson dead and McEvedy hospitalized, Nicholas would not have formally declared a winner. It wasn't that what Karrige had said was wrong, it was the fact that he was enjoying it that bothered McEvedy.

Nicholas watched her, she felt his gaze, probably trying to see if there was a reaction. “Very well. As ilKhan and witness to the Trial of Refusal, I declare that the position of the Grand Council has been upheld. The Brian Cache on Circe will be distributed through a series of combat trials to ensure—”

Just like that, laws and traditions are shattered. “ilKhan, I still protest this course of action. The Grand Council has deliberately interfered with the internal affairs of my Wolverines. This cache was on our territory, legally obtained and held by us for years. For the Grand Council to suddenly simply decide that it should be taken sets a dangerous precedent that all of us should be concerned about.”

“Not as dangerous as your Wolverines taking possession of additional BattleMechs and tactical nuclear weapons,” shot back the Khan of Clan Burrock.

“Have my Wolverines done something to Clan Burrock, other than defeat you fairly in battle, that warrants this intrusion? What if the Grand Council feels that your holdings are Eden are not appropriate? How would you feel then? Perhaps if our seats were exchanged you would feel differently, *quiaff?*”

The Khan of the Burrock Clan waved his hand in the air to cut her off. “I would question the Grand Council, as you have done. I would challenge them accordingly. If I lost, I would let the matter die. That, Sarah, is where we apparently differ. You have lost your Refusal against this Council. According to our laws, this matter is decided.”

“Normally I would agree with you,” McEvedy said, sweeping her gaze around the massive table. “Recent events have shown that the odds have been stacked against my Clan. Other Clans have been spying on my Wolverines, forcing us to do the same. This began as individual efforts to work against my people, but recently I have uncovered evidence of a new threat, something called, “The Watch,” which involved many of your people infiltrating and spying on my Clan. With such efforts taking place, it is no small wonder that a fair trial is not possible.” She ended her visual sweep of the room on Nicholas Kerensky. A pall of silence smothered the massive wooden table as all eyes turned to the ilKhan.

“The Watch had no bearing on your ability to defend your position in the combat trial,” he countered. “It is an organization that reports to me. Its purposes are mine and mine alone, and *not* for debate by this Council.”

"I was not asked to contribute to this Watch, ilKhan. I can only assume that it was put in place to work against my Wolverines. As such, and given its rather dark and nefarious nature, it is impossible to know if it corrupted my Trial."

Nicholas was not used to his Khans talking back, at least not so boldly. He was also not used to being caught off guard and exposed. "How dare you level such accusations?" he snapped back, his voice seemed to shake Sarah's entire body.

"I am a member of this Council," she replied.

"You forget your place," replied Franklin Osis, the Smoke Jaguar Khan. "Sarah, you are merely a Khan. We are all subordinate to the ilKhan. If he wishes to create a surveillance mechanism, then he can. He can involve whatever Clans he wishes to in it."

"You speak freely, Franklin," McEvedy pressed. "I notice that you have nothing at risk here. The integrity of your Clan and your material holdings are not in question. I have known you for years. I have no doubt that you would respond much more hotly than I am right now if it were the Jaguars that were in danger of being stripped of resources."

"The Smoke Jaguars are not in question here," Khan Karrige replied. "What is at stake is our rule of law. You have seemed to turn your back on it. You have lost your Trial to my Widowmakers who defended the decision of the ilKhan and the Grand Council. You are ignoring decades of law and order that have kept our people at peace and prosperous. Who are you to do this?"

"I am the Khan of Clan Wolverine," McEvedy said firmly. Just saying the words made some of her aches and pains fade, if only for a moment. "It is not me that has forgotten my duties and responsibilities, Jason." She held back making any more accusations. Enough had been laid down in this debate already. Her challenging of the ilKhan regarding the discovery of The Watch was more than enough to add tension to the atmosphere.

"I remind you, Khan McEvedy, that you are *simply* a Khan. My word holds the law here," Nicholas Kerensky said angrily. "You have no standing to question my decisions and actions. You may rule one of twenty of the Clans, but I rule us all."

"This debate is pointless," The Khan of the Coyote Clan added. "We should move ahead with the bidding for the Brian Cache's contents. By our laws this matter is settled. Arguing over it does

nothing but stir hatred and upset the balance of the Clans as a whole.”

“It seems,” Khan Karrige added coyly. “That only one of us is arguing.”

Sarah McEvedy stared at her one-time friend and ally. *Is this all worth making a stand about?* She felt as if the die had already been cast by the Grand Council and Nicholas. *It is only now a matter of time before they come for my Wolverines; either one clan or all of them together. If I had more time, I might be able to ensure that what happens impacts fewer people.* Time. It was a luxury that seemed to have deserted her.

She had made plans that could preserve her people. There were potential allies in this room. One thing was for sure though, negotiations could not continue today. She faced a room of rivals that had turned on her, either singularly or together in conspiracy. They feared her Wolverines, and coveted what she had done with them. The irony was not lost on her. By doing what was right for her people, she had had turned the rest of the Clans against them.

Carefully, she slid her chair away from the table. For a long moment, she stared at the inlaid figure of her Clan namesake carved in front of her. Gone was the feeling of pride the first time she had sat at this table. Gone was the camaraderie of the Khans. Her friendship with the ilKhan had been badly bruised, if not destroyed. All that remained now was to do what she could to implement her plans to preserve the Wolverines. To do that, she would need time.

“I will take my leave of you all,” she said firmly. As she rose her chest tugged at her with hot fingers of pain. McEvedy’s knee felt as if it were on fire. None of that matched the pain she felt in her soul.

“You cannot simply walk out of a Grand Council session,” Khan Osis added. “Our business has not concluded.”

Her friend, Khan Joyce Merrell of the Snow Ravens, spoke up. “Even though the Wolverines Trial against this Council was lost, that does not mean that you cannot bid to defend the pieces of this Brian Cache that are in dispute, Sarah.” Her voice tugged at McEvedy. They had known each other a long time. She was trying to help her, trying to get her to take a path to save face with the others in the room.

Negative. I will not grovel for scraps at the table like a dog. My departure is demanded, even if it is nothing more than a gesture.

“It appears to me that decisions regarding the future direction of my Clan are not mine to make, not alone anyway. Given that and the nature of my injuries, it would be best if I left now. Besides,” she shot a glance back at the Widowmaker Khan, “there is a smell in this chamber that I find somewhat offensive.” Using her cane, she angled her body away from the table.

“Khan McEvedy,” Nicholas said in a calmer tone. “I ask you to reconsider. Khan Merrell is right.”

She turned back to the man that she had once trusted so dearly as to place her own life in his hands. “IlKhan. I no longer have the stomach for this.”

“Do not let it end like this, Sarah,” Nicholas pressed.

“I assure you, ilKhan,” she said firmly, her eyes narrowing in anger. “It is far from over. In fact, I feel safe in saying it is just beginning.”

Texas Class Battleship Bismark
The Norfolk Boneyard
The Exodus Fleet Station Five
Strana Mechty Star System
Clan Space
8 October 2823

The air on the *Bismark* still smelled funny to Star Colonel Franklin Hallis. It was a hint of sweat, possibly some mold, and dust. It was the smell of age—of the passage of time. The mothballed Exodus Fleet had been stored in ten different locations, the Norfolk Boneyard was far out in the Strana Mechty system. Here the ships were kept, ever ready for action, per the orders of the ilKhan. While none were immediately jump ready, maintenance crews boarded them regularly and did the necessary work to ensure that the ships were still listed as “combat effective.”

It was always assumed that the Clans had warships or aerospace fighters that patrolled the boneyards. Franklin had bet that was a myth. Why patrol or attempt to protect a fleet that was so far away from any possible threat? He understood that the waste of resources was what drove his people’s almost forgetting this fleet of ships. There were automated sentries, satellites that monitored the fleet, but they had been easily overcome by programs written by the Scientist Caste. Technology could never replace ingenuity.

This Fleet was the origins of the Clans. They had begun as the Star League Defense Force under Nicholas Kerensky’s father, Aleksandr. For nearly two years they had traveled from known space into the vast, uncharted periphery to arrive at the Pentagon Worlds. Franklin had been just a boy then, following his family in the SLDF. The ships of the mothball fleet were a distant memory. This was like a chapter out of the bible for him, an epic story. These ships had been homes for the families that now made up the Clans under Aleksandr’s son, though these people were vastly different than the original settlers that had come on the Exodus.

Franklin had come with a small team of ship experts. Their mission was to ready a handful of ships per the orders of Khan McEvedy. The work was proving easier than he had expected. The maintenance on the vessels had not been shabby. They were in good condition, ready for action on relatively short notice. Franklin had picked out three transports and two of the larger battleships. They would have to suffice. He had a team scouring the San Diego

Boneyard as well on a similar mission. Combined with the ships already in the much-reduced fleet of the Wolverines, he hoped that they would fit Khan McEvedy's needs.

Whatever those needs were.

He had seen a glimpse of her plans, and had reviewed his role in them. Even with what he had seen, he realized that the scope of what she was contemplating was massive in scale. When he had been sent to the ships, Franklin had suspected that Khan McEvedy was planning some sort of a move with the Wolverines. Sarah McEvedy had been one of the founders of Clan Wolverine, and had been like a mother not just to Franklin, but to almost everyone in the Clan. She was not an arrogant and aloof Warrior. McEvedy was a woman of the people. Time and time again she had taken measures to protect her people, and had brought the Wolverines to the pinnacle of Clan life. Her name was spoken with the same reverence as that of Nicholas Kerensky. From what Franklin knew, that could prove dangerous.

He floated across the bridge and looked out of the armored ferro-glas window to the fleet hovering in space around him. Somewhere out there, on the massive jump transport *Rawhide*, a crew was readying the vessel for a jump out of system just as he was doing aboard the *Bismark*. The same was happening with other ships, star-jumping vessels that had been idle for a generation. *I have heard other castes talk about ghosts. I wonder how many are here watching us now?*

One of his senior technicians drifted across to him. "SaKhan, we have an incoming message from Strana Mechty for you—priority one," he handed him the portable comm unit. The ship's communication system wasn't online, out of fear that it would automatically send a signal warning the other Clans that someone was aboard these ships. Franklin paused. *I will never get used to this title...saKhan.*

"This is Deuce," he said into the unit.

"Deuce, this is Wolverine Actual," came back a familiar voice.

"Good to hear from you, sir."

"I trust that all is going well, *quiaff?*"

"Affirmative. As planned, my Khan."

"I wish that the same could be said of my work," McEvedy replied. "I am transmitting a secured file to you. It is for your eyes only. Do you confirm?"

There was a light *beep* as the file downloaded into the unit in a secured packet transfer. "Affirmative, sir. I have the file. My eyes only." Franklin saw the title. "Operation Switchback." He couldn't explain why, but the title alone seemed to have an ominous ring about it. It had been some time since the Clans had launched any sort of new campaign. There had only been the mopping up of the last bit of the Pentagon Wars. Then again, this wasn't about the Clans—this was about the Wolverines...

Glancing at the data, he found his suspicions confirmed. Khan McEvedy was doing what was necessary to preserve the Wolverines and their way of life. She was taking great risks. It was a bold plan. Combined with what he had seen from her earlier, Hallis now understood the true scope of the plans she had made. *My faith in her is not misplaced—the scope of this alone is pure genius.*

"Franklin, once you have matters in hand there, I need you to join me here. I am attempting to buy us some time. Go over that file. It will detail the operation I already have you on. I will need you on Strana Mechty, and I have a jumpship waiting to take us to Circe. As you will see in the plans, I have made sure we have ample jumpships poised for a number of circuits."

Franklin scanned the file more. "By the League..." he said under his breath. The file was not a summary, but very detailed plans and logistics of a sweeping operation. He had seen a high-level overview before, but this...this had details and timetables and list after checklist of details that were stunning. *What are we about to start?* Then his thoughts focused even more. *What will the ilKhan do?*

"Say again, *quiaff?*"

"Negative, sir. I simply was reading the details of what you sent me. The contents struck me as—daring."

"I understand."

"Sir, has it really come to this?"

"You can avoid the 'sir,' Franklin. You are my saKhan."

The title was one that Franklin had not yet gotten used to. There

had been no formal trial for the position, as was common practice. Khan McEvedy had broken with tradition and intervened, telling would-be candidates who she wanted in the role and asking them to not engage in a pointless trial. Now was a time when she needed someone at her side that she trusted—that's what she had told the more vocal candidates. There had been some complaining, even Franklin had heard it, but in the end he had taken on the assignment, and no one had challenged him for the role. *I only hope I can fill Robertson's shoes.* "My apologies. Old habits are hard to break. You have been our Khan my entire life, after all."

"Thank goodness you are young, or I would have to reconsider my choice. I hope we can avoid implementing this operation. If not, Switchback may be our best course of action."

"I hope you are right too."

"When you get here, we will have to send out a number of encrypted messages. While Trish Ebon may want to return to her unit, I need her to remain on Circe for the time being at the contested Castle Brian. I have already sent out a few messages to prepare for some of the Switchback protocols. If this comes down, Franklin, it will come down fast. We need to be prepared."

