

TRIAL UNDER FIRE

Chapter 1 The Jaguar's Reach

Loren L. Coleman



<strtextlog>

<330-1347> Field Commander Charles Antonescuc reports. Southern pass held against Smoke Jaguar force. Coordinated resistance on Huntress has been smashed, but there is no indication of Khan Osis' presence. Surviving clan warriors available for interrogation.

<408-1955> Prince Victor Steiner-Davion to all field commanders. Huntress is ours.

<409-0942> Lieutenant Michael Tonai, DEST, on debrief of prisoners. All evidence indicates that Khan Lincoln Osis has escaped Huntress for Strana Mechty. However, of possible worse consequence are rumors that one Galaxy Commander Corbett is rallying Smoke Jaguar forces at a remote staging area. Flagged for immediate investigation.

<409-2315> Jerrard Cranston reports to Prince Victor. Galaxy Commander Brendon Corbett, the Smoke Jaguar officer who led forces back to Huntress, bypassed the capital for the colony world of Tranquil. From this command post, he has sent out a call that all surviving Smoke Jaguar warriors should rally to his position rather than to Khan Osis on Strana Mechty. Reconstructed records prove that Corbett has received several responses. Our "friend" Trent believes that Tranquil may possess the command and production resources to resurrect Clan Smoke Jaguar.

<410-0601> Prince Victor Steiner-Davion, Commanding. Unacceptable.

Low Planetary Orbit

Tranquil, Clan Homeworlds

28 April 3060

The smallest briefing room aboard the DropShip *Black Hammer*. Enough space between the gray-painted bulkheads for a small table surrounded by half a dozen chairs, three of the seats currently occupied. A duct in the ceiling blew down tepid air tasting of the metallic tang left by atmosphere scrubbers.



The Star League ensign hung over one wall—a silver eight-pointed “Cameron” star against a black field. The room’s one concession to tactical briefings: a flat-D screen opposite the flag, connected via spiraling cable to the keyboard cradled over the left arm of Lieutenant Connor Sinclair.

Connor stood next to his own seat typing one-handed, his gray eyes studying the blank screen with a frown of concentration.

The young lance leader kept his dark brown hair cut at the edge of military regulation length. Though his uniform was cut along the original Star League Defense Force lines, he’d added a regimental patch from his old unit, the Davion Heavy Guards. All MechWarriors assigned to one of the Damocles Commando lances had done the same. In his lance he counted one from the Kestrel Grenadiers and two from the First Aragon Borderers. Warriors he had never served with before.

Finally the screen glowed to life, and against the backdrop of a star-studded spacecape a world grew to fill the frame. Dark blue oceans covered a majority of the planet’s surface, with two large land masses standing out in brown-green relief.

“Tranquil,” he named the world.

The planet rotated quickly, and froze when the smaller continent came under the camera's eye. One final flurry of keystrokes, and as the land zoomed in to fill the screen he set the keyboard into a special wall receptacle designed to hold it.

"This is where Galaxy Commander Corbett has decided to reestablish the Smoke Jaguars, if he can." The young lieutenant swept his gaze over the assembled lance. "We're here to kick the supports from under him."

"Asking quite a bit aren't they?" Dominic Paine shifted uneasily in his chair. "I don't know about any of you, but personally I'd feel better about this with a full regiment backing us."

Connor shook his head. "Pacifying Huntress cost the task force too much, and Prince Victor has no idea what he'll face on Strana Mechty. Remember, they're trying to shut down the *entire* war." He shrugged. "The six Damocles Commando teams are all they can afford to spare."

"Nothing like feeling expendable," Dominic said, his light tone exaggerated to the point of sarcasm.

Tessa McCaughnell tugged at the thick braid of red-blond hair laying over one shoulder, then leaned over to slap Dominic on the arm.

"We're no' here to take on the lot of them," she reminded her new lancemate. "Just to give Brendon Corbett some sleepless nights until the Prince shows up a-riding the black coach." She looked toward Keith Andrew and then back to her new lieutenant for support.

Nodding his appreciation for the back-up, Connor forestalled further outbursts with a raised hand. "Also the Clans are known for absorbing the weak, and the Smoke Jaguars share this world with Clan Wolf who control several cities on the larger continent. If we make Corbett appear ineffective, the Wolves are likely to finish the job for us." He offered a tentative smile. "Then we can all go home."

That pulled answering nods from everyone. Living off WarShips in Clan space was no substitute for the worlds of the Inner Sphere. For home.

"Any chance the Wolves will involve themselves on the Jaguars' side?" Keith asked.

Connor gave them all an easy shrug. "No one came to the Jaguar's aide at Huntress. In fact, some intercepted comms indicate that the Wolves interfered with another Clan that wanted to get involved. The Smoke Jaguars are isolated and vulnerable. We need to take advantage of that as we can."

He turned back to the flat-D screen.

"So here's our little part in the raiding." He brushed a hand over the snow-capped mountain range which locked away a hook-shaped peninsular region from the mainland. "This peninsula appears to be the only land really improved by the Smoke Jaguars. Our recon probes found a few minor towns and one small city. What little they have in production capacity and command assets will be concentrated here. Insertion of our BattleMechs will be made on our next turn around the planet, a low-orbit pass over the area, via drop-pods and stealth 'chutes." Surprised looks at the mention of parachutes. "It will be early morning, local time," he explained, "and we don't want landing flares to give us away."

"The *Black Hammer* and the *Eclipse* will deploy six lance-size commando teams. We're Commando One, but don't let that go to your head. It just means we hit the ground first."

Sober expressions greeted him. BattleMechs might be the pinnacle of military technology, walking the battlefields of the thirty-first century with titanic measure, but the Clans bred talented warriors and had made a few technological advances in their years of isolation away from the Inner Sphere. They owned too many advantages not to take them serious.

Dead serious.

"The good news is that we aren't supposed to see *any* heavy resistance. The bad news is that we aren't *supposed* to see any heavy resistance. We'll certainly try to keep it to a minimum, and three Mobile Field Base vehicles will drop with us giving the commando good on-site repair and refit capability. We recon this first operations area." He pointed to the inside edge of the peninsula's hook. "Taking targets of opportunity. And then hit a facility out at the tip of the peninsula which Intelligence believes is a 'Mech production factory. Once all six teams have completed their objectives, we rendezvous for DropShip pick-up."

Connor reached over to the keyboard and hit the power toggle. The image on the screen winked out of existence with a light hum cut off by a popping noise.

"Any questions?" No one—not even Dominic—raised a hand. "Then let's get buttoned up."

No one moved quickly, he noticed. These were good warriors, if a bit nervous for their first mission with each other. His job was to hold them together long enough to grow comfortable as a team, to complete the mission and make it home. He stepped in the direction of the door, stopped in front of the Star League ensign to stare into the hub of the silver Cameron star.

One line ran off in a long spike to the right. The guiding light of the Star League.

