



Invasion 3042: Countdown to Apocalypse

Jamie Wolf looked over the crowd of figures in the palatial conference room, deep in a renovated Brian fortress located on the continent of Remus, on the planet Outreach. The room was filled to capacity, with the leaders of every House, Periphery State, and major mercenary company in the Inner Sphere in attendance. Only one seat stood vacant: the seat reserved for Thomas Calderon, leader of the Taurian Concordat. His military commander, Marshall Hadji Doru, was in the second seat reserved for the Taurians, and so Jamie decided that the conference could convene without him if needed.

The task of gathering all these auspicious leaders together in one place was Herculean in scope, and Jamie wanted to minimize the security risk by not tarrying. Security was paramount, with armed guards inside and brand-new Wombat BattleMechs on patrol outside. The entirety of Wolf's Dragoons, three regiments, was stationed on Outreach, and the whole planet was locked down for the conference. For the next 24 hours, no one could get on- or off-planet without priority clearance from Jamie and a DNA-coded passcard.

The Wombats were new designs fielded by the Dragoons, and many were gifts for the visiting dignitaries to entice them to the conference: All of the leaders craved new technology, and Jamie wondered just how many were here simply to glean the new advanced tech he was freely giving away to the rest of the Inner Sphere. Not even an epic threat to the entire galaxy was enough to convince half the leaders to attend; but dangle the promise of some new technology in front of them and their reluctance vanished instantly. None of them could afford to fall behind in the technology race, in case their enemies received a tactical advantage that they did not possess.

Jamie keyed the security frequency on his earpiece and instructed his orbital patrol units to watch for the Taurian shuttle, and then he signaled to his Security Chief that he was ready to begin the conference. A second signal, this one to the Communications Officer, caused her to activate the HPG override; the conference was being broadcast live to the entire Inner Sphere. Followed by his aide and senior

officers, Jamie walked up to the podium and stood before it as he steeled himself to deliver the most important and difficult speech of his life.

"Ladies and Gentleman," he began, the seriousness of his tone and the dynamic presence of his voice instantly quelling the background conversations of the assembled dignitaries. As all eyes converged on the forward podium, he paused and scanned the room with his gaze to ensure that he had the attention of the entire gathering before continuing.

"Most of you know me as Jamie Wolf, leader of the Wolf's Dragoons mercenary company. However, contrary to this misconception, the Dragoons are *not* a mere mercenary company: We are a reconnaissance unit for Clan Wolf sent to spy on the Five Great Houses. We lead eighteen Clans, the descendants of the Kerensky Exodus of 2784. My people stand poised at the edge of the solar system in preparation for an invasion of the Inner Sphere. In order to best explain the circumstances that have brought this into being, I direct your attention to my aid-de-camp, Colonel Natasha Kerensky."

Natasha's introduction had the desired effect upon the gathered dignitaries: shock and stunned silence. If anyone could hold their attention and make them see the seriousness of the situation, it would be the famed "Black Widow". The name Kerensky was synonymous with the Star League military, and Jamie used her specifically to help bridge the gap in their minds between the Exodus and the present day. Natasha cut a commanding figure in her dress uniform, with her black spider motif opposite the Dragoon's wolf-headed patch on her lapels. With a quick slash of her hand she motioned to have the lights dimmed and switched on the holo-projector.

"After many years of circuitous travel and hardship, the Exodus reached a grouping of five planets which they named the Pentagon Worlds, and began to settle down. However, long-standing internal rivalries divided them once again, and civil war began to tear them apart, mirroring the actions of the Inner Sphere. The similarity between the Five Great Houses and the five Pentagon worlds was not lost upon us: We could leave the Inner Sphere, but the hatreds and grudges of the past that we had tried to escape had followed us."

"In desperation, Aleksandr's son Nicholas began a second Exodus to the world of Strana Mechty. It became obvious that a new way was needed; a better way: A way to bury the past forever by starting a new future. No longer would there be Houses, but Clans loyal only to themselves, and held together by a Grand Council. The military was broken down completely and rebuilt with different unit

formations, eradicating anything old and familiar that could be clung to in remembrance of the old ways. And when they were ready, Nicholas led the Clans to re-conquer the Pentagon worlds."

The dignitaries could see on the holo-map where the Pentagon worlds and Strana Mechty lay in relation to the rest of the Houses, and murmurs of consternation arose throughout the room. A wicked glare in their direction from the Black Widow quieted them down, allowing her to continue.

"With the Pentagon worlds once again under control, the Clans set about advancing technology beyond that of the Star League, designing new and more powerful mechs and weaponry." Natasha touched a stud on the console and a holographic schematic of a Timber Wolf appeared next to the map. The image rotated slowly on its axis, and Natasha paused; both for dramatic effect, and to give the image a moment to sink into the minds of the assembled leaders.

"While the Clans advanced their technology far beyond what even the Star League had accomplished, centuries of warfare caused a decline of technology in the Inner Sphere. After four Succession Wars very little Star League technology remained, and most of that was unusable, either because the designs were lost or the capability to build advanced components was destroyed. The recovery of the Helm Library Core by the Grey Death Legion in 3028 has begun the slow process of rebuilding, but even now you are still decades away from recovering all of what was lost to you."

Natasha paused for effect once again. As she did so, a woman in a ComStar uniform stood up, her Primus insignia clearly visible. "It sounds to me," she began haughtily, "that you are betraying your people. How do we know that this in itself is not an attempt at deception? You just admitted you were a spy; how do we know who you really work for?"

The Black Widow's eyes lit up with rage and shame as she glanced over at her Commander, and Jamie Wolf took a step forward to field the question. "The Clans," he began, "no longer follow the ideals and traditions of the Star League that they profess to espouse so highly. What was once done as a temporary solution to a desperate situation has been perverted and elevated to the status of a religion: Much as ComStar has done over the centuries," Jamie commented, a slight smile on his lips. Primus Waterly's face went red with fury, and Jamie continued to explain.