"I believe I understand."

"Good," her voice was reassuring. "There is still a chance to head this off. I have asked the ilKhan to meet with me, someplace private. Someplace where I hope I can reach him. I still hold out some hope that my plans will not be required."

"I hope you are able to get us away from the brink."

"If not, I will need you ready to move."

The Wolverine Enclave
Strana Mechty
Clan Space
9 October 2823

The Wolverine Enclave seemed much more active than the last time he had seen it. Even at this hour of the evening, when most families were settling down for dinner, the streets were still filled with people. There was a sense of urgency in the air. For Franklin it made it seem all the more real. *Switchback*. Khan McEvedy was beginning it. The lower castes were mobilizing, preparing for the directives.

He was stopped at the entrance to the command facility and put through security protocols that he had never imagined a year ago. The irony was not lost on him that he had ordered such scanning and identity checking. The infiltration of the Wolverines by other Clans, by The Watch, had stunned him, and forced Franklin to implement a number of directives to prevent spying. He had no idea if they were working, but they would have made matters much more difficult if *he* had been attempting to spy on the Wolverines. In his mind that was some condolence.

The command bunker was busier than the streets outside. Troops were packing shipping containers, people were running down the hallways, conversations were yelling competitions over the hustle and bustle. SaKhan Hallis ignored it all. He was saluted almost every few steps, salutes he quickly returned. He reached the inner ring where Khan McEvedy had asked him to meet her.

She didn't rise when he entered the room. He saw the hook of the cane that McEvedy had been using holding it on the tabletop. She gave him a smile and gestured to the chair next to her. His mentor's face was worn and weary, as if she carried the weight of the world on her shoulders and it was smothering her slowly, painfully. The last trial that she had been in had taken a lot out of Sarah McEvedy. Her face was more wrinkled, and her tired eyes made it seem that she was either taking drugs or was exhausted. Still, there was some of that fire in her face, that drive that had made her so popular with her people. It was a combination of sternness and motherly care.

"Good to see you, Franklin," she said. "I trust that you had a chance to review the Switchback directives on your trip in?"

"Affirmative," he replied. "This is an ambitious plan. I find it hard to believe that the other Clans and the Grand Council itself will not dramatically react to it."

"I am still of a mind that we may be able to avoid a confrontation," McEvedy replied with little conviction. "I will try my damndest to dodge a head-on confrontation with the Grand Council, but Franklin—I saw what they had started to turn into. It is as if every Clan but a few have turned against our Wolverines."

"Sir, I want to make sure I fully understand your plan."

"Of course," she activated the small holotable projector. A map of Clan-controlled space came up before them. "For our Wolverines to survive, we are going to have to turn away from our way of life in the Clans. A move of independence will not be taken without decisive action on their part. Nicholas and the Grand Council will not stand for it and will come after us. Currently we have numerous territories we defend, to be exact, there are six enclaves of the Wolverines spread out on five different worlds. Spread out this way, we cannot concentrate our forces for defense. As such, I am calling for the migration of loyal Wolverines to two of these territories—the one on Strana Mechty, where we are, and the one on Circe. Realistically, our main force will be on Circe. Only eight Clans have territories there, and most are small and geographically disbursed. That will buy us some time we need to prepare for the journey.

"Our holding force here on Strana Mechty will secure the attention of the Clans. We will need a strong military demonstration that will hold the focus of any adversaries." McEvedy said. "Every clan has an enclave and holding here. We will have enough military force here to pose a risk to them—it will force their attention to turn here. In the meantime, the ships we have and are borrowing from the boneyards will go to Circe and depart with the bulk of our people and expendables. The last force to withdraw will be those on Strana Mechty."

"I concur with your strategy, Khan. At the same time, moving that many people will be difficult at best."

"Remember, not everyone is coming," McEvedy replied. "There are some, even some of our Warriors, that are more loyal to Nicholas than to their own Clan. They will be allowed to remain. Enough of us are going to be risking our lives—I do not want people there that do not believe in what we are going to do."

“What will be their fates?”

McEvedy pondered that, but only for a moment from what Franklin could see. “Nicholas has his brutal moments, but he created the caste system to avoid injuring innocent people. Our civilians will be fought over by the Clans to incorporate into their own Clans. The Warriors that remain may face a harder existence, though realistically the ilKhan does appreciate and respect loyalty. In the end, they may suffer career issues, but should be fine.”

“And our property that we are abandoning? Your plan calls for some drastic measures.”

“Affirmative,” McEvedy said, sighing hard as if the decision was not easy. “The people we leave behind will have their homes untouched. Everything else is to be destroyed, put to the torch, or rendered worthless. We built those settlements and cities. I will not stand by and let other Clans simply walk in and take them and use them against us. The Widowmakers, Smoke Jaguars, and Jade Falcons may think that they can benefit from seizing our factories and laboratories and cities. I want them to find nothing of any benefit. Especially the Widowmakers.”

“I take it Khan Karrige is leading the charge against us?”

McEvedy nodded, rubbing her taped ribs from the trial where the Widowmakers had tried to kill her. “We were good friends at one time. Now he is becoming a bitter, old man. What bothers him most is that our people are happy and prosperous. He is a jealous neighbor, and he is letting his emotions get the best of him. Jason Karrige is someone to be watched carefully, Franklin. He is devious and is given to the old ways, the ways of politics. He is not alone. When we depart, I do not want him to be able to profit or advance his Clan—or any of the Clans for that matter—one bit.”

Scorched earth. It was a strategy that had been used countless times in the history of mankind. Franklin knew that it would have little effect on the Clans militarily. McEvedy also knew that. She was waging a psychological war on her fellow Khans. The mental image of them walking into one of the cities and finding nothing but a handful of civilian homes and the rest of the city smoldering and burning was going to stun the aggressors.

“Khan McEvedy—” he said carefully, not wanting to appear un-supportive of the strategy that the Switchback directive laid out. Then he caught himself using her bloodname. “Sarah. Nicholas is no fool, and has inherited the Kerensky genes for combat and

strategy. There is only one place for us to run. We may catch him off guard initially, and I think we will be successful. They will then come at us then with everything they have.” The saKhan knew that there was only one place that the Wolverines could go—back to The Inner Sphere. While the version of the plans he had read did not detail their ultimate destination, it was most likely because McEvedy knew that there was only one place they *could* go. Home. Back to the people that the Star League Defense Force had deserted decades before.

The Khan smiled at her junior’s words. “That is why we will not head immediately down the path of the Exodus fleet. Our initial jumps will take us outside of Clan-inhabited space, but not immediately towards the Inner Sphere. We will take our time and work our way around Clan-space and eventually back to the Inner Sphere, but we will be behind any clan-force looking for us.” As if to emphasize her points, she activated the holographic display and showed the intended route that her Wolverines would take.

“Are you sure?”

A quick nod answered the question. “Nicholas will mobilize quickly, he has to as soon as he realizes we are on the prowl. This will be an affront to his leadership of the Clans. You are right, he is no fool. He will set off in pursuit of us back to the Inner Sphere. He cannot risk us reaching the Inner Sphere and telling them what the Clans represent or their precise location. What he does not realize is that we will be moving *behind* him, slower, more carefully. Our first goal is to reach the world listed on the Exodus star charts as ‘Barbados.’” The light on the holographic display twinkled almost halfway back on the original Exodus fleet trail back to the Inner Sphere.

“Why there?”

“We do not have the time to plan and supply for the entire voyage back. Unlike when we first came from the Inner Sphere, we do not need colonization supplies. We will need food and water. Barbados was found by the Exodus fleet. It had ample fresh water and a wide range of edible native plant life, including several animals that could be used for food. We have to go to Barbados and re-supply enough for us to complete the journey back to the Inner Sphere. Nicholas and his fleet will be far in front of us, thinking they are hot on our tails.”

“Where will we go upon our return?”

McEvedy paused, her mouth slightly open. “I do not know, Franklin. We have only a limited amount of information as to what has unfolded since the SLDF pulled out on the Exodus. We recovered a stray jumpship from the Rim Worlds, but it offers only a vague idea of the wars that have erupted there. The Inner Sphere may not have changed at all, or it could be like the Pentagon worlds became before we liberated them. Jerome Blake may have been able to preserve some of what had been the League—we simply do not know for sure. General Kerensky and Nicholas both believed that war was inevitable. From what I saw during action in the Pentagon Civil Wars, a total war on the scale they predicted would leave entire worlds left asunder. Realistically though, none of us know what happened. Which means that when we return to the Inner Sphere, we have to be careful about the people we meet and the alliances we make.”

“What will the ilKhan do when he realizes that we are not fleeing in front of his fleet? He could turn about at any moment and catch us.”

“The only way he can know that is to reach the Inner Sphere himself and find that we are not there. By then we will have enough astrogation data to avoid following the Exodus path back into the Draconis Combine. We can pick and choose where we desire to return. Nicholas will either be forced to turn around and go home or confront the Inner Sphere with whatever forces he has with him. It is my hope that he will be so occupied with attempting to skirt the House military units that we can move around him.”

“There will be some of our people that do not make it to the departure points. I do not like the thought of leaving any Wolverines behind.”

McEvedy’s face hardened. “We learned a lot from the Exodus in terms of logistics, and Nicholas’s second Exodus to Strana Mechty at the onset of the civil wars gave us some insights as well. This is nowhere as ambitious a plan or operation, but the reality is that some of our people will not make it. They will be cut off, alone, left behind. I do not like it, not at all Franklin, but it is a reality, *quiaff*. Of course, contingencies will have to be made for them, plans for their survival.”

“You must have some thoughts about that, *quiaff*?”

“Aff. We will give orders for them to disperse, to hide, to blend in. It will be a hard life at first, but it is not as if they are hunted criminals. Over time, they will find lives with other Clans, and find

ways to ensure that our legacy continues on.”

Franklin stared at the holographic map and slowly turned his eyes back to Khan McEvedy. “As they used to say, ‘on paper it looks good.’”

“That is not enough and you know it,” McEvedy replied, leaning back slowly and wincing slightly. *Her injuries are still tugging at her.* “Nicholas is not used to people that do not follow his commands. From what I have seen in my life, the entire concept of someone not doing what he says is something almost alien to him. When we bolt for freedom, he will come at us not just with Wolves, but with every Clan.”

“What about bidding? Surely that will help mitigate the damage to our people should they engage us?”

McEvedy shook her head. “You must understand. Remember the *Prinz Eugen* incident? Nicholas was the driving force behind what happened there, as much as people point to Aleksandr. Mercy... pity...they will all fall by the wayside when his anger cuts loose. After twenty years of fighting, there is finally peace. Defiance is not a concept that the ilKhan deals with well. Regardless of our formal rules and traditions, he will somehow ensure that the Wolverines are no more. I fear that defeat on the battlefield may not be enough for him.”

Franklin said nothing for a moment. *Gone. The ilKhan wants us gone. What crimes have we committed that would have led to this moment? The allowing of individuals to change castes? Negative! That could not be it, not alone. Why have they all turned against us? We are just like all of the others are our core, yet every Clan has started to view the Wolverines with contempt and hate.* “This plan will work, my Khan. It has to. There is no other alternative. If we remain and do nothing, the Clans will strip us of what we are Trial-by-Trial.”

“I believe that there are others that see things the way we do. On the political side I plan to meet with Nicholas one-on-one to see what his feelings are, if he will open up to me. I don’t want to have to execute these plans, and I hope I can find something in Nicholas to avert this. It is a slim hope,” she conceded.

“You will know when the time comes when I call for secession of the Wolverines. This will test to see if those that have told me that they believe the way we do have the courage to take a stand. That will also be our cue that we should begin execution of Switchback

immediately. We have to move before the other Clans rally against us. It will also buy any allies we may gain in the Council time to act as well."

"These other Clans...will they risk rising against Nicholas and the Grand Council?"

She shrugged. "I know them well enough that I believe some may have the courage to join us. Until that time, I am unprepared to share our plans with anyone else. As it stands, no one fully knows what is going on, which means that The Watch and Nicholas do not know—only you, Franklin. While many of our people are working on this operation, they do not realize the full scope of it."

There was a moment of silence between the Wolverines, the two generations of the Clans. Franklin respected McEvedy as a family matriarch. She had been part of the Star League Defense Force. She had been in the epic battles to reclaim the Pentagon Worlds, ending the Civil Wars. Franklin had come later to Nicholas's banner; he had served, but had not been part of the Star League. He had skills, strong combat and leadership skills, that much was true. What he did not have was the experience that a woman like McEvedy possessed. If he was lucky, he would live long enough to develop those skills. "Tell me, Khan. What would you have me do?"

"For now, stick to the plan outlines for Switchback. I want you to direct what intelligence elements you have in place to begin monitoring the other Clans, especially the Widowmakers. We need to be ready should they move prematurely. You will accompany me to the Grand Council session in two days. They plan on dividing up the Brian Cache that we now have. I plan to do what I can to delay that, or at least throw some confusion into their plans."

"I will not fail you."

McEvedy grinned, obviously pushing back her pain. "I only hope that I do not fail *you*, Franklin."