"Let's all remember why we are here," he said. "And what we represent." Then he was through the door and heading for the *Black Hammer's* 'Mech bay.

He hoped that reminding them of their higher duty owed the Star League might assuage some of the doubts they must certainly still feel.

It certainly helped him.

* * *

Connor's *Bushwacker* was already secured into its drop-pod, ready for imminent deployment. The egg-shaped shell acted as heat shield and extra armor for the penetration of Tranquil's upper atmosphere. Explosive charges would separate the pod from BattleMech well after insertion, allowing the large 'chute to arrest the fall and settle the 'Mech easily to the ground.

Connor squirmed through an access opening and lowered himself on a short chain ladder to the shoulder of the squat titan. Standing just shy of eight meters in height the *Bushwacker* was shorter than the average 'Mech, and with its turret-style shoulder joints and far-spread arms was actually wider than it was tall. For a fifty-five ton machine it was well armed and armored, however. Capable of running up to eighty-five kilometers per hour—perhaps a touch

more if he handled it right—the *Bushwacker* made a good raider.

A technician held a spotlight into the pod, outlining an open hatch set into the BattleMech's head. Connor dropped down into his cockpit, dogged the hatch behind him with a quick spin of the inside wheel. Off came the slacks and uniform shirt, leaving him in knee-length shorts, T-shirt and combat boots. A MechWarrior's *true* uniform. Pulling his cooling vest from a small locker, he then stored his officer's uniform in its place. The vest was made from ballistic cloth ribbed with small tubes of coolant, designed to offset the extreme heat of a BattleMech cockpit.

Connor pulled it on and settled himself into the *Bushwacker's* pilot seat.

A power cord stretched from the right side of the control chair, and he plugged its end into the mating socket on his cooling vest. The chilling coolant immediately raised gooseflesh on his arms, though he knew he'd be thankful for its touch later.

From a pouch to one side of the seat he pulled self-adhesive monitoring pads which he stuck to upper arms and inner thighs. The trailing leads he gathered in his lap, then grabbed his neurohelmet off a nearby shelf and settled it over his head. Among other things, the neurohelmet helped translate his own sense of balance to the BattleMech's massive gyro. He plugged the leads into the sockets set into the left side of the helmet. A thicker cable, this one feeding from its housing on his control panel, fastened to the neurohelmet at a large socket set into the throat guard.

Prepared, all that remained was to bring the *Bushwacker* to life.

A series of toggles released the dampening field which banked the fusion fires of the BattleMech's reactor. A rumble more felt than heard rose from below and in back of Connor's seat, and his cockpit control panel lit up as power flooded the circuits. Heat scale registered in the cool-blue tones of a BattleMech at rest, and all threat indicators remained silent. His head's-up display glowed a ghostly, transparent green against the inside of his helmet's faceshield. He turned off the HUD, not needing its distraction until ready for combat.

“Security check, Lieutenant Connor Sinclair.” He waited while the computer tore apart his voice and matched it against the secure print buried within its memory.

“Voiceprint match confirmed.”

The computer’s voice was soft, almost feminine, but still mechanical in delivery. Connor was not one of those who preferred to alter it for more human characteristics. Some MechWarriors even used recordings of their wives or girlfriends. A bad habit, in his opinion. BattleMechs were machines of warfare—better to not get too attached.

“Proceed with security sequence,” the computer prompted him.

Because voiceprints could be faked, MechWarriors often installed a second layer of security—a code phrase, which only they would know. “We are united and committed to a bright new future,” Connor said, having chosen a line from Prince Victor’s first Star League address.

“Verified. All functions now at your command.”

An easy switch opened up the secure channel of his lance. “Connor Sinclair on-line and ready for drop. Commando One, report.”

Tessa, Keith, Dominic; one by one they all checked in ready for drop. Connor switched over to the *Black Hammer’s* command frequency. “Commando One ready for drop,” he reported.

A crackle of static, and then the voice of the DropShip’s communications officer. “All commandos report ready to drop. The *Eclipse* has matched our insertion path. Fifteen minutes to drop window. Prepare for gravity changes.”

Fifteen minutes. Connor ate away at the time checking all systems twice, and weapons once again for good measure. Both long-range missile systems, one launcher riding over his left shoulder and the other replacing his left arm, checked out fine—fully loaded and missiles armed. Diagnostics on the centerline large laser and both machine guns read in the green.

The Mydron eighty millimeter autocannon on his right arm showed an intermittent fault, so he cleared the ammunition feed which pulled the depleted uranium slugs up from his

right torso and refed the weapon. The fault indication disappeared. It would do for now.

A minor fluctuation of gravity warned Connor that the DropShip was maneuvering for insertion. The main thrusters wavered in strength for a moment and then were dampened, losing the artificial gravity brought on by constant thrust. Lateral thrusters rolled the *Black Hammer* and created pockets of micro-gravity constantly shifting in direction. Used to solid ground beneath his feet, the lance leader rode it out with teeth clenched so tight as to hurt his jaw.

"Commando One, prepare for deployment. Good hunting, Damocles. Counting down from twenty... nineteen..."

The *Bushwacker's* computer was fed a signal from the DropShip, and the computer voice overlaid the final few counts with its own pre-drop checklist. Connor listened in to the last few seconds, tensing for the drop.

"Shield integrity confirmed.

"Power curve, optimal.

"Drop check complete, all systems nominal. Landing coordinates confirmed."

Then a solid weight slammed into his back as the pod was rudely ejected from the *Black Hammer*. He couldn't breathe, and felt certain in that second that his heart had stopped beating as well. The pressure squeezed at his stomach.

Then as abruptly as it had begun it was over. The pod, *Bushwacker*, and pilot were in freefall. Only a light bucking indicated that the drop-pod was beginning to hit upper atmosphere.

One of the cockpit auxiliary screens flickered to life as the computer patched it in to sensors mounted on the outside of the shield. It showed dark space interrupted by the harsh pinpricks of stars as they are seen only from space. The pod rolled on its attitude jets, bringing the *Black Hammer* into the camera's eye. The *Union-class* DropShip was an immense white-gray sphere hanging against that black backdrop, growing smaller by the second. He saw a blur against one arc of the hull which might have been another drop-pod launching outward.

Everything seemed to be proceeding according to plan....

When it all fell apart.

No warning. If Connor had blinked, he might have missed it. Even so, he would never be certain if the azure flare was a true memory or supplied by his mind to explain the sudden explosion that burst from the side of the DropShip.

A flash of—possible—coherent light.

A silvery spray of melted armor raining out into space, chased by the catastrophic evacuation of atmosphere, equipment and personnel through the rent in the *Black Hammer's* side. The DropShip tumbled toward the edge of his screen even as the emergency comm frequency overrode his receiving equipment to chatter a flurry of mixed transmissions into his ear.

"What the hell was that?"

"Can't get a reading on..."

"...you confirm 'Mech pod deployment?"

"...day, mayday, we are going... down..."