"When Aleksandr Kerensky led the Exodus to the Pentagon worlds, he was faced with a tremendous logistical problem: Most of the people who went with him were soldiers, and did not have the necessary skills required to support and maintain

the military. He had almost no farmers, laborers, and technicians required to feed and house his massive army. Yet how to choose those who would remain in the military, and who would be forced into a support role? He solved this problem with a series of tests. Whoever passed the tests would remain warriors; the rest would become technicians, laborers and farmers. Thus those who failed to perform could not cry 'foul', as they had only themselves to blame. Most of the unnecessary equipment, mechs and warships were mothballed in storage facilities at various locations. It was Aleksandr's hope that one day they would return to the Inner sphere to resume their lives. Sadly, however, it was not meant to be."

"It was Aleksandr's son, Nicholas, who decided that the role his father had played was too passive, and that in order to remain a viable society, the Clans needed a more dictatorial leadership. To control the populace, they were placed in a caste system where it was difficult to rise above your current station. The few resources they had were lavished upon the Warrior Caste, who constantly tested their skills in brutal live-fire exercises designed both to increase their skills and to weed out excess members. All citizens were reeducated to accept their lot in life, and extol the virtues of the Great Father, Aleksandr, to the point of deific veneration. Rituals were created and adhered to with religious fervor. Combat was looked upon as the ultimate in martial and artistic expression, to the point where all disagreements were settled through combat, ensuring that the Warrior Caste remained dominant."

Jamie scanned the faces of the assembled leaders as he spoke, taking a mental tally of those who appeared to be considering his words and those who looked skeptical or disbelieving. "With the advent of advanced eugenics technology," he continued as Natasha switched holograms to show pictures of the various clan phenotypes, "Clan warriors are genetically engineered to be stronger, smarter and faster than anything previously seen. They are raised from birth with groups of others from the same gene pool, called *sibkos*, where they are put through a brutal training regimen, until only the best of the best remain. These few are then paired together for live mech combat, with only the winners graduating to become part of the Warrior Caste. Out of a group of thirty, only two or three survive to become warriors, the rest being relegated to a lower caste."

"These warriors know only one thing: combat. Raised their entire lives in the belief that combat and death are the means to an end; indoctrinated in Clan propaganda and history; honing their skills through unending conflict; and holding Aleksandr and Nicholas Kerensky up in religious reverence; they kill, and they fight,

and they die, confident in the belief that *their* clan is the only one deserving the right to lead the others in conquest."

Jamie sighed in reflection. "Here now is where the Clans fail to live up to Kerensky's vision. In their acknowledgement of Aleksandr's dream to return and bring the glory of the Star League back to the Inner Sphere, and yet blinded by their single-minded obedience to Nicholas' fascist society, they plan to return to the Inner Sphere: not as enlightened guides, but as conquerors. Aleksandr conceived of the Exodus to prevent needless bloodshed; attempting to preserve as much technology as possible and keep it out of the hands of power-hungry madmen. Nicholas *became* the very power-hungry madman that his father opposed, as brutal and unyielding in his policies as the Usurper, Stephan Amaris, himself."

"So you see," he continued, with only a slight tremor of emotion in his voice, "the Clans have become the very evil they sought to fight against. All of the vile deeds associated with Amaris have been duplicated by Nicholas himself, including genocide. For at Nicholas' order, after much political manipulation and posturing, an entire Clan was destroyed, their citizens forcibly sterilized, their cities razed, and their culture eliminated. They attempted to speak out against Nicholas and leave Clan society and were annihilated for it."

Comparing the Clans and their methods to Amaris the Usurper had a noticeable sobering effect on the assembled leaders. This was something they could comprehend, and were familiar with. "Now I hope you can understand our reasoning for this. We did *not* betray our people; we are holding true to the vision of the Great Father, to restore the glory of the Star League to the Inner Sphere."

"We are not alone in this line of thinking, though we Wardens are vastly outnumbered by the warmongering Crusaders, who will lead the Clans on this invasion. If it is any conciliation, the Clans' system of bidding will cost the lives of many of their warriors before the order of attack is determined. But once it has, they will be an unstoppable, relentless juggernaut, racing towards Terra in the drive to be the First and Greatest Clan, the *iiClan*, and thus prove to themselves who is the greatest among them." The entire hall was quiet: All were mesmerized by Jamie's oratory as well as the projector, which gave life to the words as he spoke them.

"Once Terra has been taken, they will not stop there. They will carve up the Inner Sphere among themselves, and each one of the other Clans will demand Trials of Refusal over Terra. Battle after battle for possession will be fought there, until there is nothing left but smoldering wreckage, and Terra ceases to be a prize worth

fighting over. *That* is our future, ladies and gentlemen, unless we can band together to stop it."

As Jamie paused, Natasha's voice rose above the momentary silence, her melodic voice lilting the strains of a poem learned from her childhood.

"No natural calamities caused you;
There was no great disease, no famines;
no interstellar catastrophes to blame
You have no excuse to explain
how this, our rightful palace, has been fouled
with the dust of countless innocent dead.
The truth is that you are the descendants
of traitors who scurry about like rats
in the dark, fighting over petty kingdoms,
at the foot of the empty throne,
Never recognizing that you have given up
the one true prize."

As she finished, the word 'Seyla' echoed in unison from every Dragoon in the hall, and a hush fell over the conference. A single tear rolled down Natasha's cheek as she attempted to explain this ritual to the gathered leaders of the Inner Sphere. "This is my favorite passage from the Remembrance," she said, "the written history of the Clans since the Exodus. It is the reason the Crusaders use to justify their conquest of the Inner Sphere, as they see you only as debased barbarians; but I see an additional meaning in those great words. I see the petty Clans, fighting over Terra like spoiled children over a favorite toy, not realizing that it needs to be protected, not ravaged. How generations of Crusaders can read those same words and not see the correlation is beyond me; they are the reason I became a Warden."