Clan Widowmaker Hall

Strana Mechty

9 October 2823

Khan Jason Karrige of Clan Widowmaker looked at the communication he had received from Circe, and allowed himself a private smile. Things had not been going according to plan as of late. He had hoped that Sarah McEvedy would have had the courtesy and honor to die during the Trial of Refusal that had killed saKhan Robertson. Still, seeing his old acquaintance weary and crippled made her appear weak in the eyes of the other Khans. *Who am I kidding, she is weak.* The report from his handful of operatives on Circe made the Wolverines even weaker. If all went as he hoped, he would not have to finish off McEvedy...the Grand Council would do it for him. His Widowmakers would simply have to mop up the remains.

What he had on Circe was insurance.

He knew that McEvedy would overreact about the decision to divvy up the Brian Cache. That was why he had sneaked in two of his own Warriors disguised as Wolverines. McEvedy and her Warriors never saw it coming, never saw the threat that the tactical nuclear weapons posed. The two infiltrators had penetrated the bunker and smuggled out one of the nuclear warheads.

The ilKhan was so focused on the agitation and allegations that the Wolverines had leveled that he never saw how events were really unfolding. Nicholas hated challenges to his authority, nor was he willing to tolerate them. Exposing The Watch had been a good move on the part of McEvedy, but she had overplayed it, which only served to infuriate the ilKhan. Now Nicholas Kerensky saw the Wolverines more as rebels than as part of his society. Pushed further, Sarah McEvedy would react even more strongly, and only add fuel to the fire that was burning in the soul of the ilKhan. Karrige knew that if he presented the ilKhan with a "solution" to the Wolverine issue that he and the rest of the Grand Council would leap at it. And the solution was seductively easy.

And if they didn't overplay their hand, well, there was the nuclear warhead. *Matters could be forced...* Properly managed, he could create a crisis that even the quick-thinking McEvedy could not escape.

One way or another, the age of the Wolverine Clan was going to come to an end.

The Grand Council Chambers
Strana Mechty
Clan Space
10 October 2823

Sarah McEvedy watched the ilKhan rise from his seat and convene the session. In the chair along the outer wall sat her new saKhan, Franklin Hallis. It was a shame that Franklin had come for his first and possibly last day of ever seeing a session. She remembered a time when she was proud to sit at the council table. Now that time had passed, it was tainted by the people around her. McEvedy was willing to press matters with the Grand Council to defend her Clan. Even if the risks associated with it placed her people at risk. *They are already at risk, they simply do not realize it.*

"I notice that the seat of the saKhan of the Wolverines is filled today," Nicholas said, casting a suspicious gaze at Franklin. "Is there a reason for this, Khan McEvedy?"

She shifted in her seat and felt the ever-present throb in her chest from the broken ribs still strain each breath. "It is my pleasure to present to you and the esteemed members of this Council our new saKhan, Franklin Hallis."

Nicholas cocked an eyebrow, and for a moment his face appeared to be that of his father, Aleksandr, but only for a moment. "This surprises me. Trials for leadership of a Clan are always attended by me. I was not invited to any such trial."

The rest of the eyes in the room, along with their contempt, fell on McEvedy. "ilKhan, there was no Trial for this position. The other candidates qualified for this role did not oppose Star Colonel Hallis's ascension."

A murmur rose, but only for a second. "I find that impossible to believe, Khan McEvedy. We are the Clans. Ambition and growth are part of who we are. Are you telling me that none of your people desired the role of saKhan, *quineg*? That makes no sense."

"Negative, ilKhan. I spoke with the candidates beforehand. I told them that Franklin was my choice to succeed saKhan Robertson. They respected my decision and withdrew from consideration. He stood unopposed for the role."

"You cajoled them into withdrawing," fired off Khan Jorgenson of the Ghost Bears. "It is a move that lacks honor."

Sarah's face tightened. She could feel it. "I did not intimidate my Warriors. My people respect me. Perhaps if the Ghost Bears leadership was as strong as ours, you would understand." Jorgenson often spoke with a bitter streak of sarcasm, Sarah knew that. His devotion to the Ghost Bears was admirable, but he often did not see beyond his own Clan. His version of events during the Pentagon Wars was as tainted as other Khans. Each Clan recorded their history from their perspective – often at the expense of the full truth. *In years to come, that will be our weakness.*

Khan Karrige of the Widowmakers chuckled, a noise that was disturbing to McEvedy. "I was unaware that you were so popular with your people, Khan McEvedy. Apparently they place more faith in you than they do in the ilKhan, this Council, or the traditions of our Clans." Karrige had made this personal. He had, in two sentences, drawn a line between McEvedy and everyone else in the room.

I have to try and step back from the brink, it can save lives. Before she could say anything, Nicholas cut in. "I would say that any such ascension to the role of saKhan is not official unless I preside over it as ilKhan. Further, Khan McEvedy, if there was no combat Trial, there can be no one assuming such a role or a seat at this table."

Sarah was dumbfounded. *I never thought that this would be this big of an issue. I should have guessed, given Nicholas's ego.* She had known him a long time, and for the first time she felt he was being manipulated by those in the room around her. Sarah had always seen Nicholas as the great manipulator, but now she saw that there was another side to him, one that her peers could take advantage of. "IlKhan, there is no such law or rede that binds us that I am aware of."

Nicholas balled his fist and hit the great round table. "It is tradition. A tradition, I might add, that your Wolverines are not exempt from. Until this matter is settled according to our laws," he cast a fleeting glance over at Franklin. "*Star Colonel Hallis, you are not welcome at this session.*"

Franklin rose slowly, looking at Sarah, then at the ilKhan. He pulled his uniform taut, as if to grapple with his dignity. There were no words that McEvedy could offer that could take away the shame. The verbal sparring with the ilKhan and the Grand Council had taken another victim, this time Franklin. No one in the room spoke until the door clicked shut behind Hallis.

"You have embarrassed us all," the Jade Falcon Khan spat from her seat.

“Have you no sense of respect for the ilKhan, *quineg?*” added Khan Osis of the Smoke Jaguars.

Others chimed in. Sarah said nothing. Even on the most minor point the Grand Council was mounted against her, poised to strike. She was alone, very much alone, in a room of former friends and confidants. Kerensky let the remarks and insults continue for a few moments, then motioned for silence. The Grand Council chambers fell quiet. “We shall begin the bidding for the challenges for the contents of the Brian Cache located on Circe.” His patience level was gone, Sarah knew that. He was changing subjects simply out of boredom and frustration. *Classic Nicholas. Predictable...but at the same time not.* She did not underestimate the ilKhan. He was a genius, like his father—like his brother. At the same time, she stirred from fending off the verbal attacks.

I cannot sit for this. She slid her chair back. “IlKhan...with all due respect, I cannot abide by these Trials. The claims against my Clan have been made with extreme prejudice. I will excuse myself rather than soil my honor in this way.”

Nicholas cut to the chase. “This session has been called and convened. I was willing to allow your display of anger before out of courtesy, Khan McEvedy—not again. If you leave, your Wolverines will have no part in the bidding for the contents of that Cache. There will be no Refusals taken if you do not take part in the Trials of Possession Khan McEvedy, am I clear, *quiaff?*” He spoke like a lawyer, a politician, not a Warrior. *I have not sullied my honor Nicholas, but apparently you are willing to.*

Sarah knew this was an all-out confrontation. She gritted her teeth as she spoke, holding her voice as steady as possible. “The Possession of that Brian Cache and its contents are in the hands of the Wolverines. Some of those materials there are from the 331st Division of the Star League Defense Forces—my father’s old unit, a unit that is part of our Clan now. If anyone wants to take these goods, they will have to pry them from our claws.” She slid the chair back further and prepared to rise.

Khan Mitchell Loris of the Mongoose Clan spoke up. “Khan McEvedy, you go too far.”

“Do I, Loris?” she snapped. The Mongooses were an annoyance she didn’t need at this moment. “I know many of you in this chamber have found our ilKhan’s actions offensive. Until recently, we never spied on each other. What are we becoming as a people? Is it worth it? I think not.”

Nicholas seemed to survey the room. “My honorable friend, the Khan of Clan Wolverine, continues to ignore the decisions of this body, as verified by the recent Trial. I do not care that this cache is that of the 331st Royal Division, her father’s command—nor should you. We are a people of law. I am not above the law any more than any one of you.” Nicholas, ever the master of the room, turned back to her. “I ask you as a friend, think through your actions carefully.”

He was backing her into a corner. She knew it. “We will hang by your laws, either separately, or together.” She took a strained step towards the door.

“You have no standing on this issue if you walk through that door!” barked Nicholas.

McEvedy turned slowly. “I understand fully what I am doing, ilKhan.” She swept the room once more with her eyes. “And if any of you have the courage to see this farce for what it is, you will join me.”

No one stirred or moved.

“You cannot do this,” Nicholas implored. “My fellow Khans, our colleague is clearly overwrought. I call for a vote of censure. Loremaster Ward, please—”

She took her cane and slapped it down on the table, the echoing *crack* cutting the ilKahn off. “Does the truth hurt so much, Nicholas? So much that you are willing to sacrifice not just me but your own people—a people that have shed blood in your name?”

“You go too far,” he said in a low tone.

“Then ilKhan, do what you must,” she said, pulling the cane back. “I will do the same.” She stepped through the doors.

“She should be arrested!” barked Franklin Osis behind her.

“Arrest her? I think not,” Nicholas said, the last sound she heard as the door slammed behind her.

In the hallway, McEvedy spotted Franklin standing idly by, reading his noteputer. He was obviously more calmed after his embarrassment in front of the Grand Council. She hobbled to him on the cane, leaning in on her compatriot, huddling close.

Franklin cut to the chase. “That did not go well.”

“Nicholas has become more fickle over the years.” It was a massive understatement, and she regretted it the moment she spoke the words. *They almost arrested me. Our clan does not have long before Nicholas makes his move.*

“I fear that I only added to the issues facing our people.”

“Negative. If nothing else, it tells me just how resolved the Grand Council is against our Wolverines. You saw that for yourself.”

“So what is next?”

McEvedy leaned in even tighter, putting her arm around Franklin’s shoulder like a mother. “I will meet with the ilKhan in a place where he and I can speak alone, where I can try to reach him one more time. A part of me feels it is a wasted effort, but I have to try.”

“And me?”

“You, Franklin, are going to contact Star Captain Ebon. Send an additional Trinary to support her, place them under her command. Tell her that the other Clans will most likely be coming soon. She is to strip that Brian Cache of anything of value except the nuclear weapons. Carrying them would be a burden that I would never deploy anyway. Besides, those are the real sore spot of that Cache. Other than that, if any other Clan approaches, she is authorized to defend the facility.”

“Such an action is bound to lead to conflict.”

Khan McEvedy smiled. “Yes. It will. Our enemies will need to know that we are not weak, that we have the conviction to defend what we believe in. Wolverines can both gnaw and maul at the same time.”

McKenna's Pride, McKenna-class WarShip
Geosynchronous Orbit
Strana Mechty
Clan Space
11 October 2823

As the airlock hissed and opened McEvedy slid her cane into her belt loop and used the hand grips to pull herself aboard the *McKenna's Pride*. A guard wearing the uniform of the Cloud Cobras saluted her as she drifted in. "Khan McEvedy. I was informed by the ilKhan that the two of you were coming aboard, sir. This way, if you please." The young guard pushed off down a long corridor.

This ship was special for all of the Clans. It had been the flagship of General Aleksandr Kerensky during the original Exodus of the Star League Defense Force. When he died, Nicholas had him interred in a special glass coffin aboard the ship. Originally Aleksandr had been laid to rest in a normal tomb, but people had flocked to it as an almost religious site. Sarah knew that bothered Nicholas, his father had been the only light that had ever outshone him.

So, he ordered a re-interment of the body. The former flagship remained fully operational, and was placed in orbit over Katyusha City on Strana Mechty. In the parks, telescopes were mounted so that citizens could look up and see their "great father" hovering over them. A guarding star of troops from each Clan rotated in every few months, taking a shift guarding the body. This month must be the duties of the Cloud Cobras. If she remembered correctly, the Steel Vipers would take over in a just a few days.

Other than the guards, there was a small maintenance team that kept the ship in full working order. Nicholas had ordered that the *Pride* was to be kept fully operational. Her engines, guns, even jump drive were ready for action. It was a memorial to his father and at the same time, it was a powerful ship of battle. McEvedy looked around. She had been aboard the *McKenna's Pride* before, a few times, once when she had been on active service. She studied the ship's interior as she followed the guard, checked the corridors. *I imagine Nicholas hates coming here. His father and brother are reminders of his past. Keeping the General up here, the people can only look upward. No competition or comparisons with his leadership.*

She entered the officer's mess, which had been converted to the tomb for Aleksandr Kerensky. The coffin had a piece of ferroglas across the top and flat-finished metallic sides. The sides were adorned with the Cameron Star, the symbol of the former Star League. The guards stood with their backs to the coffin, facing outward. The figure of one of the greatest generals of all time lay with his arms crossed over his chest. His gray command uniform was adorned with his medals, his eyes closed. It was as if he were sleeping. McEvedy closed her eyes for a moment of respect, ignoring the fact that Nicholas, Aleksandr's son, stood at the head of the coffin.