On screen the DropShip rocked again as if a fragile globe struck by an invisible fist.

More debris spilled out as the vessel slid away from Connor's camera angle. Silence reigned for all of three seconds, the lieutenant gripping the arms of his control chair with near-panic strength.

Then his comm gear changed over automatically to a new channel, flashing an emergency frequency for the *Eclipse*. A new voice whispered in his ear.

"My God. We've lost the *Black Hammer*."

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Chapter 2 First Contact

Loren L. Coleman



REACT-1 FORCES

Lieutenant Connor, please stand by...

(What do you mean that's all we have? You're certain? All right, let's go with it.)

Lieutenant. This is Corporal Thomas Sorenson, commanding your Mobile Field Base vehicles. We're in contact with Captain Taylor on the *Eclipse*. Trying to ascertain what has happened. The *Eclipse* has abandoned its run. Status of the *Black Hammer* is still uncertain. I have yet to raise your lancemates or any members of Commando Two and Three, but as of this time we are still go—the mission clock is running.

You are falling slightly off-target. We predict a shallow-water splashdown north of what appears to be a fishing village. We will await you at our designated landing area, near a good refit site. Your optimum route has already been programmed into your navigation computer.

Luck to us all.

Tranquil, Clan Homeworlds

28 April 3060

APCs were no match for a BattleMech.

Right hand easy on the *Bushwacker's* control stick and his left nudging the throttle, Connor Sinclair turned his back on the burning vehicles and the oily smoke they trailed skyward over the fishing village. The *Bushwacker's* left foot sideswiped one building, tearing a gaping hole into the wall and collapsing the covered porch. A flatbed hauler parked in his way was crushed even flatter beneath the other foot, then he was free of the village and moving into the valley which ran roughly parallel to the coastline.

He throttled the 'Mech into a run, keeping part of his attention on the HUD and the red icon which showed a *Firefly* closing on his position. A light 'Mech and an older design, dating back to the original Star League, the *Firefly's* trio of medium lasers still demanded a modicum of respect. He would smash it from range, and then move on toward rendezvous.

The comm system crackled to life with an abnormally loud burst of static. "Leave it? ...hauling explosives...Commander." A long pause. "Aff...bridge."

He'd set his system to scan known Clan civilian frequencies, though the receiver was having difficulty pulling in more than a broken signal. Thomas Sorenson had apparently picked it up as well.

"Lieutenant, did you receive? Laborer caste frequencies, but something about explosive charges? Watch your step."

As if to underscore the warning, threat indicators screamed for attention a split-second before the *Bushwacker* lurched to the left. A flight of missiles slammed into the BattleMech's right shoulder, blasting away precious armor but not near enough to upset the massive gyro balancing the war machine.

Connor hauled the control stick over, tracking his targeting reticle into the corner of his main screen. The *Bushwacker* twisted at the waist while continuing to run forward. Through the ferroglass canopy he spotted the *Firefly* as it angled in behind him. The lighter 'Mech had arced over a low range of nearby hills on jump jets, closing faster than anticipated

to score first with its long-ranged missiles. Still, a five-pack of LRMs weren't enough to threaten him. Unless he let the Clan warrior into the *Bushwacker's* six, at the weaker armor protecting his back.

Drifting his reticle over the *Firefly's* outline, the crosshairs burned from red to the bright gold of a hard weapons lock. The targeting system also gave him an audio cue, a soft tone which promised a good missile firing solution. Connor squeezed into the shot, smiling his victory as his large laser burned away armor over the *Firefly's* right leg. His twin LRM racks added to the other MechWarrior's misery, peppering the head and upper body of the light 'Mech.

Waiting for his weapons to cycle, Connor checked his screens with a practiced glance. A quarter mile further along, the valley ended at the foot of a four-story bluff. A ramp gave access to the upper plateau, and against the skyline above it a second *Firefly* now moved to engage. The light traffic scattered quickly, caught between a running BattleMech firefight and the second *Firefly* ready to defend the ramp. Only a tractor-trailer rig remained on the bridge, apparently abandoned. Connor guessed the first *Firefly* would now circle further afield and avoid him until it could join up with the new arrival.

Except he'd forgotten to take into account the Clan practice of single combat.

In their quest for ultimate glory and honor, Clan warriors tended to fight alone, spurning help even as it stood nearby. Although outmassed by twenty-five tons, the first *Firefly* was not about to share the kill. It cut back inside the *Bushwacker's* firing arc, pouring on the speed in an attempt to close and bring its medium lasers into play.

With the Damocles Commando 'Mech still at a full run toward the ramp, the *Firefly* never stood a chance of making it in close.

Connor's autocannon cut too low, churning the ground with a hail of eighty-millimeter slugs. Cursing silently, the Inner Sphere MechWarrior toggled again for missiles and lasers. The ruby beam of his *Bushwacker's* large laser splashed over the *Firefly's* left shoulder, stripping it down to titanium skeleton. The first missile flight was picked off by the anti-missile system riding in place of the light 'Mech's right arm, but the following flight slammed into an already-weakened right leg.

The knee joint bowed outward, rolling the leg out over the ankle actuator. The *Firefly* stumbled and went down, right leg snapping off at the knee and forward-thrust torso burying itself lasers-first into the valley's soft earth.

It wasn't getting up again.

Now Connor was grateful for the cooling vest he wore. Waste heat flooded the *Bushwacker's* cockpit as the fusion reactor spiked from the power draw required for the double-salvo of weapons. Heat sinks built into the engine worked almost as quickly to shunt it away, leaving Connor with only a few second's labored breathing of the stifling air.

No time to wait. Turrets flanking the ramp suddenly popped up and began to snipe at his BattleMech. A stream of light autocannon fire rattled against the *Bushwacker's* right side, chewing into armor and raining the protective composite down to the ground in shards and splinters.

Easy targets, these. Connor's centerline laser silenced them in a matter of seconds as he continued to move against the ramp, intent on putting down the second *Firefly* hard and fast.

Which was when the fireball blossomed at midpoint up the ramp, consuming the parked tractor-trailer rig as it threw a gout of flame skyward. The ramp collapsed, its structural integrity shattered by the force of the explosion. For a moment Connor thought the second *Firefly* might somehow be responsible, but no, not with the light firepower the design carried. Then he recalled the truck, and the earlier transmission.

Hauling explosives!

Damn.

"Sorenson, this is Connor. I've lost the ramp!"

He'd also lost any advantage range might have given him as the *Firefly* opened up with medium lasers and missiles. The *Bushwacker* stumbled under the onslaught, gyro thrown out of balance, but Connor's steady hand on the control stick compensated for the rough treatment.

Corporal Sorenson did not exactly sound thrilled. "I'd recommend you find another way, then, and fast, sir."

"It's not like I can build another," he snapped, trading salvos with the *Firefly*.

The *Bushwacker's* large laser ate away at the other 'Mech's shoulder, while the *Firefly's* trio of lasers again spit emerald pulses into the larger machine. Connor's autocannon missed, again.