Thomas Marik, leader of the Free Worlds League, was the first to understand the concept. "'There are none so blind as those who will not see'," he quoted, and as he locked gazes with him Jamie knew that here there was a kindred spirit, whose clear grasp of the situation would go far in cementing a permanent relationship with the Five Houses, and Jamie began to hope that his Outreach Summit would be successful in recreating the Star League after all.

Loud murmuring filled the room as the rest of the assembled leaders discussed the gravity of the situation amongst themselves. Jamie opened the floor to field initial questions, and Takashi Kurita, leader of House Kurita, with his son Theodore beside him, asked the first question.

"You have spoken of Clan technology, and the fierceness of their warriors," he began. "You have promised us much technology, and in return you want our cooperation in what is nothing less than the recreation of the Star League itself. Before we can even consider your words, we require proof that the threat is as dire as you say it is; that this Clan technology will prove to be such an unstoppable force."

Jamie was prepared for this line of questioning, especially from the Draconis Combine, who stood in the most obvious path the Clan invaders would need to take on their road towards Terra. He nodded to Natasha, who spoke a word into her wrist communicator. A few moments later, the side door opened and an Elemental stooped through the doorway, his metal feet echoing loudly as he strode into the room, to the shock and horror of all in attendance. He quickly strode around Jamie and the podium and stood on Jamie's left opposite Natasha, who began playing a holovid of Elementals in combat.

"This is the Clan basic infantry unit, the Elemental powered armor suit," Jamie explained. "Equipped with jump jets, shoulder-mounted SRM racks, small pulse laser and armor-ripping claw, a star of five of these can disable an assault mech in record time. Their small size, speed and maneuverability, combined with swarming attacks, make them a difficult opponent to eliminate. The suit can withstand considerable punishment before being breached and, once breached, the armor administers painkillers, stimulants, and other medicines to keep the wearer alive and at full battle strength. A new armor sealant, called Harjel, is also injected at the breach site to seal both the suit and the wearer's wound."

Jamie signaled the warrior to remove his headgear, and the warrior complied, giving the leaders their first live view of a Clan-bred Elemental warrior. "This is Point Commander Lars, of a Fetladral Bloodline *sibko*, and one of the few trueborn warriors in the Dragoons," he introduced the Elemental to the assembly. The man stood seven-and-a-half feet tall, his blond hair cropped short, and his strong jaw set in a perpetual grimace. He spoke not a word, but merely inclined his head at the gathering.

"The Clans breed thousands of Elementals, just like Lars, in their breeding canisters. When they come, they will bring dozens of advanced mechs, deadlier weapons, and technological breakthroughs. Does this satisfy you, Lord Kurita?" The leader of House Kurita could make no reply, so Jamie continued with his briefing.

"I have heard word from my security forces that Lord Calderon's dropship, the *Icarus Rising*, has just entered the atmosphere and should be arriving shortly; when he arrives I shall be handing out packages to all of you, detailing the Clans and their forces, along with technical readouts of all their mechs, their advanced weapons, their strengths and their weaknesses. With any luck, the Inner Sphere can begin mass-producing their own versions of these, and thereby have the means to halt the invasion, but it will take *all* of you, from all five Great Houses and the Periphery States, to assemble a force large enough to stop them before it is too late. Together, you can survive. Alone, you *will* fall.

Marshall Daru stood up, clearing his throat as he took the floor. "The *Icarus*, you say?" he asked. "Nay, the *Icarus* is... indisposed... right now," he stated, as he struggled to find the words to explain. "It would seem that Protector Calderon is currently limiting his 'protection' to the beautiful daughter of a Deist High Priestess, who, herself, has had the advantage of his 'personal protection' in the past," he said dourly. "I would go so far as to wager that this conference is the furthest thing from the Protector's mind right now, which is why I am alone in attendance."

"Thomas is not really a bad or a lecherous man," he went on to explain over several murmured comments, "but since the death of his son, Edward, in a dropship accident in '34 he has become increasingly paranoid. He totally believes that this conference is a prelude to the invasion of the Concordat by the Inner Sphere, orchestrated by none other than the Federated Commonwealth, of course," he said, inclining his head toward Hanse Davion, who merely rolled his eyes. Melissa Steiner-Davion, seated at his side, however, huffed and stared daggers in return. "I had suggested the liaison to ease his mind and turn his thoughts away from a possible 'preemptive strike'.

Jamie listened to the news in alarm and brought up the emergency security channel. "*Wolf One*, report! What is the status on the Taurian ship?"

"Cleared sir; DNA match and passcard check out," was the reply from the Dragoon's orbital assault dropship, the checkpoint all the dignitaries used before being allowed to the conference. "The ship verifies as an unarmed Black Widow-class troop transport, with Taurian signatures."

"Divert Sparrows One and Two to intercept the dropship and force it down in the Quarantine Area," he ordered. "If it deviates from its flight path, shoot it down. Pursue and make a detailed scan of the vessel." Several of the closest guests paused, noting Jamie tone and body language, and began to whisper among themselves.

"Pursue and scan, roger," came the confirmation. "No weapons; four life forms, including the ambassador; nothing unusual," was the reply a few seconds later. "Sparrows One and Two are entering radar range."

Jamie began to breathe easier, but then the commlink crackled back into life. "The Taurians are making a break for the surface at combat drop speed! All units are in pursuit!"