"Leave us," the ilKhan commanded the guards. They made their way out of the room. The windows to the mess were open, giving a view of Strana Mechty below. The blue and green orb of the world shimmered as McEvedy moved closer. Nicholas did not betray any emotions as he floated next to his dead father. *He has seen so much death during the occupation and the civil wars that even the death of someone close to him does not move him.*

As the last guard turned and sealed the hatch behind him, Nicholas crossed his arms and spoke from the head of the coffin. "Why did you choose here to speak, Sarah? Did you think that the presence of my father would somehow help your pleas with me? Your performance in the Grand Council is not something I intend to let pass lightly."

The zero gravity removed much of the pain that she had been feeling, and McEvedy felt more confident than she had in a long time. "Negative, ilKhan. I just realized that we are approaching a time of change. This place means a lot to me—your father means a great deal to me. I thought that I would come here one more time. None of us know when a visit to such a place might be our last. Besides, I knew that we could speak here without interference."

There was an uncomfortable pause before Nicholas spoke. "You are starting down a path that you cannot turn back from."

"I am beginning to see that. I was hoping I could come to you, as a friend, as a woman that trusts you, and see if you can give me advice on how to avoid the conflict that I see coming."

Nicholas offered no emotion. "Your Wolverines have grown very strong. The new technology you are working on, the new BattleMechs you have introduced, your skills in the Trials, all show you becoming the most powerful of the Clans. In most respects, I admire what you have done with your people."

“At the same time, it makes us a threat.”

“Our people do not respond to threats well. Sarah, there are numerous Clans working against your Wolverines. I am no fool. I know they believe they are guiding my actions—I assure you they are not. You need to know that they will not permit you to become even more powerful.”

“And you, ilKhan?”

Kerensky turned slightly and looked out of the window down at Strana Mechty, refusing eye contact with McEvedy. “Our people are stagnating, Sarah. You have seen it. With no enemies, no conflicts, their bonds to each other are weakening. They want the caste system relaxed. They seek some of what we have turned our backs on. They question the directions that we have traveled together. This is a time when our values are being tested.”

“And my Wolverines?”

“You represent one possible future. It is not a future that I subscribe to or endorse, however.” Nicholas turned and locked his gaze to McEvedy’s. “I *built* this society, the Clans, with a vision. It is not for you or any of the Khans to question or attempt to change that.”

The words hurt. Nicholas was scolding her. “It was never my intent to erode what you built. I was serving my people.”

“As am I. The difference is, I answer to a higher calling.”

“IlKhan, the options for me, for the Wolverines, are becoming limited. What do you desire me to do?”

Nicholas said nothing for a moment, but placed his hand on the ferroglass of the coffin, over the face of his father. McEvedy was not sure if it was a loving touch, or if he was covering his father’s face. “I see no hope for the Wolverines going forward. Several Khans are going to move against you. They will seek to remove your clan once and for all—absorbing you into their own holdings. They want the technology you are developing, the hardware that you have created, your territories, your people.”

“There are no provisions for absorbing a Clan.”

“There will be. They will create them.”

“And you see no hope for us?”

“There are nineteen other Clans, Sarah. All seek to benefit in some way from your demise. At the same time, it sends a clear message to all of them to not stray from the path I have laid down, or risk the same fate. I will not stand in the way of the Grand Council. Your Wolverines will serve as an example to the other Clans, to my people, of what happens when any one Clan becomes too powerful. It will force a level of self-correction to the Grand Council. It will prevent us all from turning on each other.”

“That is why you sent The Watch after us...you were conspiring against us.”

“I do not conspire,” he snapped back. “I lead the Clans!”

McEvedy rubbed her chin in thought. *They have already ordained our destruction, our absorption, perhaps even something worse. They will come at us like vultures, picking at our carcasses. If we are one thing as a people, it is relentless.* “IIKhan, you know that I cannot sit back and do nothing while the other Clans come at us. I am a leader, and must do what I can to protect my people. You would expect no less of me.”

Nicholas lifted his hands from the ferroglas over his father’s corpse. “I know you will, Sarah. In fact, I am counting on it.”

He was counting on it. A good fight, a bloody contest on the part of the Wolverines would solidify people behind him. We are to be made an example of. Testimony to his authority and rule.

“IIKhan...Nicholas,” she went for the personal touch with her leader. “This is not necessary. Innocents will die. My people and others can be spared. There must be another way.” She knew the answer before she asked, but asking was necessary.

“Even the Nova Cats will not be able to side with your Wolverines, nor will the Snow Ravens. They would like to, but they can not do so. Your enemies are many and determined. If I spare you, I will be all but acknowledging changes to the society I created. I can not do that.”

“I could renounce the changes I have employed. I can step down as Khan.”

Nicholas showed his teeth with a grin. “It would send ripples to other Clans. The message to the other Khans would not be sufficient, Sarah. Loss of rank or even your life is not enough to drive home the point. Pain, suffering, war—that is necessary to bring my people together. When they see the fury we are capable of to

our own brothers and sisters, the more rebellious elements will fall in line.”

“You are selling us out,” McEvedy said in a low tone, looking down at Nicholas’s father. “You are using us to scare others into your way of thinking. This is akin to genocide.”

“I am being a leader. *Your* leader, until you allowed yourself to be corrupted by your lower castes and your own ego.”

“I have no desire to face you across the field of battle,” she confessed.

Nicholas did not seem to share the pain. “We will both do what is necessary.”

The Tiki Province
Circe
Clan Space
11 October 2823

Point Commander Cale signaled the first contact with a hint of tension in his voice. Star Captain Trish Ebon listened carefully. *I have to set the tone here.* "This is Amber Star. I have multiple signals on the ground and closing at moderate speed on your position."

She licked her lips. Both the Khan and the new saKhan had contacted her and had given her both warning and rules of engagement. Reinforcements had arrived, and her work had been stepped up from simple inventorying of the Brian Cache to removal of the goods that were inside. "You are authorized to ignore our normal rules and conditions for Combat Trials," Franklin had told her. She had heard the words but at the same time had cursed them. Total war was an ugly thing. The rules regarding Trials had removed some of that horror. Now her Khans were unleashing her from their restrictions.

Damn them all.

Her own long-range sensors picked up the mag readings of multiple BattleMechs closing on her position. She switched to tie in communications and read their IFF transponders. It was a mix of Clan forces. Jade Falcons—no surprise there, given their loss of the bunker earlier. There was a Ghost Bear contingent, a star of 'Mechs. The Wolves were there, and the Coyotes. The Steel Vipers were present as well, though they only came with a pair of BattleMechs. It was insulting on its own.

These were the forces that had won the Trials of Possession for the Brian Cache. The only problem was that they had no right to it. It was property of the Wolverines. Trish knew she had some advantages in the fight. These were discreet Clan forces. They would not be willing to coordinate their efforts. She could divide them easily enough, since they would struggle to work together. Numerically, the odds were even. She knew the terrain well enough, but the Jade Falcons had scouted it and knew it as well.

The best edge she had was that she was not going to stand on formality. The Khans had told her that she didn't have to, and she wasn't going to. Trish had met with her Warriors and told them

what was happening, told them that these Clans were going to come. She told them that they were coming to rob the Wolverines. They were behind her and behind Khan McEvedy. "We have incoming targets. I will attempt to..." she hesitated for a moment, "...negotiate with them. If that does not work, I expect you all do to what is right for your Clan."

Negotiate? *Negative. I want to lay waste to them. I hate having responsibility.*

Trish switched to the broadband channel. "This is Star Captain Trish Ebon of Clan Wolverine. Approaching force, identify yourself and your intentions."

After a moment, a deep voice came on. "This is Star Captain Jacob Hall of Clan Ghost Bear. We represent the winners of Trials of Possession for the contents of the Brian Cache you are occupying. Under the authority of the Grand Council of the Clans, we have come to claim what is ours; won by battle and blood."

I do not think so. "Negative," she replied. "You are on soil owned by Clan Wolverine. We do not recognize these Trials you speak of. This is a holding of our Clan and possessions of our people. If you approach and attempt to steal the material here, we will be forced to defend ourselves."

The pause told her they were trying to figure out the best way to deal with the situation. "With what forces will you defend this Cache?"

So, you want to play by the rules, query affirmative? "It will not work that way, Star Captain. In our eyes, you are invaders and plunderers. We cannot and will not tolerate a move against this facility."

"You would risk civil war with the Clans, *quineg?*"

I am not risking anything."

A laugh, a deep, dark belly laugh. "Let us see what you have."

Trish looked at her sensors. Total war had come to Circe.



“Amber Star, sweep to the west and then cut back. Hit the flank of those Coyotes! Make them howl!” Trish said through gritted teeth. Her new model *Pulverizer* felt smooth and steady under her control. A Ghost Bear *Sentinel* painted blue/gray was trying to drive on her own flank, but she had other plans. The *Pulverizer* she piloted was equipped with one of the new extended range particle projection cannons, “gutbusters,” they were nicknamed by the Warriors for their enhanced damage. She swung her gut-buster online to her current trigger and locked her targeting reticle onto the *Sentinel*.

The Ghost Bear’s Ultra autocannon spat a nasty barrage of shells that hit her cockpit...a reminder that these Warriors were playing for keeps. She returned the favor, firing the ER PPC. The brilliant blue flash of charged particles hit the flank of the Ghost Bear Warrior. It furrowed deep, sending a spray of molten armor splattering into the air. The *Sentinel* reeled in mid-step, then went down. It showed as operational, but was out of the fight for a few minutes.

The battle had been going well. As she had expected, each of the attackers was trying to fight the Wolverines alone on their terms. The Steel Vipers’ pair of *Lancelots* had punched through her pickets and driven into her Star—taking down two Wolverine ‘Mechs before both succumbed to deadly barrages.

The Jade Falcons had tried to take advantage of the fight and turn the flank. She had not been so forgiving. In the tight wooded area where they had tried to move she had caught them on a ridge commonly known as Wombat Ridge. The plummet down the ridge to the river was deadly and almost impassible for a ‘Mech. Her force had pushed them off the high ground. The cost had been considerable, but the end she had smashed Star Captain Trall’s *Bombardier* with two salvos herself. In the wooded terrain the long-range firepower of the Falcon ‘Mechs had been all but neutralized.

Her force was mangled despite their victories. She still had a Star and-a-half of BattleMechs on the field, but all of them had taken some damage. Point Commander Cale reported that the only force that had not attacked yet was the Wolves. Like their namesakes, they skirted the edge of the battlezone, stalking, awaiting the right moment to strike.

Trish decided to not wait any longer. “All units reform on a line due west of the trail road.” The roadway had been hastily cut through the woods to remove the material from the Brian Cache. It

was nothing more than a muddy bog most of the time, but the dryness of the last few days had turned it into hardened clay and dust. It was also one of the few areas where the terrain was clear enough for a shot. "We will hit the Wolves and fall back to the road. We'll wrap up their flanks there and eradicate them."

Lumbering her *Pulverizer* to the road, she watched her long-range sensors and was surprised to find the Wolves were turning her flank. "Bloody hell."

"Say again?" came back Cale's voice.

"The Wolves are shifting towards the Cache. All units form on the road and charge to the bunker." The column fell in behind her and started at a full trot down the road.

The Wolf Clan BattleMechs were spread out on the top of the Brian Cache. Felled trees were everywhere, casually taken down by the laborers of the Wolverines. Firing down the roadway, they could not miss the lead 'Mech—her 'Mech. Her *Pulverizer* caught a salvo of no less than forty long-range missiles and multiple lasers. Trish felt her brand new BattleMech grind and moan around her as she pressed forward enough into the small clearing so that her force could fan out on the flanks.

Her footing slipped. She danced her targeting reticle down as her 'Mech fell. As the sight drifted across a Wolf *Crab*, a cobalt burst of energy hit the right arm of the tube-like 'Mech and tossed it hard back, sending its laser shot searing into the wood line beyond her.

The *Pulverizer* dropped hard and she saw the damage indicators paint a horrible story of carnage. Yellows and reds covered her torso and legs, indicating that the armor had been holed in many places. The *Thorn* behind her, piloted by Warrior Cox, only lasted for a single salvo before it was obliterated. The Wolf Clan *Crab* went down, probably from a shot from Cale's *Stag II*. The *Stag II* was one of the prototypes rushed out of the plant. Cale's still had only gray undercoating for paint on it. Using the *Stag* chassis, it had a much larger engine and weapons mix, trading speed and death for armor.

The woods burst into flames as she rocked her *Pulverizer* back up. The sides were not evenly matched. She saw that. *We might win the day but have nothing left to show for it. And the Wolves get nothing but an empty bunker.* Her long-range sensors showed that two of the badly damaged Ghost Bear 'Mechs, including the

Sentinel that she had taken down earlier, were back up and looking for a fight.

“Wolverines!” she called out to her unit. “We need to fall back. Drop into the woods and fall back.”

“Sir?” Cale called.