"Yes, sir." Soreneson's voice was a touch more respectful, though plainly worried. "But there's an *Owens* up here prowling around. If it finds us, we're done."

The *Firefly* had stepped up to the edge of the bluff, rising over the retaining wall which had helped bolster the strength of the ramp and now was all that remained of the structure. "Build another?" Connor whispered to himself, drawing a hint from his own words.

He dropped his crosshairs down to the retaining wall, scoring a deep cut across its face with large laser, and then hammering at it with missiles. The LRMs could not acquire anything approaching a solid lock, but this close they hardly needed it. The explosive warheads dug deep, shattering the bulwark. The wall crumbled in an avalanche of dirt and rock and broken ferrocrete, undercutting the *Firefly* which fell backward and then tumbled down the slide. Crushed armor plating littered the slope. Connor stepped his 'Mech forward, bringing one foot down on the fallen *Firefly's* right side and caving it in. Laser fire and autocannon slugs exploited the hole, working down into the central cavity and smashing the large gyro which all 'Mechs depended on to keep upright.

Carefully, the young MechWarrior stepped over the stricken *Firefly* and worked his way up the treacherous slope.

"I don't know what you did, Lieutenant, but the *Owens* is heading your way with something to prove."

"Something to protect, you mean," Connor said as he topped the rise and throttled into an easy walk. His scanners registered the *Owens'* approach, but also the large facility built into the cliff facing of a nearby large hill. "Jackpot, Sorenson. If those dishes on top are any clue, we've walked into a Clan communications facility, and a rather large one."

His first flight of missiles was already streaking gray contrails through the air when the *Owens'* large laser flayed into

his leg to slice away better than a half ton of armor protection. An Inner Sphere OmniMech design—no doubt brought home as spoils of war—the pilot had chosen its one hard-hitting long-range configuration.

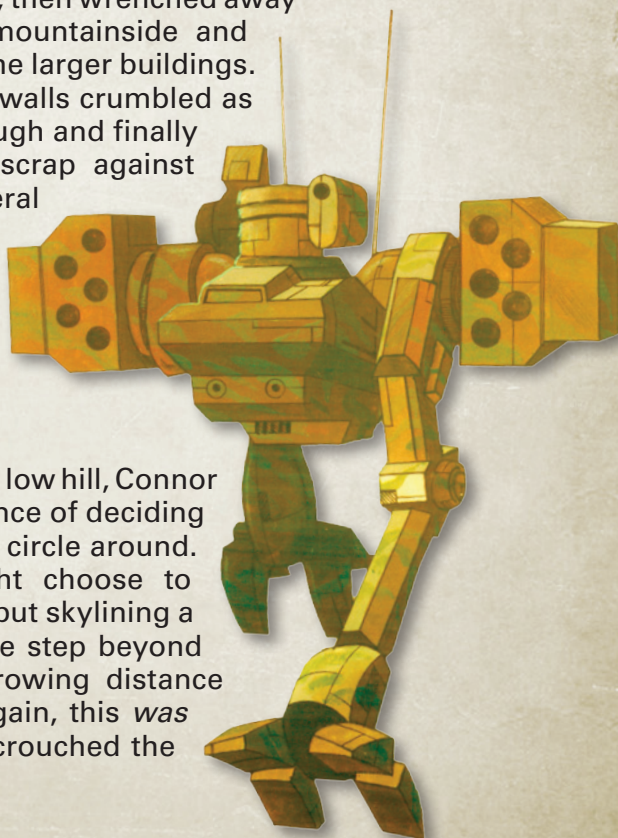
Connor opened the throttle, guiding his *Bushwacker* into a loping pace that angled around a small mound—putting it between him and the charging *Owens*—let loose with another double-flight and this time adding his laser into the barrage.

The Clans built well enough when it came to protection from the elements and the possibility of light collateral damage. But they rarely hardened auxiliary sites against direct attack. Why should they? Any other Clan wanting to contest the area would *batchall*, challenging the defender to meet him in open ground with any or all defending forces. The assaulting force would then match the defenders, and a contest initiated. While Connor appreciated the ritualized methods of the Clans, protecting essential but non-hostile facilities, part of the Inner Sphere's purpose in attacking Clan Space was to remind them of the devastation total warfare could bring.

On his fifth salvo the main communications dish twisted about on its seating, then wrenched away to fall down the mountainside and smash into one of the larger buildings. Ceilings caved and walls crumbled as the dish rolled through and finally smashed itself to scrap against the ground. Several fires sprang up in the ruins, the death blow for the facility.

Which left an *Owens*.

Hidden behind the low hill, Connor had a fifty-fifty chance of deciding which way it would circle around. Of course, it might choose to come over the top, but skylining a light 'Mech was one step beyond bravado and in throwing distance of suicidal. Then again, this *was* a Clan warrior. He crouched the



Bushwacker as low as its profile allowed, then shifted about to face the hill, one arm pointing off in each direction so that no matter which way it came the Inner Sphere warrior could hope for the first shot.

It swung around on his right. Connor pulled at his autocannon trigger, snapping off what should have been an easy shot. The stream of depleted uranium slugs again sliced low, throwing up a geyser of blasted earth which sprayed the *Owens* but did little to deter it.

Connor swore fluently. Trying to salvage something of the situation, he wrenched the right arm upward. His curse had barely left his lips when the second burst cut off prematurely. Fault lights flashed for his attention. It required the briefest glance to see the weapon registered a feed mechanism fault. The same problem he'd noted back on the *Black Hammer*. Only here, in combat, what had been a concern before now spelled out grave danger.

No time to clear the jammed feed, Connor swung around to put his backside to the hill before the much faster *Owens* circled in behind him to carve at his weak rear armor. The Smoke Jaguar warrior made a stab for it, but was a touch too slow on the throttle.

The *Owens* ended up point-blank with the *Bushwacker*, toe-to-toe and trading hard-hitting strikes. Gem-colored light flared between the two, the *Owens* owning the advantage as it brought two medium lasers into play while Connor was limited to his centerline large laser and a pair of machine guns. The *Bushwacker's* weapons fire sanded armor off the light OmniMech. A sudden jump in the heat profile of the *Owens* let Connor know that he had slipped past a flaw in the armor, carving away at the heat shield which helped contain the fusion reactor's waste heat output. He smiled in grim satisfaction, hoping to press that advantage.

Then emerald laser fire walked from the *Bushwacker's* left shoulder up across its head, splashing over the cockpit's ferroglass canopy. The cockpit shook with incredible force, throwing Connor repeatedly against his five-point harness and the seat back. The restraining straps dug painfully into his chest, and his vision swam with the purplish-haze aftereffect of a laser blinding.

Several new alarms rang out, deafening in the close confines of the *Bushwacker's* cockpit.

And Connor Sinclair couldn't see well enough to know what was wrong!