Jamie was not pleased. Dropships were made for a high-speed descent, which made them difficult targets to hit. The fact that this one was too small to be armed did not matter. "Sparrows, fire at will!" he ordered. "Scramble the rest of the aerospace fighters! *Wolf One*, confirm the body count on board the Taurian; scan the cargo bay for *anything*." Jamie's unusual behavior sparked further whisperings from the Inner Sphere leaders, and many began to wonder aloud if there was a problem.

Wolf One reported back a few moments later. "I get no readings from the cargo bay area, sir, *nothing*! Something is jamming our sensors. And they are heading straight for the conference! How by the Great Father did they know where it was?"

Jamie cursed silently under his breath as he started to pace back and forth in front of the podium. He noted that more and more dignitaries focused their attention at him, concern rising in their voices, and he hoped that the two aerospace fighters he dispatched would be able to hit their target. A few tense moments later and he received the confirmation he was waiting for. "This is Sparrow Two reporting direct hits on the Taurian!"

"Sir *Wolf One* here!" his assault dropship broke back into the comm channel. "There is a radiation leak coming from the Taurian, it appears that Sparrow Two has hit the cargo bay area. Scans are coming through now," the man paused, checking his equipment. "Munitions!" he exclaimed. "They have explosives on board!" he confirmed. "It looks like... dear God... *Alamos! I read four Alamo nuclear warheads on board!!*" screamed the officer.

A sinking feeling entered the pit of Jamie's stomach. To die, here, so close to recreating the Star League... He knew the even the mighty Castle Brian could not withstand firepower of that magnitude. He ordered the defensive cannons on line in a last-ditch effort to stop the plummeting dropship, but he knew that their chance of survival was slim at best; even if they did take out the ship, the resulting explosion would more than likely take out the entire mountain anyway, and the radiation would kill any survivors.

"*Wolf One*, break off pursuit, and Godspeed," he told his dropship. At least someone needed to live, to report what had happened here. "All fighters continue firing."

He moved to address the nervous dignitaries; Natasha and her guards were able to keep order for now, but things were going to get out of hand very quickly if he did not do something to calm them in their final moments. Part of him wanted to lie, to tell them everything was going to be all right, but the warrior in him screamed that they should die knowing the truth.

"Ladies and gentlemen, a rogue dropship has entered the area with intentions on crashing into this fortress. It appears to be carrying Alamo warheads." Only a few of the leaders knew immediately what they were, but then someone said the word *nukes* and the crowd started to panic. The Elemental donned his helmet and stood at attention with his chin held high; the fear of death did nothing to diminish his fighting spirit. Natasha crossed over to Jamie and snapped a crisp salute. "It is the greatest honor of my life to die by your side, sir," she said to her commanding officer.

Jamie returned the salute and held it. "And it has been the greatest honor of mine," he said to her, a single tear rolling down his cheek, "to have lived by yours."

The security forces moved in to ensure that no one caused a riot. To the credit of the gathered leaders, no one did. Hanse and Melissa held each other closely, and she began to cry. Primus Waterly began to lead the group in prayer. They were still praying when, exactly two minutes and sixteen seconds later, the burning dropship hit the front wall of the fortress and exploded, turning the mountain into a giant mushroom cloud. There were no survivors.

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Leo Showers, ilKhan of the Clans, paced the floor of the council chamber deep within the belly of his flagship, the *Dire Wolf*, currently in orbit around the jump point of the Pentagon world of Babylon. The assembled Khans of all seventeen Clans were in attendance, a rare event since the reclusive Steel Vipers and Blood Spirits only showed up for the most important Council sessions. The main item for deliberation was the rediscovery of Clan Wolverine, now called the Cult of the Blood Moon, and Showers was in a dour mood, his anger matched only by the leaders of Clans Smoke Jaguar and Ghost Bear, who had gotten into an early argument over the absent Kraken Guard Khans and had been ordered into silence.

Showers needed to approach the subject in a manner that would not cause immediate outbursts from half of the more volatile Khans. He looked to the Loremaster, Kael Pershaw, and asked, "When are the Kraken Guard Khans due to arrive with their data files?"

"Within the hour, ilKhan," came the Loremaster's reply. "Apparently they experienced a delay in their return, possibly by a group of bandits or Dark Caste members wishing to keep the Not-Named Clan secrets for themselves."

"All I wish to know from Khan Hazen," stated Khan Bjorn Jorgensson of Clan Ghost Bear, in an attempt to restate his earlier question, "is exactly *what* they were doing near Pharaoh's Tomb in the first place."

"Performing *your* Clan's sworn duty, apparently," Khan James Cobb of Hell's Horses, commented offhandedly.

Jorgensson's face went white with rage as he glared at his rival. "Should you have something to say to me, Cobb, say it now so that we may draw a Circle of Equals!"

Before Cobb could return a comment, Khan Lynn McKenna of the Snow Ravens attempted to diffuse the situation between them. "Peace, Khan Jorgensson.," she said to her erstwhile ally. "I do not believe Khan Cobb meant any offense toward the Ghost Bears and their sworn commitment toward eliminating any remaining elements of the Not-Named Clan. We all admire the vigilance your Clan has shown since the Trial of Annihilation."

"You mean, of course," corrected the Steel Viper Khan, Brett Andrews, "Since it became common knowledge that they allowed the *surats* to slip through their fingers." His reference to the great shame of the Ghost Bears, when one of their patrols allowed Wolverine warriors to empty one of the Brian Caches unmolested, simply because the Bears were not given the honor of performing the Annihilation themselves, caused Khan Jorgensson to leap to his feet, hands balled into fists.

He leaned forward, fists supporting his weight on the table, and glared at his other enemy. "It is not *our* fault that the Not-Named Clan still exists! *We* did not fail in that regard!" he declared.