“Let them have those nukes. It is all that is left there anyway,” she said wearily. As if to emphasize her point, she fired her lasers at the *Highlander* that the Wolves were moving forward. The hit did nothing but seem to mess up the paint job on the massive Assault ‘Mech, but it was enough for them to know that they had been struck and struck hard by the Wolverines. *Let them gnaw on that for a while.*

***The Grand Council Chambers
Strana Mechty
Clan Space
11 October 2823***

“Word has come in from my Wolves on Circe,” Khan Winson said. “The Wolverine Clan has refused the ruling of this Council. When our forces landed, they refused to adhere to the Trials for the materials. The Clans that arrived were attacked. The only ones that emerged triumphant were my Wolves.”

“Only because your Wolf Warriors did not shed blood, but waited for others to fight the superior Wolverine numbers,” Khan Breen of the Steel Vipers responded.

Nicholas Kerensky looked at them with some concern on his face. “They fought then?”

“Without following the rede of combat that we all have followed since the founding, they have fragrantly flaunted their intentions to stand alone against the Clans.”

The door opened to the Grand Council chambers and Khan McEvedy entered.

The Ghost Bear Khan rose to his feet at the sight of his former comrade. “You have a lot of gall coming in here today after what your people have done.”

McEvedy walked steadier with the cane. She moved towards the table, but not to her seat. “I heard of the events that unfolded on Circe myself. I was not going to come today, but there has been enough verbal stabs in the back by the members of this Council. I thought I would ensure that if anyone has something to say, they can do it to my face.”

“You are out of order,” Nicholas said coolly.

“Apologies, I Khan,” she bowed his head. There was not a great deal of conviction in her voice.

“Do you deny what happened?” Hazen of the Jade Falcons spat.

“Of course not. All of you have blood on your hands because of this.”

“I strongly suggest that you watch your words, Khan McEvedy,” Nicholas’s words were sharper and louder this time.

Sarah ignored him. It felt invigorating.

“Have you not told them ilKhan, *quineg*? Have you not disclosed your plans? The ilKhan and I spoke. This course of action has already been decided. The Wolverines are to be a whipping-boy for the rest of you, a force to unify you all. We have been set up since day one to be a role model for the Clans—a role model of what happens if you do not follow the will of the ilKhan.” She was yelling at the Grand Council, perhaps the only member to do so other than Nicholas himself.

“Silence! By our laws you may—”

She relished cutting him off mid-sentence, something he hated. “I will not be silent. You seek to crush us. I will not go down without a fight.”

“You will take your seat,” Nicholas commanded, pointing to the chair at the great round table.

“I am afraid I cannot do that, Nicholas,” she said, using the first name of the ilKhan as if it were an insult. “I am no longer a member of this Council.”

“What?” came the voice of the Jade Falcon Khan.

“Given the events on Circe and this Council’s misguided direction,” she turned and shot a glare at Nicholas, “I cannot tolerate sitting here and taking part in this farce. My Wolverines are seceding from the Clans. We wish to rule ourselves rather than be a part of this current leadership. I know a number of you feel the same way, and we invite you to do the same.” She cast a glance down the table, pausing only with the Snow Raven’s Khan Merrell. She lowered her eyes, refusing to make contact with him. Others balled their fists, some simply sneered back with venom in their eyes.

“There is no provision in our law for a Clan to secede,” Nicholas said. “So as I commanded before, take your place at the table.”

McEvedy turned to face the ilKhan. “No Nicholas, I will not. Just because there is no rule against seceding does not mean we cannot do it. My Wolverines desire peace with you all. Know this though, if any of you come after us, we will use any and all means at our disposal to defend ourselves. If you come at us, prepare to reap the whirlwind.”

“Heresy!” barked the saKhan of the Fire Mandrills.

"You will not make threats in this chamber," the ilKhan commanded.

"I am not making threats!" McEvedy retorted. "I am stating fact. My Clan, my people, we have all been set up. Your petty jealousies of the progresses that my Wolverines have made have soured you to the truth. The ilKhan seeks to use a war against us to solidify your support for him and the culture he is forming. Your jealousies taint all of you."

"Traitor!" The Ghost Bear Khan rose to his feet and pounded his fist on the table. It sounded like a roar of thunder in the chamber.

"Hans, I am not a traitor to anything other than the corruption that has poisoned this Council." She turned to face Khan Karrige. "My so-called equals lack the courage to face me like Warriors on the field of battle. They conspire behind closed doors and in the shadows. I have no use for such men."

Karrige laughed, but it was more bravado than anything else. "You are digging your own grave."

"The grave I dig will hold your Widowmakers as well, Jason."

"Enough of this!" Nicholas commanded.

"I call for a new Trial, a Trial of Absorption against the Wolverines!" Khan Osis of the Smoke Jaguars called from the far end of the table.

For a moment, there was no sounds in the room. An eerie silence fell like darkness on the Grand Council chamber.

McEvedy surveyed the room. "Leave me and my people alone," she said softly. "Because if you do not, I will be forced to do things that you cannot imagine." Using her cane, she made her way to the door. It echoed behind her as it slammed shut.

Nicholas turned to the shattered Grand Council. "I believe someone here made a motion..."

General Order Wolverine 014

"To Those of Wolverine Blood:

"Dark times are upon us, and I turn to you for your support. The experiment of Nicholas Kerensky known as The Clans has come to a juxtaposition, and the time has come for us to walk one of two paths. The path that the ilKhan has chosen is one that offers an ever-reducing number of freedoms and opportunities for personal growth. The path I offer for you is one where your destiny is your own...and that your children can grow up in a society where they can find their own providence.

"We are breaking our ties to our fellow Clans. There are some that would see this as an act of rebellion. It is not. It is an act of self-preservation. It is best for us to stand alone than under the heels of those that see themselves as our betters. As your leader, this is the choice I alone am empowered to make.

"I am repealing the caste system immediately. Furthermore, I am returning the right for families to select their own partners and to return to more traditional family units. Surnames will return shortly as well. We will find a way to honor those in the Warrior ranks that have earned this right. We have the right of self-determination and self-destiny. The era of the ilKhan's suppression of these rights is over.

"This choice will bring about changes for us all. We must act to preserve the Wolverine heritage. Some of you will be torn between your loyalties to the ilKhan and that of your Clan. I understand this, and promise you that anyone seeking asylum with the other Clans is welcome to do so. No ill will is offered, and safe passage from our territories will be granted.

"While I hope that our former allies and comrades would treat us as welcome neighbors, the reality is that some opportunists are bound to take advantage of our political situation and attempt to seize power for themselves. For those of you that stay, we face difficulties and hurdles that are still unknown. We will face them as we always have, as family. We will not retreat from the principles of the Star League that we carried with us from the Inner Sphere. Our honor and integrity is not a bargaining chip with our former peers.

"Additional information will be forthcoming. In the meantime, prepare as you would for a time of war. Go about your daily rou-

tines, but recognize that interruptions and changes are inevitable. When called upon to act, I count on you to act. We must all prepare for the tough times that are bound to come.

“Only through our unity as a people can we one day emerge from this approaching twilight.”

“Sarah McEvedy, Khan, Clan Wolverine”

BATTLECORPS

**Wolverine Enclave Williamsport
Lum
Clanspace
11 October 2823**

The bidding had been more vicious than Star Captain Douglas ever had imagined. The Widowmakers had been whittling away at the bidding with his Clan Mongoose for hours. Now that the Mongoose Clan had won, they stood poised to swing into the small city of Williamsport and seize the laboratories and holdings there.

The Wolverines would pay for their treachery.

A Trial of Absorption. He had never heard of that before. He had only been out of his sibling company for three years now, and this would be his first large scale Trial. His youth had been with other Warriors, all training in combat, now the real test would come. The Wolverines had held the city for years. It was where they conducted weapons research, if the information he had was right. He and the binary of 'Mechs under his command would sweep in and catch the defenders off guard. They would fight them, crush them, and the city would be the possession of his troops.

His Khan had told him that the Wolverines would most likely not be fighting according to Clan customs and traditions, and for Douglas that made things even more irritating. Rumors had abounded that the Wolverines had declared themselves independent, that they had renounced Nicholas Kerensky and the other Clans. They had threatened total war with the Clans. He had heard that they had desecrated the memorials to the Star League on Strana Mechty. Even in his own city there had been graffiti on the walls of a warehouse, scribbled by some lower caste scum, calling Khan McEvedy a hero. *Hero? No, she was not a hero.* The lower castes saw that because of her reputation for supporting their ilk. McEvedy had lost her way, forgotten her place in society—Douglas was sure of that.

He was also sure that his force would teach the errant Khan the price of her mistake.

His Mongoose forces would be the first test by the Grand Council of the resolve of the Wolverines, at least that was what his Khan had said. Douglas was ready. He would teach them the respect and honor that only a true Clan warrior could exemplify.

Smoke rose from the valley below. Not heavy smoke, but wisps of gray and white. It did not appear to be the normal pollution of a city, it was far more extensive. His first concern was that the Wolverines were employing some sort of gas attack. He checked the sensors on his *Hermes* and detected no biological, radiological, or toxic fumes. *Fire? Negative.* Had the Widowmakers or some other Clan cheated and rushed in before him to secure a victory?

"Sneak Star," he called out. "I want you to fan out to the north about two kilometers. Come up to the valley edge when you see us close on the ridge. You are covering our flank and the Cameron Highway that leads out of the city. I do not want these *surats* escaping."

"Affirmative, Star Captain," he heard. Sneak Star jogged to the north. He waited until they were in position. "Alright Avalanche Star, we are going to crest the ridge. Assume firing positions. The rules of engagement that the Grand Council gave us allows us to fire first. Remember, the Wolverines are not likely to be playing by any rules whatsoever, so provide cover fire and support to each other as needed. We are not here to destroy the city, but to take it intact."

Douglas maneuvered his *Hermes* to the edge and looked down. It was a scene he had only seen on historical holovids, images of Operation Klondike and the civil wars. The city of Williamsport was blackened. Only a handful of buildings remained intact, mostly residential units from what he saw, that and a few water towers and other service-oriented structures.

The buildings had been burned. Not a burning from battle, he was sure of that. They had been careful, controlled burns. It looked as if a nuclear weapon had gone off. Some structures had been spared. Most had been totally destroyed. His primary target, the science laboratories near the west edge of the city, were flattened black piles of ash. The remaining whiffs of smoke curled upward.

He checked his sensors. Nothing. There were people down there, but no signs of any armed forces. Douglas first suspected a trap, but realized that he was not being fooled. The Wolverines knew that they were coming and had destroyed the city.

"What happened, Star Captain?" came the voice of Sneak Star's Point Commander.

"Fan out," he said. I want this area secured."

“Sir...what happened here?”

“The Wolverines,” he said carefully, “Have shed their honor. They ran like cowards rather than face us in battle.”

There was a pause. “Sir. If they have run, the question I have is, ‘where to?’”

Douglas said nothing. *That was a question for the Grand Council to answer.*

Great Hope—aka The City of McEvedy Tiki Province

Circe

22 October 2823

Khan McEvedy watched as the DropShips landed everywhere around Great Hope. The ride in had been fast, using pirate points and fast burns to confuse any spies that might be watching her, and she had made it to Circe in record time. She still called it by the old name, Great Hope, but her lower castes had always referred to it as the city of McEvedy. It was one of the things that Nicholas has raked her for two years earlier. She was pleased that it had bothered him so much now.

The city was nestled in a tiny river valley that opened to a port facility on the sea. It was the capital of the Wolverines, one of the first sites they had liberated. The Snow Ravens' capital was on the other side of the planet. She had ordered her WarShips to positions to ensure that the shuttle activity between Great Hope and the transports was masked, a mini-blockade of her own capital.

The evacuation had been going on for days, so far with no interruption from the Clans. There had been sporadic reports of conflicts, of Clan forces poking and probing at Wolverine holdings, but the main assault had not begun. More than a few had struck at cities and complexes that had already been abandoned. With the two-dozen dropships all around Great Hope, it was easy to see that mobilizing her Clan was complex, and bound to be confusing for her would-be foes.

As she limped down the tarmac, she had been accosted by several officers, each asking for orders, clarifications, her signature on the seemingly endless sea of paperwork. There was a lot to do. *How did Aleksandr Kerensky do it? Yes, that's right, he had the entire SLDF to support him.* Even Nicholas, who had managed the organized flight to Strana Mechty at the start of the Pentagon civil wars, had pulled off a minor miracle. There were so many details she had to entrust to her staff that it was mind-boggling.

As she moved across the spaceport, she heard a rumble as one of the massive Mule-class dropships took off. *Leaving for safety, I hope.* She had done all of the confronting she had planned with Nicholas and the Grand Council. They would come for her, Nicholas had ensured it. The Wolverines were being sacrificed in the name of unity of the Clans. The sad part was none of them

fully understood that Nicholas had set his people up—that he was willing to sacrifice one of his Clans for the sake of control and power. Destroying the Wolverines was like a man willing to cut off his arm to make a point.

A man wearing a white lab smock approached and bowed his head reverently. *This must be him.* “Doctor Vaun, I presume?”

“It is a pleasure to meet you face-to-face again, Khan McEvedy,” the older doctor said. Sarah knew him for his work in the genetics program of the Wolverines. The man was a genius, or so his records implied.

“I would hope that you would reconsider joining us, Doctor,” she said.

Vaun smiled. “I am an old man. I would be taking up a seat that is needed for someone that can offer a future to our people.”