It hurt to breathe, the muscles over his chest and abdomen bruised against his harness. Alarms continued to sound their warnings. Connor blinked away the ghostly images the laserfire had burned over his eyes, vision clearing as the haze swept back.

Only the lightly polarized tint to the canopy and his neuro-helmet's faceplate saved him from more permanent damage, though in combat even a second's blindness could prove lethal.

His wireframe damage schematic showed heavy armor loss all over the *Bushwacker*. Armor protecting the BattleMech's left arm was now a memory, the *Owens'* emerald pulses finally eating through the last of its protection to cut away at the myomer muscles and shoulder actuator. The arm hung useless down the BattleMech's side. Further damage concentrated primarily along left leg, right torso, and the head, promising breaches in those areas soon enough.

If he gave the Smoke Jaguar warrior the chance.

Slapping quickly at the irritating alarms, Connor silenced the distractions then worked throttle and stick to shift the *Bushwacker*, shuffling the 'Mech around in a tight circle.

The *Owens* gave chase, but sluggishly. Shimmering steam and sooty black smoke leaked out of several rents in the armor covering the small OmniMech's upper body. The shielding damage he scored earlier had overheated the *Owens*, robbing it of speed and likely making targeting more difficult. Apparently the Clan pilot had not been able to convert over to the Smoke Jaguar's better heat sink technology, leaving the *Owens* vulnerable after rapid-fire laser barrages.

It was an advantage.

It would be all he needed.

Connor smiled grimly, second-guessed the Jaguar warrior and throttled forward into a tight circle outside of the *Owens'* now-limited turn radius. Too eager, the Clan pilot had committed himself to chasing the *Bushwacker's* rear arc, and now overextended himself. Connor caught the *Owens* by the back instead.

The centerline large laser lanced a ruby beam through the Omni's weaker armor, cutting away more engine shielding. If the shudder which trembled the *Owens* meant anything, he had also nicked the gyro housing as well.

His machine guns hammered in afterward, this time smashing all the way through and releasing the inferno harnessed at the heart of every BattleMech.

A golden blaze burst from the *Owens'* chest cavity, coring the OmniMech even as fiery tendrils worked through the machine to burst out of shoulder and hip joints. The 'Mech flew apart as easily as a rag doll shredded at the seams. Armor shrapnel peppered the *Bushwacker* which rocked backward in the face of the explosion. A few large pieces of slag that were once actuators and titanium support structure slammed hard into the BattleMech, as if an attempt by the *Owens* to take the larger machine with it.

He rode it out, jostled once more against his five-point harness but otherwise coming through unharmed. The *Bushwacker* presided over the ruined frame of the *Owens* and a battlefield of scorched earth littered with smoking debris. No enemy threats showed on the HUD.

The field was clear.

* * *

A ten-minute walk from where he had put down the *Owens*, Connor found the trio of MFB vehicles gathered into a triangular formation down inside a shallow wash. Thomas Sorenson had chosen a good site. Enough flat area to break out the repair facilities, Connor noted with relief, checking his armor loss and damage to the *Bushwacker's* left arm. There was also the autocannon to fix, as he had no intention of losing one of his best weapons in the middle of battle again.

The fifty-five ton BattleMech had certainly looked better. Still, three Clan 'Mechs down and one comms facility scrapped. Not a bad day, though he was ready to quit while ahead.

That wasn't going to happen.

"Good to see you, Lieutenant." Sorenson waved from the ground near one of the MFBs. He had a hand-held radio unit. "Ready to take on the world? I hope so."

Sinclair walked the *Bushwacker* into the area framed by the three vehicles, but delayed his shutdown procedure. "What do you mean?"

Sorenson's report lacked anything in the way of personal feelings—the way a good intelligence report should be given. "I mean we're still 'go' to hit the factory. You and Dominic Paine, and these three MFBs."

"Dominic made it?"

"We heard from him just a few minutes ago. He's moving to regroup. Also, survivors of Damocles Commando Two made contact with the *Eclipse*. Two MechWarriors and an MFB support vehicle, trying to complete their mission down at the southern hydroelectric facility."

If not the best news, it was at least encouraging. Team Two was out the door after his commando. If two of them made it down, then both Tessa and Keith would be out there as well, trying to make rendezvous. But, "No extraction then?"

Even from up in his cockpit, he saw Sorenson's head shaking. "Run tape," the corporal ordered.

A new voice cut into the conversation. Tinny and faint from recording and rebroadcast, Conner still recognized it—Nathan Taylor, captain of the *Eclipse*. "We've made no determination on the status of DropShip *Black Hammer*. We assume it is down. Act in accordance with mission specifications until we facilitate your extraction. Taylor, out."

"That was Captain Taylor's official response to my request for information—thought you might like to hear it for yourself. He set his ship down in the mountains north of the peninsula rather than risk facing whatever knocked the *Black Hammer* from the sky. Commandos Four through Six are trying to break through the mountain passes, and so come down onto the peninsula to rendezvous and pull us all out of here, but they are meeting with resistance. Our extraction is, essentially, an unknown factor at this time. We're expected to proceed on mission."

No *normal* op would ever go forward after such a catastrophic loss. But then, this was hardly a MechWarrior's run-of-the-planet mission. And as much as Connor recognized

With half the force originally allotted? He shoved aside the doubts.

"Get Dominic on our flank, but have him hold off by a few kilometers. In that captured Clan *Shadow Cat* of his he'll make the perfect flanker—able to guard our line of advance and hit any approaching force before they realize he's with us. It will help keep the Clan forces pinned in place while we sweep straight for the factory."

Sorenson could not keep his own doubts from showing in his voice, or even in his question. "You really think this will work?"

Connor toggled off the comm system, and preceded with his shutdown without answering. It saved him from having to choose between enthusiastic hyperbole and an evasive reply. Besides, Sorenson was smart enough to figure out the truthful answer for himself.

What choice did they have?

BATTLEFOOTPS

TRIAL UNDER FIRE

Chapter 3 Into the Fire

Loren L. Coleman

Okay, I'm heading forward. Don't be late!

Roger that. Good luck, Dominic.

Yeah, sure.

All right, Lieutenant. Dominic Paine has moved ahead to set up his flanking attack against the 'Mech factory. He will move in as soon as you begin your run, meeting you at the second bridge. From there the two of you can proceed to the island facility.

And we've finally made progress on the codes recovered from that destroyed communication's facility back on the beach. The data has allowed us to break part of the Clan encryption system, tapping into some of their radio chatter. The proper codes have been entered into your BattleMech computer, so you will receive a direct feed of Clan intentions from now on. Here's hoping it helps.

Let's end this.

Tranquil, Clan Homeworlds

29 April 3060

“...hurt... can not... Noooo...”

The scream faded to static and then silence as the *Thor's* missile ammunition detonated in the over-the-shoulder launcher, tearing a gash through its left side and setting off the main ammunition bin by sympathetic explosion. A red-orange fireball ripped through the interior of the Clan OmniMech, shattering its turret-style waist and amputating both legs.