At this remark, Khan Ulric Kerensky slowly stood to his feet, his commanding presence drawing the eyes of all in the room. Leader of Clan Wolf, and proud holder of the Kerensky Bloodname, he wore strength and calm like a mantle as he stared across at his accuser, his somnolent gaze holding up under the bridled fury of the Ghost Bear Khan.

"Our Clan," Ulric began calmly, with only a hint of ice in his voice, "performed beyond all expectations and won more honor than you can comprehend on that long and bloody campaign. You cannot imagine..."

"Bah!" uttered the Jade Falcon Khan, Elias Critchell, "You fought with inadequate forces to get the job done because your *pride* forced you to bid below the established cutdown. You bid poorly."

"This was a matter of Clan honor," Ulric countered. The Wolves do not need to explain themselves to a Clan whose *pride* will not allow them to accept the fact that the Founder chose to join the Wolves over the Falcons so long ago."

Khan Critchell would not back down. "*Honor* would have told you that Widowmaker won the bid; and well! It was *arrogance* that would not allow the Wolves to let anyone else have a chance to win glory."

"Have a care, Khan Critchell," Ulric warned. "You push too far."

"What are you going to do about it, Khan Kerensky?" Critchell asked. "Are you going to tell me to 'prepare to reap the whirlwind'?"

"*Enough!*" commanded the ilKhan, instantly quelling any possible retort from the assembled Khans. "We are *not* here to place blame; we are here to decide what to do about this so-called, 'Cult of the Blood Moon'. What do we know about them, their strengths and weaknesses?" Showers looked over at the Loremaster.

"Very little tactical information, ilKhan," Pershaw said. "Apparently they control three systems in the far reaches of the Outer Rim. Since their flight, they have rebuilt to a considerable size and military force, suggesting outside contacts with the Dark Caste. I cannot believe that they have become completely self-sufficient since their exile. Specific scans and tactical information will not be known until the arrival of the Kraken Guard. According to a transmission from Khan Kabrinski, they skirmished with unknown forces and managed to capture a small Scout class jumpship. They were able to access its data core and learned much valuable information about the outlying systems and location of Cult bases. They are bringing their *isorla* here for examination."

"Excellent!" said ilKhan Showers. "The KG has indeed brought much honor to their Clan if this information proves to be accurate. In the meantime we will need to prepare our forces to eliminate Clan Wolverine once and for all."

Several Khans began to speak but Showers cut them off with a wave of his hand. "There will be no bidding on this, except internally within your respective Clans. I will *personally* take charge of this Annihilation, leading a single Galaxy from each of the eighteen Clans. Their affront was made to the Founder, Nicholas

Kerensky, and the Clans as a whole; we *all* shall be involved in their destruction; in this, none can say they were uninvolved, or that this was not a thorough undertaking, or claim that any one Clan was given preferential treatment. All shall be given a chance for the glory of enforcing the will of the Founder.

At that moment, a signal came from the bridge. "IlKhan, a single Scout-class jumpship has just entered the system. It appears heavily damaged, and it is not listed in our ships registry. Sensors are detecting a radiation leak coming from the primary engine compartment. She is currently hailing us."

"Channel it down here," the ilKhan ordered, "and put the image on the primary viewscreen." Immediately the speakers filled with squelch and static as the radiation interfered with the comm signal. The message constantly faded in and out, and Showers could only catch a few words of the message.

"..ail ilKhan! There is nment breach around...reactor that.... signal. We are... safe distance... repair crews... ascertain the damage... extreme caution"

The display showed that the unidentified ship had come to a stop a respectable distance from the rest of the fleet and was drifting slowly. As they watched a Broadsword-class dropship detached from the main vessel and began flying toward the *Dire Wolf*.

Showers decided to exercise caution. "Bridge, scan the incoming dropship," he commanded. After several seconds, a reply came from the console.

"OvKhan, it appears that prolonged exposure to the main ship has saturated the dropship with radiation. Although not lethal, I recommend sending medical and decontamination teams to the ship the moment it docks."

"Aff", agreed the ilKhan. "Set an intercept course to the dropship and notify me when it docks. We need the information it contains as soon as possible."

Showers then returned to the Council meeting, ratifying an official vote to pursue the destruction of the Not-Named Clan. There was no one who opposed the motion. Before other deliberation could take place, a signal once again came from the bridge, interrupting the meeting.

"ilKhan, the dropship has successfully docked and medical teams are standing by. However, radiation levels on board the Broadsword are much higher than previously recorded and fluctuating rapidly."

As the video was sent down to the viewer, a second scoutship jumped into the system on the same vector as the first one, nearly colliding into it. A clear message rang from the new arrival, booming loudly into the Council chamber's speakers.

"Hail, Leo Showers, ilKhan of the Clans! Hail to the Khans of the Grand Kurultai! I am Galaxy Commander Arden Pryde, Loremaster of the Kraken Guard, bringing important data on the Not-Named Clan on behalf of Khan Kraken Hazen, who was injured in a cowardly ambush near the Undead Sea. I humbly request permission to come aboard."

The ilKhan thumbed the mike to broadcast throughout the ship. "All hands, Red Alert! Security teams to Docking Bay Three! Detach and destroy that dropship!

An immediate response came down from the bridge. "IlKhan, docking clamps are not responding! Radiation is reaching critical levels!"

Righteous anger flashed across Shower's face as he started to realize the depths of this deception, and he knew he was trapped. "All hands, abandon ship!" he ordered, but knowing it was far too late for them all.

The Sovetskii Soyuz-Class heavy cruiser *Dire Wolf*, flagship of the ilKhan and symbol of Clan supremacy, became, for one brief and shining moment, the brightest star in the sky as the tactical nuclear warheads aboard the dropship exploded, taking with it the leadership of all the Clans, and throwing the Clans of Kerensky into chaos.