“Great minds are hard to replace.”

“Which is why I presented you with the plan as I did.”

The plan. McEvedy had looked at it. A way to preserve a copy of the Wolverine Warrior genetic samples. Duplicating the genes for preservation in the future was daring and dangerous. “I looked over your plan, Doctor. There are some risks.”

“You would be taking the primary samples of the Bloodnamed Warriors with you. I would retain only a small amount of the material. But I will ensure that the Wolverine warriors live on.”

It was a daring plan, one that ensured some hope for her Warriors’ survival if her Switchback directive somehow failed. “You should not ignore the risks, Doctor.”

“I am loyal to you, Khan McEvedy. You understand our people and their freedoms. Nicholas seeks to ruin what vestiges of family life remains. My plan has risks, but in the end, it will work. You know that.”

“If you are discovered, they will kill you.”

“By the time they discover what I intend to do, I will already be dead, and you and the rest of our people will be safe. My work ensures another future.”

I hope you are right, Doctor Vaun. I hope you are right...

Rooster Plains

Circe

Clanspace

22 October 2823

The Trinary of Wolverine BattleMechs bent in the middle and seemed to fall back. The green hills were torn up by the running 'Mechs, sod ripped up by the moving battle. Every so often a small, smoking hole in the tall grass, a missed shot or autocannon round tore up the Circe plains. Heavy drops of rain, "Circe Pelt," as it was referred to, poured down on the battlefield, further cutting visibility.

This battle had been vicious, much more so than anyone had anticipated. The Fire Mandrills had lost the bidding for the fight to the Steel Vipers. The Vipers had assumed that they would hit the sibling company posted on the Rooster Plains and defeat them summarily. After all, these were mere children, not seasoned fighters. Surprise would guarantee victory. A storm front had rolled in just before the battle, and in the middle of the thunderstorm, the Wolverines had hit.

The Wolverines fielded a reinforced Trinary of 'Mechs. Their infantry had dug in and fought well, but were no match for the Steel Vipers that overran their position on the knolls near the training facility. As the Steel Vipers surged towards the encampment, they hit a string of vibramines buried in the sod. The cost had been two 'Mechs, their legs twisted and contorted.

Mines—the act of cowards. Not the actions of Clan Warriors. This young sibling company would pay the price—at least that was the thought as the battle unfolded. Sweeping to the south of the training facility, they pressed the Wolverine 'Mechs back, but at a cost. The Wolverines were fielding several new models of BattleMechs, models that seemed to be able to inflict more damage. Worse yet, there was only spotty information on the new models, making them unknown entities in battle. The ilKhan had spoken to the Grand Council that the Wolverines had been doing such research. Once again the greatness of Nicholas Kerensky showed through. These new models of 'Mechs were not in the battlecomputers warbooks, which meant that they had to learn their capabilities, strengths and weaknesses the hard way—in battle.

They had pursued the siblings out into the rolling plains. Apparently they had someone of seasoned leadership command-

ing them, probably a trainer that had once been a veteran. It was a pity that such men had to die. The Steel Vipers had offered a challenge to absorb the Wolverines, to let them fight honorably. They had refused the attempt. Now all that was left was to drive them to the ground, crush them. It was not a pleasant act, but one that was required.

Khan Breen of the Steel Vipers saw the waver in their formation, and felt that victory was near. "They are breaking in the middle of their line. Drive there, punch through, and turn their flanks from the center." He had served with Khan McEvedy and the other original Wolverine saKhan, Robertson. He had felt sad at the death of Robertson, defending the Wolverines against the fury of the Widowmakers. Now the Steel Vipers were one of the instruments of the Wolverines undoing. The only good news was that once victorious, he would absorb this facility and grounds as part of the Vipers enclave on Circe.

His forces, the 80th Fang, followed orders to a tee. They hit the center, but it only dropped back, refusing to collapse. Suddenly Khan Breen saw what was happening. By driving hard into the center, his forces were suddenly catching fire from the flanks, a murderous cross-fire.

He watched as one of his *Hussar's*, albeit a weak 'Mech to begin with, crumpled quickly. A *Shadow Hawk* was caught in the head with a blast from an extended range PPC from across the field of battle. The shot punched into the cockpit on one side and out the other. The Warrior was carbonized instantly by the blast, and the 'Mech toppled into the sod, sinking deep into the wet soil.

A rumble worse than thunder shook the field. Turning, he saw through the rain a plume of orange, a fireball rise into the air. The Wolverines had done something that shocked him—they had blown up their training center. His own 'Mech rocked back under a barrage of short-range missiles and laser fire from three Wolverine 'Mechs. The blast caught his Warriors off guard, giving the Wolverines a chance to pounce. Another Viper 'Mech went down. The odds were shifting quickly in favor of the Wolverines. By not fighting by Clan terms, they had mauled the 80th Fang in a matter of minutes.

This is not worth it. Not now—now that the facility was a burning hulk. Not these losses. "Vipers, this is Viper Actual. Fall back to the staging area in pairs. I want suppression fire laid down on the Wolverines as we withdraw." He watched as the Wolverines rushed in the opposite direction, off towards the borderlands with

the Snow Ravens. Their capital city, Dehra Dun, was only 60 kilometers away. The surviving Wolverines were the Snow Ravens' problem now, not his.

I hope you fare better against them than we did. He was about to signal Khan Joyce Merrell to let her know of the threat heading her way, but stopped short. *If she is victorious where I failed, what does that tell the ilKhan and the others about my Vipers?* He hesitated.

Joyce needs to deal with them on her own.

Outskirts of Great Hope, aka The City of McEvedy The Tiki Province

Circe

Clanspace

22 October 2823

The Wolverine-held Tiki Province was a mix of terrain spread out for thousands of square kilometers. The dense forests, the eroded mountain ranges, the flat-dry plateaus, the swamplands, it was a microcosm of terrain types in a relatively small area. The center, the prize, was Great Hope, also known as McEvedy. *Only the arrogance of the Wolverines would dare to presume to name a city after a betrayer like Sarah McEvedy.*

Khan Karrige knew he came across as petty about his political maneuverings against the Wolverines in the eyes of his peers. It did not matter to him. He wanted the Wolverines to suffer, to diminish, to die. He would absorb their assets, their resources, their territories and peoples. He already had a shopping list of what he needed. By cherry-picking the right resources, he would ensure that his Widowmakers would be the most dominant of the Clans. *Who cares what the other Khans think of me?*

His Widowmakers had won the bidding to try and engage the Wolverines in this territory so that he could gain access to the mines in the area. So far the siege had been a challenge. First there was the screen of warships over the Wolverine territories on Circe. On the trip in, his own assault force had been swarmed by Wolverine fighters and warships. He had asked for safe passage and had been granted it, but it was nerve-wracking to see that kind of firepower concentrated. *They are up to something...* He knew Sarah all too well. *She wants me to fire first, to get the blood on my hands. She is honoring our traditions just enough to avoid a battle where she would be painted as wrong or unjust.* Thus far, the Wolverines that had fought had only done so when attacked first by the other Clans.

The Wolverines had not dug in or fought fairly. As soon as his force, a Battle Cluster, had entered the Tiki Province, the Wolverines had started to engage them in a string of hit-and-run assaults. They swept in, fired, and pulled back. It was time consuming and un-Clan-like, at least in his mind.

IlKhan Kerensky and a delegation from the Grand Council had joined his force, adding to the pressure. Nicholas was seeing first hand that the Wolverines had already abandoned their clans and were fighting like marauders. It only solidified his stand about Khan McEvedy and her people. *They will all see that I was right about them...these Wolverines have turned their back on our ways.*

Of course he had ways to ensure that the Wolverines were seen in a bad light. *It pays to have people on the ground here with the right tools. Insurance...especially with the ilKhan here.*

As they got closer to the city, a strange sight greeted him on the roads. Refugees. People that claimed that they were supporters of Nicholas Kerensky had been expelled. They loved their Clan, but did not want any part in the coming fight. As if to accentuate their fear, he saw a sickening cloud of smoke rising from the direction of the city. He knew that amount of smoke came from only one thing, a city being burned. Occasionally he saw dropships landing and taking off, their fusion fires lighting the sky like meteors. Karrige slowed his forces advance somewhat. Something was going on in the city, and he did not want to rush in blind.

Nicholas had other ideas. "Why are you slowing, Khan Karrige? You have won the bidding to fight the Wolverines here. Victory assures you will absorb them. Go, now, into battle. Show them what a real Clan Warrior is!" The ringing of Nicholas's voice over the comm channel was a nagging reminder of what he had to do.

Checking his long-range sensors, he adjusted them to the maximum range. Khan Karrige was looking for a signal, a special signal. He knew it was there, in Great Hope, because he had ordered it there. A final present for the Wolverines. The final nail in their coffin. *After this, absorption will be the last thing on anyone's mind.*

He switched to his NBC sensors. Nuclear, Biological, and Chemical sensor sweeps would tell a story, even several kilometers away. There! There it was. His Warriors had done their job. Their mission had been simple...sneak the nuclear warhead out of the Brian Cache and smuggle it into the city. The two Warriors would remain with it. If confronted, they had Wolverine infantry uniforms, and would easily pass a cursory inspection. The warhead was armed and tied to a firing code on his battlecomputer.

It was going to be a glorious show...and Nicholas has a front row seat.



Khan McEvedy watched as the last four DropShips prepared for departure from aboard the *Overlord*-class *Huron*. Her rear guard forces had been the oldest Warriors of her Clan, and had been having fun harassing the Widowmaker Clan forces. These were the Zeta Galaxy. Most of these troops were very old, and had served as young men and women under Nicholas's father in the Star League Defense Force. All were seasoned veterans of the civil wars and Operation Klondike. Where Nicholas had proposed that older Warriors had no role in society, the reforms that McEvedy had initiated offered new life to her Zeta Galaxy. She had evacuated a Binary worth of the Warriors, under protest. The rest insisted that they be the last to remain in Great Hope. All of them wanted a piece of the Widowmaker Clan.

The city was now a ghost town, burning with controlled blazes and left in ruins. *If the Widowmakers want this city they will find it of little value to them.* Some ten-thousand civilians had opted to not depart with the rest of the Wolverine forces. McEvedy respected that. Some simply did not want to leave their home on Circe. Some were old and infirm, and did not want to travel. Others were lower caste families with young children that did not want to risk them on an unknown space voyage. A few Warriors, mostly newly graduated from their sibling companies, said that they did not want to fight the forces of the ilKhan. The reach of Nicholas Kerensky, a living god, was long and far. The excuses did matter to her. She honored them all. *I will not fault those that side with Nicholas. They have not seen him over the years, seen what he is capable of.* She thought for a moment of Andery, and shook her head at the memory.

The Widowmakers had all but halted their advance outside of the city, about ten kilometers from the edge of the city proper, using the rings of hills for cover. McEvedy ordered her Zeta Galaxy Warriors to make ready. She moved them out of the city center to the far suburbs. She would not draw the Widowmakers into the fighting an urban battle. It was tempting, but there were still innocent civilians in the city. She did not want to place them in danger.

As she watched a Star of troops rush far out from the city, she wondered about how Franklin Hallis was doing. For just a moment,

she thought of Andery again. She knew he would approve of this. Like Nicholas, he had an impulsive streak in his blood. In fact, he would be thrilled with this kind of operation. They had pulled out right in front of the other Clans. McEvedy had denied them the fight that they wanted. It was going perfectly so far.

The future looked bright and hopeful in the moment. Sarah allowed herself a smile as she paced for a better view on the *Huron*. Soon she hoped to feel good enough to take to a 'Mech cockpit again.



"iIKhan, we are about to begin our assault," Khan Karrige said. His fingers entered the code into the battlecomputer; zero-alpha-zero-bravo, zero, zero, one. His finger hovered over the transmit button. He silenced his own microphone in his neurohelmet. His Widowmakers rose up over the crest of the hill. He himself moved his 'Mech slightly to face the city of Great Hope.

"With this, I drive a stake in the heart of the cancer that is attempting to devour our people." He hit the button, and a new sun erupted on the surface of Circe only a dozen kilometers away. It was oddly silent as the nuclear burst rose upward and seared the ground with brilliant, man-made sunlight. There was a cracking noise, like lightning in a summer storm—followed by a roar of a thousand dropship engines flaring at once.

The shockwave came with such force that the Widowmaker BattleMechs on the top of the crest were knocked back. A howling gust of wind, hot, searing, ripped at the 'Mechs. Karrige saw the iIKhan's BattleMech tilt back under the force of the blast. Dust, dirt, ash, debris, everything came by as if he had been dropped in the center of a tornado. The Widowmaker Khan fought to keep his 'Mech under control even though he had set off the blast and knew the shockwave was coming. In the distance he saw a mushroom cloud, churning with great balls of fire, agitating upward, feeding on itself. His sensors screamed radiation warnings.

He turned his comm system back on. It was time for the cover act. "iIKhan, are you alright?"

A stunned voice came back to his ears. "What has happened?"

"A nuclear attack. The Wolverines have apparently used a WMD on their own city."

"There were civilians there. My sensors picked them up. Thousands of citizens," his voice was stunned, slowly evolving to pure anger. "What has Sarah done?"