Its left leg flipped up and over the head of Connor's *Bushwacker*, landing in the river.

The right leg was thrown far to one side, into a nearby minefield where it triggered several of the hidden explosive devices.

A twisted, misshapen frame of metal landed several meters off to one side, all that remained of a once-powerful war machine. One of the best Clan designs, piloted by a tenacious warrior. Star Commander Freya had dogged their tracks for several kilometers.

“Careless fool!”

A weak transmission, partly obscured by the static. The kind Connor recognized as the Smoke Jaguar communications on which his computer could now eavesdrop. There was no hiding the disdain and anger coloring the voice. Unless he missed his guess, that would be Star Captain Hasaan Furey who had been referenced in other intercepted transmissions.

Corporal Sorenson's relief was just as evident. “Nice work, Captain. You were right, we should have sidetracked to take her down earlier today.”

His lungs felt on fire. Gasping in breaths of the cockpit's scorched air, he choked on the ozone scent of burnt insulation from the monitor which had shorted out. Just as well he was saved any comment, with Dominic Paine interrupting.

“This is *Gunner*, moving in from the west. Where's my support?”

Connor was running behind. A glance at the mission clock told him just how many precious minutes he'd wasted dealing with the star commander. He had already taken out the site's powerhouse—a fairly impressive plant, considering there was only the one 'Mech factory, a large set of greenhouses and some storage and barracks facilities to supply. But by now he should have been meeting up with Dominic to hit the small offshore island on which the factory was situated.

"Where are you, Dominic?"

"Fighting off a *Black hawk-Kurita* variant and a *Strider* just this side of the second bridge." A brief pause and a wash of violent static. "Check that—make it a *Black hawk-KU* only now. Damn! That hurt. The better question is, where are you?"

Making up time fast as he could. Running deeper into the small outpost, Connor pulled up short as his Head's-Up painted a threat icon, the computer tagging it with the code for a *Puma* OmniMech, primary variant. The computer couldn't always tell OmniMech variants apart, but the twin particle projector cannon made this an easy ID. He didn't need to glance at his armor schematic to see that one solid salvo from those PPCs would score through any location on his *Bushwacker*, his weak armor courtesy of Star Commander Freya. According to the HUD, the *Puma* waited just around the corner of the two-story greenhouse complex.

He plunged through the glass wall, trying a short-cut.

Star Captain Furey must have had the place wired for sensors. "There is one inside the project," he said almost at once. "Protect those facilities!"

Easier ordered than accomplished, with a fifty-five ton BattleMech already loose inside the building and no way to come after it but to smash your way through and engage.

The *Puma* tried to hedge, shattering one wall with a swipe of the arm but not actually entering itself. A mistake, leaving Connor the advantage of better cover—his *Bushwacker* nestled within a screening growth of lush, food-bearing trees and plants. Only one of the PPCs azure whips struck him, the man-made lightning melting armor which runneled from his left torso to puddle among the plants and start several trees afire.

The *Bushwacker's* autocannon missed wide, smashing to tiny shards another wall of the greenhouse; the feed mechanism fault light flashed a quick warning and then went out. Again.

Large laser and missile racks made up for the treacherously undependable autocannon, scoring deeply into the *Puma's* notoriously-thin armor protection.

The uneven exchange was enough to convince the Jaguar warrior that he needed some cover, but too late. The light 'Mech throttled into a run when Connor's second strike slammed into it. Missiles pockmarked leg and chest, the ruby beam of the large laser cutting in afterward and probing deeply into the center torso.

The *Puma* dropped like a puppet with its strings cut, shaking as if with a palsy.

Large chunks of metal shot out the rent in the armor at high velocity, the gyro tearing itself to pieces in catastrophic failure. The *Puma* tumbled gracelessly through a thick patch of quillar. Connor turned his back on it to smash his way through several support beams and the far outside glass wall. Behind him the greenhouse facility collapsed inward like a broken house of cards.

Furey didn't require monitors. Wherever he was waiting, the destruction of the greenhouse had to be easily visible. "Stravag!" he cursed over Smoke Jaguar frequencies. "I will crush them myself."

But where was the local commander? And for that matter, where was Dominic? Running out from between two buildings and over the second bridge, the *Bushwacker's* footsteps clanged against the metal decking. The lieutenant saw the broken and smoking form of a destroyed *Black hawk*, its cockpit obviously smashed inward by a gauss round. Dominic's handiwork, sure enough. But no sign of the *Shadow Cat*.

"This is *Gunner*. I'm over the last bridge and hitting the factory. There's an *Orion* over here!"

Both questions answered at once. The *Orion* was an old Inner Sphere design. Not on par with a Clan-tech OmniMech, but at seventy-five tons was only one step shy of an assault 'Mech and was one of the larger machines he'd seen so far.

Certainly the Star Captain would be piloting it.

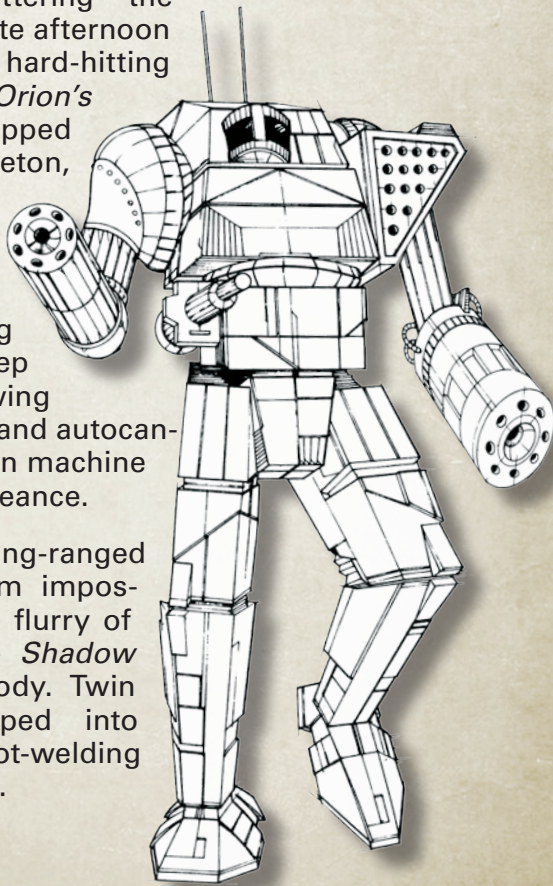
And with thirty tons over Dominic's *Shadow Cat*, the Commando MechWarrior was definitely outclassed.

Edging the *Bushwacker* over eighty-five kph, its maximum speed, Connor ran the squat war machine over the coastal plains and toward the third bridge—too slow. Slender towers flanked access to the island factory, but the lieutenant paid them little heed as he saw Dominic's *Shadow Cat* in a deadly dance around the larger *Orion*. The latter 'Mech moved slow but with lethal grace, always on the verge of smashing Dominic's Omni into scrap. The *Shadow Cat* packed a deadly punch with its gauss rifle, but then the *Orion* also massed twice as much armor protection as the smaller machine. Connor pounded his *Bushwacker* across the bridge—never fast enough—then dug his shovel-blade feet into the soft earth of the small island as he raced up into the battlezone.