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Khan Kraken Hazen watched the holo-recording of the *Dire Wolf's* last few moments for what seemed like the hundredth time, looking for a clue, any clue, as to the identity of the perpetrators of this heinous act. He read and re-read the reports of the incident to no avail: There was no face to place on this assassin, no one to pay for this crime. The Clans, leaderless and thrown into a confusion not seen since the second Exodus, were effectively paralyzed with grief and loss.

The ilKhan, Leo Showers was dead, and Kraken felt like he himself had failed. It was his place to be at the Grand Council, with the rest of the Clan leaders, even though it certainly would have meant his death: He would have died with honor, in the company of the greatest warriors of the Clans. Yet here he was, still alive, so he knew that a greater purpose awaited him. As the last remaining Grand Council Khan, he felt it was his duty to lead the other Clans through this time of chaos, and onward into victory against the cowards who orchestrated this terrorist attack. He needed to become the new ilKhan of the Clans.

It took nearly a month for the other Clans to select their new Khans, and Kraken used this time to heal and send out reconnaissance units to patrol the Kerensky Cluster for signs of unusual activity. When his vigilance bore fruit he

convened a Council of all new Clan leaders on Strana Mechty to inform them of the latest events. There was some reluctance on the part of the Clans, but all the new Khans knew the wisdom of meeting in *kurultai* to discuss the future as soon as possible, and so they came for the first Grand Council of the new Khans at the end of December.

Kraken took the floor and addressed the Council, advising them of the need to choose a new ilKhan. Several nominations were made, but nothing was finalized; it would take several more meetings followed by an open vote before the matter was to be decided.

The next topic of discussion was the Not-Named Clan, now known as the Cult of the Blood Moon; however before deliberations could begin, Kraken made a startling announcement. "With all due respect, gathered Khans, there is a much more pressing concern, one so dire I believe that we must place the issue of Clan Wolverine on hold indefinitely." There was much protest, but Kraken stood firm, entreating the gathered Khans to listen to his words before making a judgment. He placed a holodisk on the reader, which showed the entire Inner Sphere, with the Kerensky Cluster at the top. A series of white lines connected the different systems, showing all the established jump points between them.

"This is our most recent list of jump routes connecting star systems in the Inner Sphere. The green line you see is the route taken by the Great Father during the Exodus." This was common knowledge to the Clans, and they waited for Kraken to make a point.

"Two weeks ago," Kraken continued, "an Inner Sphere deep scout ship named the Outbound Light was captured making scans of Kronos. Apparently, we surprised them, and we were able to pursue and capture the vessel before they managed to escape." Kraken touched a button, and a planet near the western edge of the Cluster began to glow red. "Extensive interviews of the crew revealed that they belonged to a group called ComStar, a secret military sect based on Terra, who venerates Jerome Blake in the same manner as we revere the Great Father. It would seem that the Inner Sphere has finally found us."

Shouts and exclamations filled the council chamber. Kraken waited patiently for the outbursts to settle, the eye of calm in the middle of the hurricane of emotion. Once he was certain he had the focus of all the Khans in the room, he continued.

"Examination of the ship's database shows that a covert unit of ComStar's spies, called ROM, first discovered the Kerensky Cluster nearly a year ago. They

have had us under surveillance ever since. They have accomplished this feat, and thus far eluded our patrols, using ComStar's new RC-Gravity StarDrive technology."

"This deviation from standard Kearny-Fuchida drives creates a temporary 'ripple', or wormhole, in space, allowing travel across tremendous distances of empty space. The presence of large gravity wells, such as solar systems, disrupts these wormholes, so that the drives can only create small wormholes between closely packed systems, such as the Cluster, but they can travel tremendous distances across open space, traveling from Kronos to Nueva Castile in a single leap. The devices are limited, however, by constant galactic rotation, and thus it is not possible to create a wormhole to the other side of the galaxy, to the Magistracy of Canopus, for example."

"Using the new RC-drives, you can now see a new set of jump routes between the Inner Sphere and us, as represented by these red lines." Kraken touched another button, and a red network of lines stretched across previously inviolable sections of empty space, creating direct routes between the Pentagon worlds, the Kerensky Cluster, and planets all along the Kurita and the Free Rasalhague Republic's borders. Pandemonium broke out in the Grand Council chamber, shouts of outrage and indignation mixing with various protests and entreaties among the Khans.

Kraken continued after the uproar had subsided. "We need to have the scientist castes from all the Clans working to reproduce these drives. We cannot be limited in our ability to strike back against those who attack us; for make no doubt: When ComStar discovers that we have captured one of their ships and gained this technology, they will come for us. And they will bring with them the Great Houses, who in their greed for technology will stop at nothing to steal ours and make it their own."

"I believe now that the assassination of our Grand Council was not caused by the Wolverines. We need to consider that it may be the prelude to an invasion. Our previous division of Clans, by Warden or Crusader factions, is immaterial, for the Inner Sphere will come for all of us. We stand here on the dawn of a new year, 3042 to the Inner Sphere. Their internal Succession Wars have ended, and there is nothing to distract them from setting their sights upon us. We need to prepare ourselves to defend our homeworlds."

* * * * *

The man sat in a huge council chamber deep in a recovered Star League facility on a remote planet in the Periphery, with a map of the entire Inner Sphere emblazoned on the wall before him. He was scanning the latest intelligence reports of the anarchy that descended upon the Great Houses, and all of the Inner Sphere, in the weeks since the Outreach Massacre. The planet was declared no longer fit for human habitation, and those that could leave had done so amidst full-scale rioting from the remaining populace.

The Federated Commonwealth fractured as Davion and Steiner loyalist troops flocked to their respective capitols and began blaming each other for the assassinations. Border skirmishes and sporadic raiding were common on all fronts. Reports of pirate activity increased exponentially, as bandits, disaffected regular army units, and brazen mercenaries took what they could by force from those around them.