"Sir, the radiation warnings in this area are high. We need to withdraw temporarily, for your safety, sir."

Nicholas Kerensky was not afraid. His BattleMech stood and seemed to lean towards the growing mushroom cloud. "I cannot believe that McEvedy would do such a thing." His voice trailed off in a daze at what he had witnessed.

"ilKhan, she must have used one of the nuclear warheads recovered from the Brian Cache." *There, the appropriate hints had been all placed.* While each Clan had some nuclear weapons in their possession, this one had a signature that would tie it with the other nukes recovered from the Wolverines. It was a fingerprint that tied the Wolverines to destruction of the city. It was a perfect set-up. Anyone that could prove that he had anything to do with it had been with the bomb when it had gone off.

"I will not let this simply pass," Nicholas said firmly.

"I understand, ilKhan," he said, moving his 'Mech over near his leader. "You should not. The Wolverines have become criminal in their actions here. You could have been killed yourself."

There was a long pause. The shadow from the mushroom cloud loomed over their position, turning the afternoon into night in a heartbeat. Nicholas Kerensky finally spoke. "This has ceased to be a Trial of Absorption. The actions of the Wolverines have changed everything. We need to convene the Grand Council and decide the next steps. It is obvious, however, that the failed genes of the Wolverines are not to be preserved. They are to be purged."

"You are wise, ilKhan."

Nicholas's voice seemed filled with fury just barely held in check. "In the meantime, the Wolverines elsewhere are going to understand that there is a price to pay for such actions. Using a weapon of mass destruction is to be done at a price."

"What will you do, ilKhan?"

“I need to be tied to the planetary communications grid to relay a message. The Snow Ravens can extract revenge for this atrocity. They are fighting a Wolverine force there. They will teach them the punishment for such war crimes. There is only one kind of response that can be made to this kind of action.”

BATTLECORPS

The Wolverine Enclave
Strana Mechty
Clan Space
22 October 2823

Star Captain Trish Ebon watched as the Smoke Jaguar DropShips arced in their flight to the landing zone several kilometers from the hilltop she had deployed on. Star Colonel Stanton Osis had boldly and arrogantly announced that he was coming for her to “absorb” her Wolverines, their equipment, and their lands. Absorption. This is how a Clan dies. The others devour it one bite at a time.

For a week the evacuation of the Wolverines on Strana Mechty had been underway. Many had gotten to orbit discreetly. So far the mini-Exodus had not attracted much attention. Now that Smoke Jaguars were so close and had announced their intentions, the time for citizens and other Warriors to leave had gone. SaKhan Hallis, Franklin, had promised to pick her up. *He will not leave me behind. I have that. Star Colonel Osis has nothing.*

The Jaguars had not come immediately as she had expected. That was out of character for them. They and the Jade Falcons were always quick to the fight, first into the battle—even when it didn’t necessarily make sense. Her two Stars were going to have to fight a running battle, stall for time. They did not want to wipe out the aggressors, Franklin had made that clear to her. The Wolverines simply wanted to get away with minimal losses.

When the comm channel came to life, she assumed it would be filled with the usual bravado of the Jaguars, taunting her. What she heard was the clearly agitated voice of Star Colonel Osis. “Star Captain Ebon, I will speak with you now.”

“I hear you, Star Colonel.”

“I have received a message of what your Clan has done on Circe. My Khan has told me that you may seek to usurp my victory with the use of a nuclear weapon. Before I send my troops in, I wish to know if you will fight with any shred of honor, query affirmative?”

That caught her off guard. “You have me at a disadvantage, Star Colonel.”

“Your Clan unleashed an atomic weapon in battle. Your people tried to kill the ilKhan in a cowardly attack that killed thousands of your own people.”

No! “Not possible. There has to be some mistake.”

“I have seen the images myself,” Osis pressed. “Your city of Great Hope was destroyed. Thousands of innocent people were killed. The ilKhan himself was caught in the blast, but has miraculously survived.”

Destroyed? Negative! She knew people there. Khan McEvedy was said to be there. As one of the largest Wolverine holdings, the destruction a nuclear weapon would unleash was unfathomable. Negative...it could not have been her people. “I—I do not know what to say.”

“What you can say is that, despite the fact I come to fight you, to subdue and crush you in battle, that you will not use such a weapon. I have no desire for my Warriors or those that I would take as *isorla* to be destroyed in such a dishonorable fashion.” Clearly Osis was as confused and angry as she was starting to feel.

Trish composed herself, taking a few seconds to clear her mind. “I will fight with honor. I need a few minutes to take in what you have said—a few minutes to explain to my people. I trust that this is not some sort of ruse on your part to stir our rage.”

“I fight with honor.”

“As will I. You have my word.”

“After the destruction of Great Hope, it is impossible to know what the value of the Wolverines word is. In the name of the Great Kerenskys, I will accept your bond as a Warrior. I should not—but I will.” The strain was clear in Osis’s voice.

She fought back the tears welling in her eyes. “We will fight all-out, Star Colonel. Those are my orders. You are coming to dismantle my Clan. You can expect that my Warriors will use all conventional means to survive.”

“Affirmative. I expect nothing less.”

Snow Raven's Warship Avalanche High Orbit over Dehra Dun

Circe

Clan Space

22 October 2823

The message relayed from the Dehra Dun communications center on Circe was clear and concise. The images sent by the ilKhan from McEvedy on the other side of the planet were horrifying. She had seen such carnage years after the fact during the civil war. These wounds on the Clans were fresh and deep. The city had been destroyed, nuked from within. For Khan Merrell, it made no sense. She knew Sarah McEvedy as if she were a sister, she had known her for years. This was not her behavior. She cherished life. These were her people that were killed. It made no sense to her.

Have you changed that much, Sarah?

Nicholas Kerensky had issued two basic commands that impacted her. The atrocity in Great Hope had to be dealt with. "The Wolverines must be taught the price of their arrogance to unleash weapons of mass destruction. Your Snow Ravens will teach them that lesson." It was an unprecedented move. Nicholas had authorized the use of a nuclear strike on the Wolverine force out on the Rooster Plains, where they had been evading her units.

The second order was just as succinct. The Grand Council needed to convene and discuss, "the war," and the, "change in the nature of this Trial," with the Wolverine Clan. "War." That word had been clear to her. This was no longer about absorbing the Wolverines into the other Clans. Nicholas was talking escalation of some sort. She could only imagine what that meant. There was a dark side to the ilKhan that she had seen over the years, and she worried slightly that it was this aspect of his personality that was going to drive his actions.

"Angel One," she said into the shipboard comm system. Angel One was one of her Ready Away fighters, manned and ready for immediate departure.

"Raven Actual, I read you five-by-five."

"Angel One, we are going to be changing your payload and giving your flight new orders."

"Understood. Powering down for weapons mix reset."

No, you do not understand. I am sending you down to destroy the Wolverines below. A sibling company, children in our eyes. I am sending you down to teach them a lesson.

God help us all.

She watched as the fighters prepared for launch, staring out the viewscreen, wondering, fidgeting. She sent orders out for her ground forces to fall back into Dehra Dun for their own protection. The Clans had not used nuclear weapons before in battle, even in the vicious campaigns to reclaim the Pentagon Worlds. Now she was going to be unleashing them. *An eye for an eye.* Her people had trained for using them, but never a live fire exercise.

"Raven Actual, this is Angel One. We are loaded and primed. Requesting you send the authorization code for launch."

Joyce's hand hovered over the comm panel. The secured channel was locked onto Angel One. She keyed her authenticode sequence and sent the launch code. "Angel One, this is Actual. I show you hot."

"Roger that, Raven Actual. The pickle is hot." His words were drowned out by a blaring siren. Red lights flashed everywhere on the bridge. "Sitrep!" she called across the bridge of the *Avalanche*.

"EMP alert! We have a WarShip emerging from a pirate jump point twelve kilometers off the port bow," the ops officer barked.

A WarShip...here? "I want that ship identified," she commanded. Her stomach tightened with the words.

There was a puzzled look from the sensor workstation. "Khan Merrell, this does not make sense. We are reading the ship as the *SLS Bismark*. That is impossible, though. The *Bismark* is part of the mothballed Exodus fleet. I show the *Bismark* executing an acceleration towards us; weapons bays are showing pre-charging sequences. Transponder signals paint her as a Wolverine ship."

"Are you sure, *quiaff?*" The *Bismark* was a huge ship, a Texas-class battlewagon. She remembered its history from the war against Amaris. The *Bismark* had been retired due to permanent damage to her keel. Long term service was not in her future. She was an old, quirky gal, but still a dangerous threat in battle.

"Affirmative," the sensor officer replied.

The Wolverines. Incredible! McEvedy had raided the Exodus fleet to augment her own fleet. "Sound general quarters. All hands to battle stations! Contact the rest of our fleet and have them converge on our coordinates. Have them set condition one!" A few tense moments passed as each deck signaled ready for action.

"Sir, Angel Flight has cleared the launch bay. *Bismark* is now moving to intercede between us and the surface. She is deploying two DropShips and fighter escort."

Why? Then it dawned on her. They were sending DropShips down to recover the very troops that she was planning on destroying. Their arrival couldn't have come at a worse time.

Merrell moved over to the tactical display. Angel Flight suddenly posed a problem. With an armed nuclear weapon onboard, Angel One would show up on sensors as a dangerous threat. If it was the Wolverines...and it had to be, if they were scanning, they would pick it up. More importantly, they would come at it with everything they had. "Angel One, you are to go evasive. I am feeding you targeting information," she said, keying in the code to engage the Wolverine ground forces on Circe forty-kilometers northeast of Dehra Dun. The city would be spared. Its citizens would bear witness to the destruction of Sarah's defiant warriors.

"We have weapons tone!" the sensor officer called across the bridge.

"Helm," she called out. "Bring the engines to point five. Break orbit and put us down low and between the *Bismark* and Angel One." The *Avalanche* came to life. The throbbing of the engines, the flickering of lights, everything told her that the massive ship was readying for battle. "Lock weapons on the *Bismark*. Send them a message, order them to recall their fighters and stand down."

The *Avalanche* lurched hard and began a sickening spin. Something had hit, something that had devoured armor. She knew the feeling all too well. *Damn, that is a Texas-class Battleship. It might be old and rickety, but it is dangerous.* The fact that they had fired meant that they had probably detected the armed nuclear weapon heading for the surface. *Timing is everything...* "Damage report."

"Multiple Naval PCC, and a single missile hit from the *Bismark*," Captain Fowler called from the center seat. "We have been hit on

the starboard side aft. Armor apparently has held, but they are targeting our engines, Khan.”

“Port batteries, return fire. Fire at will.”

There was a high-pitched, distant whine as the *Avalanche* fired several shots. “One battery hit, negative damage detected. One went wide.”

A warning beep from the sensor station drew her attention. The sensor officer called out again. “Incoming missiles.”

“All hands,” she called, activating the voice response system that transmitted her voice over the intercom to the entire ship. “Incoming missiles. All hands brace for impact.” Turning to the helmsman, she pushed off and drifted across the bridge to his station. “Lateral roll. Ready the starboard batteries, full barrage. Target the bridge of that ship.”

Turning in space, she saw the tactical display and watched as the *Bismark* moved to a lower orbit, matching her move. The tiny dots of light, the plumes from the missiles, were barely visible. They did not convey the firepower of naval anti-ship missiles. For a moment, she remembered the message that the ilKhan had sent. The Wolverines had used nuclear weapons already—she was simply retaliating. What if the *Bismark* was firing nukes in response? Her stomach tightened even more to a ball of knotted muscles. If it was a nuclear response, there was nothing she could do at this point.

In about a minute we will know.

“*Bismark* is firing naval lasers,” the ops officer called out. “Targeting is not showing lock on us. My Khan, the target is Angel Flight!”

“Damn!” she cursed. “Communications, patch me into Angel One.”

“Lateral roll nearly complete. Working on firing solutions, Khan.” A lot was happening at once on the bridge of the ship.

“This is Angel One, Actual. We are under fire. I have taken a hit. Repeat, I have taken a hit. Angel One is still operational. I am going to dive down into the lower atmosphere and shake this warship. Angel One requests that you park yourself between us that that battlewagon—Khan. Commencing our run now.”

“Roger, Angel One. Good hunting. Pay them back for their strike on Great Hope.” Her voice was cut off by a low rumble and the ship quaking around her. Warning alerts from the damage control workstation came on. The missiles. They had hit. The lights on the bridge flickered for a second, going brown, then out, then back on again. *Emergency power...not good news at all.*

“Hit amidship, Khan. Power relays have been severed. We are on auxiliary power here on the bridge. Aft ship reports still under full power.”

Captain Fowler spoke up. “Damage control teams to deck four, section three. Seal battle damage and get those relays back on line.” He looked over at Joyce and she could read the worry on his face. “We have about a half-an-hour’s worth of power on aux. After that we will start to lose control of parts of the ship unless we transfer to aux CIC.”

She nodded. Looking out the main viewscreen she watched as the *Bismark’s* naval PPC’s fired again. This time they were not locked onto the *Avalanche*, but on another distant target. Angel One. “Sensors. Lock onto Angel One. Give me his status.”