Too late.

Metal fragments littering the ground winked in the late afternoon sun, testament to the hard-hitting engagement. The *Orion's* left leg was all but stripped down to titanium skeleton, and large gouges in chest and right side told of other gauss hits. But even as the *Bushwacker's* targeting reticle burned the deep gold of hard lock, drawing a bead with large laser and autocannon, the seventy-five ton machine struck back with a vengeance.

A flight of twenty long-ranged missiles, launched from impossibly close, scattered a flurry of jagged holes over the *Shadow Cat's* right arm and body. Twin medium lasers grouped into Dominic's left leg, spot-welding the knee joint immobile.



Then the *Orion*'s eighty-millimeter autocannon ripped into the previous missile damage, hammering at support struts and knocking the smaller OmniMech back.

The onslaught proved too much for the 'Mech's gyro, and it toppled backward into one of the auxiliary factory buildings. The wall caved in behind Dominic's *Shadow Cat*, and then everything seemed to happen in slow motion as two stories of wood and stone collapsed over the top of him.

Burying the MechWarrior alive.

"Dominic, no!"

Connor mashed down his triggers, probing out at range with his autocannon and large laser. He heard the remembered voice of his academy instructor, "BattleMechs, they take a whole great deal of killin'," and figured the odds were better than fair that Dominic Paine had survived the fall and collapse of the building. A bit banged up and needing help to dig his way out, but alive.

He wouldn't stand a chance, though, if the *Orion* blasted through the rubble after him.

Star Captain Hasaan Furey had to be distracted—stopped.

Despite the desperation, he pessimistically predicted that his autocannon would fail or shoot wide—no need to ruin a perfectly bad history now. The Mydron-manufactured weapon did not disappoint, the stream of depleted uranium slugs passing off the left arm of the massive *Orion*. They chewed the corner away from the main factory building and undercut one of the three main smokestacks enough that it started a slow topple. The ruby lance of his laser, however, struck dead-on; sloughing away half-melted armor plates from over the *Orion*'s blocky chest.

As if a bystander suddenly tapped on the shoulder, the titan's head first swung around in search of the annoyance and then up came the left arm. The monstrous machine might have been simply pointing directions out to someone, except for the flight of twenty LRMs that suddenly speared out from the cylindrical launcher replacing the left hand. A quartet of missiles arced too wide, but the majority of the swarm flew unerringly into the oncoming *Bushwacker* and robbed it of forward momentum as explosions blossomed in a staggered

line leading from right leg up over the body and then down along the left arm.

A single missile slammed in near the cockpit, rattling Connor but not enough to throw off his own aim. Two small missile flights from his own launchers answered the *Orion's* challenge, peppering left leg and arm. The extended-range laser speared directly into the heavy 'Mech's undamaged right side, splashing molten armor against its hip and over the short grass that grew over the island.

The autocannon misfired but did not jam—a small favor only considering its lack of performance.

A wave of heat slammed into Connor as the fusion reactor spiked, its heat scale reading heavy into the yellow band but dropping fast. Given a few seconds, the young lieutenant could hope to keep up his optimum curve and not suffer the sluggish reaction by overheated myomer muscles or interference in his targeting system.

Time was a luxury he did not own, however. He rushed in close on the *Orion's* left side, preferring to face off against the heavy LRM system and arm-mounted medium laser than weather the brunt of Hasaan Furey's full attack, which could include another laser and an autocannon—*his* presumably working. Of course, he had to assume Furey to be an elite warrior, which meant he might be able to coax the *Orion* around fast enough to bring all weapons to bear regardless.

It turned the fight into a gamble, but against a twenty-ton deficit Connor risked his life regardless.

The *Orion* did try to pivot hard around. Connor read it in the exaggerated swing of the angular shoulders and cross-step of right foot in front of left. Then the heavy-class 'Mech stumbled and nearly fell. From Furey's narrow recovery and the *Orion's* awkward stance, the BattleMech's hip joint had apparently frozen in a half-extended position—some combination of Connor's last missile attack and the molten armor splattered by his large laser.

It cut into the machine's movement considerably, able to keep up with the *Bushwacker* but just barely so. It evened the field, pitting Connor against a larger but critically-damaged BattleMech piloted by a certainly more-experienced MechWarrior.



At point blank ranges an LRM system rarely achieved a targeting lock, and even then the missiles would have trouble arming in the short flight. As demonstrated before, Furey did not seem to suffer for those drawbacks. The cylindrical arm swung around, flashing out with the sapphire light of a medium laser and a new flight of twenty missiles that hammered mercilessly into the *Bushwacker's* upper body. Red warning lights strobed on the control panel as one group of missiles breached the left side, tearing into the *Bushwacker's* supporting titanium skeleton and blasting away feeding mechanisms for the shoulder-mounted missile rack.

Not that Connor would have tried to fire his own LRMs regardless, but with a failing autocannon the damage continued to rob him of any reliable firepower.

"Last time pays for all," he whispered, voice strangely loud in the tight confines of his neurohelmet.

His targeting reticle already burning golden, he drifted it down the side of the *Orion* to settle over the left leg. Opening up with machine guns, the MechWarrior hammered away armor from the left side and left leg as he watched his heat scale fall down into the shallow end of the yellow band before toggling for his centerline large laser.

The ruby lance sliced deeply, past the remnants of armor protecting the *Orion's* left leg. The beam did melt away enough of the slag freezing the other BattleMech's hip joint that it freed up, but only for a split second as it continued to core deeper.

Myomer musculature parted like flesh beneath a scalpel, and the laser ate into the ferrotitanium bones of the *Orion's* skeleton. The framework sagged, melted away and then finally telescoped in on itself. The seventy-five ton machine toppled left, and this time there would be no recovery. The left arm caught against the ground first, adding enough a twisting force to turn the 'Mech and plant its head cockpit-forward into the earth. The protruding cockpit canopy smashed back, shattering the ferroglass and driving the framework back into the pilot's command area.

"Freebirrrr—" Furey's final, static-laced scream of denial and pain, cut short. Connor winced, imagining the Star Captain's final seconds.

"Star Captain Furey, what is your status?"

A new voice, full of his own authority and not a little anger. Connor did not recall hearing it in common chatter earlier. He spent little time trying to actually place it; Dominic still needed help.

No, he didn't.

The *Shadow Cat* was rising from the center of the building, shrugging off one wooden wall that had fallen over its shoulder. From Connor's vantage point, the factory building looked hollow—though of course that made no sense. But then he couldn't argue with the way Dominic Paine simply stood and kicked his way free of some light debris. Wood framework and plywood painted to look like brick or stone or metal. Even the widows were painted on—no glass or actual openings.