A young woman, dressed in white ceremonial robes, knocked once before entering the room, breaking him from his reverie. Giving him only the barest nod of respect, she stormed across the room to stand before him, fury written on her countenance and her breath labored from the exertion of running from the tarmac to his office.

She wore the white robes of an adept of ComStar; a bright contrast to the olive drab uniform he wore. While she bore the badges of office proclaiming herself as a member of the First Circuit, his only ostentation was a broad crimson sash across his chest. Yet his eyes held a fire similar to hers, refusing to be cowed by one of the most powerful leaders left in the Inner Sphere. His eyes told of a brilliant intelligence and a keen understanding far beyond his years, and the aura of presence he exuded had nothing to do with the trappings or badges of office.

"My *lord*," she intoned, her anger causing her to bite off the words distastefully, "I demand an explanation."

"You should know better than to come barging in here making demands of *me*, Demona. I suggest you curb your attitude or I will have you beaten and thrown out," the man replied calmly.

"You would not *dare*!" she retorted. Even *you* would not lay your hands upon the Precentor Atreus! I command power of which you cannot even begin to imagine."

"Oh but I can, *Precentor*," he retorted. "Do not think for one moment that your rank has any meaning to me. My Father forced me to become a ComStar initiate,

but only to allow me access to ComStar's vast intelligence network and wealth. And I have used *both* to my advantage, as you can see."

"But the deaths of all the Inner Sphere leaders, including Primus Waterly..." Demona began, but she was cut off by her Lord.

"... should have come as no surprise to you," he finished for her. "You *knew* what the final goal of this mission was, and still you cooperated willingly. You *knew* of my plan to assassinate the House leaders, but you expected me to fail, trying to use me as one of the petty bandit lords ComStar has been funding for its own ends since the turn of the century! But you failed to foresee my ability to tap into ComStar and ROM resources the way I have, and thus I have been able to put my plan in motion decades before I had planned to do so."

"Besides," he crooned to Demona, "with the death of Primus Waterly, the door is open for you to step into her place. With you leading ComStar, instead of that meddler, Anastasius Focht, we can begin our reign of the Inner Sphere. The leaderless Houses will have no choice but to accept our dominion or suffer complete communications blackouts, cutting them off from the rest of the Galaxy. My armies are already in control of key sectors through out the Galaxy."

The look on Demona's face showed her doubt, so the man picked up a laser pointer and walked over to the wall map. "The ComGuard has Terra and the Five Houses, which will be firmly under your control, once you are elected Primus; and, believe me, I *can* make that happen. The Taurian Concordat, once a minor bandit realm, has been funded generously by me, through ComStar, and is now a military force to be reckoned with. I have bribed key members of the Taurian merchant and military structure, and through subtle manipulations of both military supplies and monetary kickbacks by anonymous patrons, I can virtually guarantee the Periphery will remain under their thumb, and therefore my invisible control. I doubt that anyone, including the Taurians themselves, is smart enough to unravel the weave of intricacies through which they are bound, and thus they, as well, have become my unwitting pawns."

"The so-called Clans, Kerensky's misguided progeny, will be slightly more difficult to manage. With the death of their former leadership, they have been placed in temporary chaos, giving me the time I need to back warriors sympathetic to outside influences in their bids to power. I may not be able to influence the entire Council, but I will have enough ears within the Clans to give me advance warning of their intentions. I will blind them, cripple them, and reduce their effectiveness as a military force, while I play my trump card, the Cult of the Blood Moon. Cut off from

the rest of the Clans, ostracized by their peers, and reliant upon the Dark Caste and Periphery merchants for supplies, they are vulnerable to economic pressure from the outside. My sponsored merchants, bandits, underground markets, and military suppliers will have them in such a tight grip they will have no choice but to bend to my will, to become the vanguard of my army as I invade the Kerensky Cluster!"

Demona saw the man's eyes light up, shining with the light of madness, the compelling tones of his voice sweeping her along, and she knew that he walked the fine line between divinity and madness. The man rose to his feet, his arms sweeping toward the map in a royal gesture. He seemed oblivious to anyone but himself, and Demona listened to him carefully, pretending to be enraptured by his oratory while she slowly worked her way around to his desk, to the needler pistol she knew he always kept there. She could see where this conversation was headed; the heights of his ambition and the depths of his ruthlessness knew no bounds, and she needed a way to extricate herself from this power-hungry madman.

"For from the ashes of the Five Houses I shall recreate the Star League!" he continued. "As Nicholas Kerensky used the Wolverines as a common enemy to unite the Clans under his rule and solidify his power, so I shall use the Clan threat to focus the entire Inner Sphere against them! They will see the restoration of the Star League as the only way for survival, and with the blessings of Primus Aziz," he said, nodding in her direction, "my ascendancy will be assured, and I will be received with righteous praise as the new First Lord of the Star League! Mine shall be the first rule in a long dynasty, revered forever as the greatest First Lord of all time! As Aleksandr Kerensky, Jerome Blake, and Julius Caesar before me, I shall be worshiped as a *god*, and I shall be the most powerful man in the universe!"

"Not in my lifetime, *First Lord*," Demona said, seizing the needler from the desk and pointing it at his head. "I never agreed to this *regicide*," she spat.

The man did not even blink. "Come now, Demona," he chided her. "Do not allow the deaths of a few political figures to cause you to lose sight of the Big Picture. Have you forgotten that it was *your* ROM agents who infiltrated the conference and let my ship through their security cordon? That is was *your* order to have the communications blackout set up, preventing any of the Clan technical readouts from being transmitted to the rest of the Inner Sphere? That it was *your* operatives who were monitoring the Clan communications traffic and enabled the deception needed to take out the Clan flagship? You have as much blood on your hands as I do mine, Demona Aziz", he reminded her.