The officer worked fast and furious at the controls. He looked up with a drained expression on his face. “Angel One is off the board.”

Her eyes widened. “Any signal from his payload?”

The operator stabbed at buttons and controls furiously. “Sweet Kerensky...” he muttered. There was a distant but brilliant flash from the planet below. “Nuclear detonation on Circe.” From the viewport on the bridge, the bright, white flash was somewhat diffused from orbit. It looked as if a hurricane had suddenly appeared, a dark purple/black storm of carnage and destruction. A sick, black circle of the storm appeared on the surface and began to spread out. Flickers of red and orange appeared on the black—fires—negative—*infernus* erupting below. The ground seemed to bubble sickly. It was as if a tornado of fire rose up stabbing into space.

“He did it,” she said unconsciously.

“Negative, sir,” the sensor operator called out. His face was pale.

“Negative?”

“Payload was dropped and detonated off-target,” his voice wavered.

“Where?”

He hesitated as the color drained from his face leaving a white visage of the Snow Raven officer. “It has detonated as an airburst over Dehra Dun.”

“Our capitol? Query negative?”

“Affirmative, Khan,” the man said as if he were on the verge of crying. “They city has suffered an almost direct hit.” As if to drive home the point, another wave of missiles slammed into the *Avalanche*, rocking the ship violently. “Captain Fowler?”

The Star Captain checked his tactical display as he spoke. “Our damage repair team was caught in the last attack. We are venting helium. Jumping is out of the question. I recommend we break off attack and commence emergency repairs.” It was not easy for him to say it. She didn’t give the order. She nodded heavily.

Dehra Dun was gone—a memory. *It was not supposed to happen this way.* This was supposed to be payback to the Wolverines for wiping out Great Hope. The horrors of a nuclear attack had returned to her people. *This is my fault. I should have planned for this contingency. I should have had more fighters up. I should have driven this ship right into the side of the Bismark.*

What will I tell the ilKhan? What have I done? The blood of tens of thousands of my own people is on my hands. She bent in the midsection, as if someone had punched her. This is the price of my perfidy to Sarah. She wanted to throw up, but couldn’t seem to muster it. Even as her ship rose from the surface and arced away from the *Bismark* she knew that her vessel was still at risk.

Dehra Dun would be a blemish on her soul forever...and rightfully so.

The Wolverine Enclave
Wombat Ridge
Strana Mechty
Clan Space
24 October 2823

The fast-moving *Kintaro* fired both of its short-range missile packs at Trish Ebon's *Pulverizer*, scoring solid hits with every warhead. She tried to lead the 'Mech slightly and waited for weapons tone—a lock! She hit the trigger on her particle projection cannon and slammed a shot into the right leg of the Smoke Jaguar. For a moment the *Kintaro* gimped—it looked as if it was going to topple, but it held its own. *Damn these Jaguars—they are good.*

It was not an understatement. Star Colonel Stanton Osis had proven himself a very skilled Warrior. His forces had a slight numerical superiority and were using it to the best of their ability. Trish and her Wolverines had lost half of their combat effectiveness already, good Warriors dead or captured. Osis had lost a Star of BattleMechs as well, but what he still had on the field was probably more than enough to do the job.

I cannot surrender. I am a Wolverine. I will not spend the rest of my days as a Smoke Jaguar. She saw a *Flashman* lumber up the ridge where she had opted to make a stand. The gray and black streak pattern was marred where earlier hits had damaged it. Trish opted to add to it. She fired her large lasers, slicing a nasty, smoking hole along the front of the 'Mech. The heat in her cockpit rose slowly but noticeably.

The *Flashman* was not amused. The Jaguar fired its three large lasers in retaliation. One went right over her *Pulverizer's* shoulder. The other two hit square in her shoulders. They did not leave long, torn armor plates, but punched in deep. Myomer muscles on the right arm gave way, dropping her *Pulverizer's* arm slightly. She saw fellow Wolverine Warrior Thomlinson land from his jump jet flight down the ridge, putting his *Guillotine* between her and the *Flashman*.

"Thomlinson!" she said, moving up the hill to try and find an angle for her shot.

"Pull back, Star Captain. I will deal with these cats," Thomlinson replied. She had known him for two years. Overconfidence was not something that he ever demonstrated before. He believed he

could win. But out of a small copse of trees at the bottom of the ridge, a Jaguar *Exterminator* emerged and cut loose with its long-range missiles. At the same time, the *Flashman* turned to face the new threat with a full salvo from its deadly array of medium lasers.

The lasers found their mark first. The medium-range weapons filled the air with emerald beams. One missed, searing the soil of Wombat Ridge. The others all found their marks, seeming to envelop the *Exterminator*. Thomlinson listed back, but held his ground. Trish moved uphill to line up the *Flashman* just as the long-range missiles wracked his already mangled 'Mech. The missiles erupted like little pustules on the Wolverine 'Mech, popping and spraying armor everywhere. Thomlinson dropped back onto the ridge line, falling to a sitting position. She was surprised he was still in the fight after the savaging he had taken.

Damn it, Franklin. You promised to come back and get me out of here. Now would be a good time. She fired her modified PPC at the *Flashman* at the same time that Thomlinson let loose with his own barrage of medium lasers. The attack concentrated on the upper portion of the Jaguar BattleMech. It stepped backwards down the ridge. At the same moment she saw a new threat, an undamaged *Champion*, come out of the trees. It fired...at Thomlinson.

His *Guillotine* had never been designed for this kind of abuse. The *Exterminator* fired at the same moment as the *Champion*. There was little hope of survival for Thomlinson. His half-sitting 'Mech tried to rise, attempted to get up. He could not. A pair of missed shots furrowed the ground around him. The rest devoured his *Guillotine*. She saw smoke, white curling deadly smoke, rise. Thomlinson had been just another Wolverine Warrior, one that had done his duty. He had saved her. Now it had cost him his life.

Anger tore at her face. "All forces fall back to the top of the ridge," she said. Sarcastically she smiled and spoke to herself. "Perfect place for a last stand..."

The Smoke Jaguars came out in pursuit. The ridge was steep, rocks jutting out every so often made for difficult footing. Her three remaining BattleMechs kept firing at the slowed Jaguars as they backed up the hill. The *Flashman* went down from a PPC shot from a *Stag II*. It was of little consequence. *We have nowhere to go.* The back of the ridge was impassible, and she knew her enemies knew that. The Jags assumed a position near the fallen *Guillotine*, firing upward. Many of the shots missed, but those that found their mark moved each Wolverine closer to Thomlinson's fate.

"We have nowhere to go, Star Captain Ebon," her comm system signaled. It was Lexi...always pointing out the obvious.

"Then we have them where we want them," she said through gritted teeth.

"Affirmative, sir," Lexi replied.

"On my order, we execute a charge. I want to punch right through the Jaguars lines at a full speed. We can move down the ridge to the bottom and then break out for the plains."

"We are with you, sir," Carver's desperate voice replied. "Give the word."

She opened her mouth when suddenly the air between her unit and the Jaguars became filled with brilliant, blue light. The sounds was more like a cracking of lightning only a thousand times louder, even from within the cockpit of her 'Mech. The beam or beams was blinding, even with the dampers in the ferroglas cockpit. A second later another barrage appeared, lightning from the sky that devoured an acre at a time. She heard a scream on the broadband channel—not from one of her people. *What is this? What is happening?* Another few seconds and she would have been in that light. Light? No. Orbital bombardment. She smiled.

As suddenly as it hit, the barrage stopped. Everything was burned to carbon. The fallen form of Thomlinson's BattleMech looked like a charred tree stump more than a war machine. The same could be said of the *Flashman* and two other Jaguar BattleMechs. The other Smoke Jaguars were falling back in a full retreat. Trish was stunned. *What happened?*

Her comm unit came to life. "This is the *McKenna's Pride* to Wolverine force on Strana Mechty. Dropship is in route to extract you. Move out to the plains and prepare for immediate departure." The voice was that of saKhan Franklin Hallis.

"*McKenna's Pride?*" she replied stunned. Of all the ships, this one was one she had not expected. "You *stole* the General's flagship of the Exodus? My God, Franklin, it is *the Pride*." Now it made sense. She had witnessed an orbital bombardment from the aging battleship that had remained in orbit over Strana Mechty. Franklin must have overpowered the honor guard and seized the ship. The Clans frowned on the use of warships to fight honorable battles on the ground. *Good thing we are no longer Clan.*

"Stolen? Negative Star Captain," Hallis came back. "We over-

powered the guard and are using it to cover your withdrawal. We are not taking the *Pride*, but leaving her here. I simply *borrowed* it for a little while.”

“This will not go over well with the Grand Council.”

There was a pause. “Then what I do next will go over with them even less.”

Twelve Minutes Later...

The attack came without warning, raining down from the sky like bolts of lightning thrown by Zeus. The Widowmakers' hall and the entire string of buildings tied to the construction of the new Grand Council Chamber erupted with a stunning blast. Everyone in the city below saw the explosion in Svoboda Zemylya Park. Rocks and sod rained down on Katyusha City, ornately carved and sculpted to exacting standards.

Each Clan maintained a hall of their own that tied to the site where the new Grand Council chambers were being built. For a moment, it was as if lightning had destroyed the complex. As the white/gray smoke lifted, it became clear that some buildings had been spared. Only the Widowmakers' hall had taken a hit—and the Grand Council site itself. Then another brilliant blast. This time the Smoke Jaguars hall was taken down. A second later another blue-white burst, this time the Snow Ravens Hall. The Ghost Bears Hall evaporated next, followed with the Jade Falcons. As if to emphasize a point, another blast was sent into the rubble of the Widowmaker's Hall, cratering the site. A pyre of twisted black and gray smoke rose from the hole.

In orbit over Strana Mechty, aboard the *McKenna's Pride*, saKhan Hallis ordered the bombardment to stop. By now everyone on the planet below knew something was wrong. This tomb, the shrine to Aleksandr Kerensky, had fired on the world it had always watched over. It was tempting to strike at the Clans' production capabilities, but to do so would kill thousands of innocent workers. *Khan McEvedy would not have wanted that.* The damage was not military in nature, but was designed to have a psychological impact.

Word had reached him of the events on Circe, and just a few hours ago of a nuclear attack on Circe. Why the Snow Ravens had bombed their own capital city was lost on him, but it was obvious from what he knew that the Wolverines had nothing to do with the destruction of Dehra Dun. Both were being blamed on the Wolverines. Franklin did not believe the media, but at the same time knew what *he* believed was not important. The Wolverines would bear the blame for these assaults. He had tried to reach Khan McEvedy, but to no avail. McEvedy had been in Great Hope; which meant that she was either dead from the blast, dead from the fighting, or unable to communicate for another reason.

I cannot let all of this fall apart...not now.

Regardless, that left him, Franklin Hallis, as the sole leader of the Wolverines. It was a weight that only one man could have understood. The man laid out before him. He would have to leave the warship, there was much to do. Forces on Lum and Marshall had to be evacuated still, now most likely under the guns of the enemy. Other Wolverine holdings had to be sabotaged so that the other Clans would not benefit from seizing them. If Khan McEvedy was dead, it meant that he was charged with the survival of the Wolverines. Even now shuttlecraft and fighters from the surface would be scrambling, daring to make a high speed run at the *McKenna's Pride*. *Let them waste resources...this ship has served its purpose for me today.*

Franklin paused at the glass-topped coffin of the Great General and looked at his face. "Your son is an evil man, General. He has caused the deaths of innocents. Nicholas is selling my people out to simply hold onto his power. Forgive me General, but he will be made to pay. I am sorry, but you would do the same thing if you were in my shoes—I know it."

He pivoted in mid-air and pushed away. In the pit of his stomach he knew that the battles of the Wolverine Clan had just started.

Author's Notes

Years ago, I wrote up a little piece in some obscure sourcebook that said that *McKenna's Pride* was General Kerensky's tomb. In the end, I don't think it made it into the sourcebook, but was one of those wonderful tidbits filed away for future reference. During the early stages of the planning for the invasion of the Clan homeworlds, I mentioned it to Bill Keith in hopes that he might get the use it. When Bill pitched his original idea for the eventual invasion of Clan Space, he proposed that the fighting would not be on Huntress, but on Strana Mechty. At a pivotal point in the battle, the Inner Sphere fleet was all but lost when it dawned on young Prince Victor to seize the *McKenna's Pride*. I remember Bill's line for Victor during the pitch session: "Picture Victor looking up at that big bad-ass battleship, with only five warriors defending it, then saying, 'Inform the commodore that I am transferring my flag to the *McKenna's Pride*.'" Brilliant! A part of me always wanted to see the Bill Keith version. A part of me wanted to be aboard that historic ship.

Of course we invaded Huntress, changed the nature of the invasion, and things were very good, but different. The scene never happened, but the image was burned in my head. Bill and I both thought that idea was neat, but it simply didn't work. So, in salute to Bill, I wanted to leverage the idea and have the old girl fire just a few more shots in battle.

Can you imagine how Nicholas is going to react? I think I have a pretty good idea...stay tuned...same bat-time...same bat-channel.

Blaine Lee Pardoe