"But... but that was different," Demona stammered. "I was acting to preserve the Inner Sphere, not to destroy it! I had no idea you had subverted my contacts within ROM, had obtained *nuclear weapons*! For the love of *Blake*! All those innocent people, the population of an entire *planet*," she sobbed, her resolve shaken and her eyes blurring with tears. "ComStar was created to *protect* life, and the Ares Convention was signed to *prevent* innocents from being harmed. What you did here was *wrong*; every fiber of my being screams at me so."

The man slowly began to walk towards her while soothing her with his voice. "And how many innocents have been killed in the Succession Wars? What had anything those political *rabble* done *not* been self-centered, motivated only by their own desire to rule over their peers? How much pain and suffering had *they* caused? They had warred with each other for so long they knew of no other way. They needed to be removed for true peace to reign once again."

Demona's hand shook as her lord moved to within arm's reach of her. He held out one hand for the gun, the other reached for her waist. He calmly stared at her, moving slowly to take the pistol away as the other wrapped around her, pulling her close. He held her in an intimate embrace, kissing her fully as he had so many times in the past three years. When at last they separated, a subdued Demona stated simply, "I will do as you ask."

"Of course," her lord stated, smiling triumphantly. "Once you are Primus, everything will fall into place."

"But mine is only one vote," Demona pressed. "What if the Circuit elects Focht, or one of the other Precentors? We cannot guarantee my success without killing half of the Circuit, which will be impossible now that they are on their guard and taking precautions."

Her lord smiled. "There are contingencies in place, my love, for even such an event as this. Should you fail to be elected Primus, you shall denounce Anastasius Focht and his supporters as traitors to the true vision of Blake. You shall then gather loyal troops under your banner and seize Terra."

"*WHAT!?*" Demona could not believe her ears, her previous fury returning to her in full. A civil war within ComStar was unthinkable! She stepped back from her lord in shock. She opened her mouth to protest but no words would come out.

"I require loyalty above all else, and Focht and his band of meddling ruffraff will either submit to our will or be destroyed. I *will not* allow him power in *my* new empire. I will begin a Jihad to eliminate any, and all, resistance to my rightful reign. Traitors and malcontents will be weeded out and destroyed in the fires of holy war.!

Only those of proven loyalty will share the bounties in *my* empire. There is *one* vision to encompass all, and it is *mine*."

Demona could not believe that ComStar would be sacrificed on the altar of one man's ambition, to fuel the fires of his ego. "Even if I am not elected Primus, I cannot send ComStar into the throes of rebellion," she declared, prepared to accept the wrath of her lord, but he merely laughed.

"My dearly beloved Demona, you already have," he told her. "Did I not say that there were contingencies in place? Even now, I have your own ROM operatives sowing the seeds of dissent among the masses, so that, should you call them to arms, many will follow you. I also have your access codes, your countersigns, and all your secret little contacts worked out. Have you not already guessed that I was using *your* access to procure funds for my expeditions, that I have been sending my orders, appended to your own, to your own ROM operatives without your knowledge?" All I had to do was redirect certain reports, alter timetables a little, and I was able to convince all of your covert spies that this operation was planned directly by you."

Demona could not believe her ears. Now at last she understood the depth of his betrayal, how he had usurped her agents and gained so much power so quickly; he had stolen hers. She thought about the pistol until she remembered she no longer had it. She turned to sprint for the door but the pistol blast caught her low on the right side, stealing her breath and causing her to fall hard to the floor. The pain was excruciating, and she fought to remain conscious as her blood began to pool on the tiled floor, the red blood mingling seamlessly with the red tiles that formed the background of the man's coat-of-arms.

"I wish you had remained loyal to me, my dear; you know how I deal with traitors. But do not worry; I shall simply have to keep up your communications until your duplicate is fully prepared. I had her surgically altered months ago." He crouched beside her, careful to avoid stepping in the blood. *I am* sorry I couldn't let you live, but you know who I am, and you've seen my face, and for that alone you had to be removed. Now you can be elected Primus, or start a Jihad; it doesn't really matter, because it won't really be *you*. No one shall know me until my coronation ceremony, when it will be too late to stop me."

"It is time for me now to move my base of operations to Terra, where all First Lords have ruled, and where I shall rule, with your most loyal ComStar troops by my side." Demona tried to fight, tried to crawl away, tried to scream, but she was too weak to stop the man as he slowly raised the pistol to her forehead. "In mere

moments, I alone shall stand at the threshold of greatness, at the dawn of a new year, the beginning of a new age. I alone shall know the truth: That the Clan Council was destroyed in late November, on the anniversary of Kerensky's ill-fated Exodus. Fitting, is it not?"

The man pressed the barrel to Demona's head, smiling the entire time, his eyes lit with madness. "And the deaths of all the great leaders of the Inner Sphere weeks before that, in the beginning of November, was also ironic, don't you think?" He pressed his finger to her lips to quiet her fearful whimpering.

Steeling herself for the inevitable, drawing on her faith in Blake, she stared hard into the black eyes of her lord, her lover, her murderer. "Someone shall stop you," she forced out between her gritted, bloodstained teeth. "Someone shall stop you, St..." before her world turned red, and she knew nothing more.

* * * * *

This is the world of 3042, where both the Inner Sphere and the Clans of Kerensky seek to rebuild following the death of most of their leadership. A power-crazed lunatic pulls the strings, but who is he really? Will his desire to plunge the galaxy into chaos result in a new Star League, or is this the start of a Dark Age? With new jump routes appearing overnight, will this facilitate an early end to the Inner Sphere by the Clan invasion? Or will the Great Houses lead a preemptive strike on the Kerensky Cluster? Join today, and lead one of the great empires of the Battletech universe, and make a difference!

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