"Better be careful around these buildings," Dominic transmitted. "You'll want a closer look at them. And at those towers flanking the bridge."

Before Connor could ask after the MechWarrior's comment, the same voice as before interrupted. "Hasaan Furey, this is Star Colonel Ratache Osis! You will respond *now!*"

"He does not sound happy," Sorenson said, the MFBs just now crossing the third bridge onto the island.

The corporal seemed very satisfied with that idea.

Connor looked over the fallen *Orion* and then to his lance-mate's erect *Shadow Cat*, a tight smile tugging at the edge of his mouth.

So, in fact, was he.

* * *

"Figures, doesn't it?" Dominic kicked at a support beam, one of several that held up the façade factory wall. "All that work for a decoy site. A Potemkin village."

For once, Connor felt the drain of Dominic's pessimism. Out of their 'Mechs while the MFB personnel worked to fix the machines up—their own and a wounded but repairable *Orion*—the two MechWarriors and Corporal Sorenson had

walked into the open back of the 'factory' building resembling a steel plant.

Three coal-burning stoves had been rigged up to provide lots of smoke, funneled up into the wooden tower above to give the impression of activity—the manufacture of armor, apparently. Strobe lights set behind the few real windows in the 'main plant' simulated the sparking of welders.

Only the towers flanking the bridge were real, and even more disturbing.

"Laser towers," Connor said, shaking his head. "Naval-grade lasers, ready to knock any DropShip from the sky that tried to make a run against this decoy factory." He exhaled long and hard, glanced to Sorenson. "Now we know what happened to the *Black Hammer*."

Dominic looked worried. More so than usual. "This Galaxy Commander Corbett doesn't play by the usual Clanner rules. No *batchall*? Striking at a DropShip from ambush rather than the *glory* of BattleMech combat? Doesn't this seem like a deviation from standard Smoke Jaguar tactics and philosophy?"

He looked around to see if anyone shared his opinion. Connor met his gaze evenly, giving no hints to his thoughts though they mirrored Dominic's. Sorenson avoided eye contact.

"Well, with those towers shut down, maybe we can get off this hell-hole planet now?"

The corporal shifted uneasily, and Connor speared him with an intense gaze. Overall, Connor liked Thomas Sorenson. A burly six foot with close-cropped blond hair and chiseled features, the man looked more your stereotypical drill sergeant than an intelligence analyst. Connor's mental image typically saw them as thin, ferret-featured men who only told you what *they* thought you needed to know.

Fortunately, the corporal didn't hesitate to speak his mind, and quite often had something worthwhile to say. But underlying the corporal's demonstrated competence, Connor sensed a vulnerability. Sorenson was not an intell officer. He was used to taking some direction from a superior, and that superior had been aboard the *Black Hammer*.

"You've already talked to Taylor," he guessed. "Haven't you?"



Sorenson nodded. "And it's very unlikely we'll see him any-time soon. I informed him of the laser towers right before joining you two out here." He held up one hand to forestall Dominic's outburst. "I am required to report all intelligence to my superior, and in her absence to the operation's ranking officer." Dominic nodded reluctantly. "Captain Taylor won't risk the *Eclipse* unless we can prove *conclusively* there are no other towers."

"What about the rescue company?" Connor asked, bracing himself for the bad news. He trusted Sorenson enough to know that if there was any balancing facts, he would have volunteered them.

"They're being hit hard. They aren't advancing fast enough, and now they can't withdraw either without taking serious losses. We'll have to take the pressure off *them* by hitting the second Operations Area ourselves. The real factories are down there."

That perked up Connor's interest, though Dominic appeared very unimpressed about taking on a new mission. "Team Two found something?" he asked, preempting another outburst by Dominic. His mind began to plan the rendezvous. "If we can link up with them, maybe find—"

Sorenson interrupted, his face pale. "Team Two is dead, Sir."

"Dead?" Dominic barged back into the conversation. "You mean out of commission? Captured?"

Unhappily, the corporal shook his head. "They took out the hydroelectric facility, and discovered entrances for two large underground complexes. But Clan troops caught them on the second leg of their operation. Neither of them made it. The report we intercepted is fairly clear on that. No prisoners. As ordered."

"So now Taylor has only half the reasons to come in here and rescue us." Dominic shook his head. "Perfect."

"There are eight missing MechWarriors out there we might still find," Connor reminded his lancemate. "If Team Two made it out, we know that Keith and Tessa are out there for certain." The real fear was hidden in Sorenson's final comment, which Dominic had missed. "Who gave the 'no prisoners' order?" he asked.

"Near as I can tell, it came through this Star Colonel Ratache Osis you heard on comms. The one who sounded most upset by Furey's defeat. However, from other communication interceptions, I believe those orders originated with Brendon Corbett. It's inferred. So is the fact that it's Corbett who is leading the fight against the *Eclipse's* rescue company."

He nodded his appreciation for the blunt truth. "You're doing a good job, Thomas. Keep it up." No reason to blame the messenger for the news, and he wanted it clear that Sorenson should not worry about keeping him informed. "Have you plotted a route down to the peninsula's southern coast?"

"I've located a dry river bed we can use for our initial approach, about five clicks southwest around the headland. It avoids a few military targets, which I think is wise at this point. I've already monitored Ratache Osis' order to increase the strength of local garrison posts." He paused. "Of course, that means the factories themselves will be very well guarded."

Dominic smiled thinly at them both. "And it just keeps getting better," he said. "Every. Single. Minute."

* * *

Three kilometers along the river bed, they found Tessa McCaughnell. Or what was left of her.

Near as Connor could tell, something had burned away part of her deployment parachute system. A glancing blow from the naval-grade lasers erected on the island? A mischance run-in with an aerospace fighter patrol? Didn't matter. Without the system's braking effects, Tessa's *Crusader* had fallen harder than her jump jets could compensate.

Both legs were partially buried into the earth. The upper leg framework had been telescoped upward into the *Crusader's* chest, spearing the fusion reactor and causing catastrophic failure. There wasn't much left of the BattleMech. One arm, and the mangled head blown a good hundred meters away.

Why hadn't she ejected? It was a question they would never be able to answer. All the two MechWarriors could do was bury her remains. No words were spoken over the gravesite.

What was there to say?

BAVTL-FOORPS

TRIAL UNDER FIRE

Chapter 4 Method & Madness

Loren L. Coleman

Lieutenant Sinclair. We intercepted a private channel between Star Colonel Ratache Osis and his aide. Stand by for playback:

...smashed, Drey. The entire facility. Without those greenhouses, we will be hard pressed to feed the incoming forces.

You warned him, placing the decoy site so near our agricultural project.

Aff. I did. But will Brendon Corbett take the blame for this?

Neg, Star Colonel. With Lincoln Osis' death on Strana Mechty, the Galaxy Commander will be our next Khan. He can do no wrong.

Exactly. I will make these surrats pay. This I promise...

You catch that, Lieutenant? Lincoln Osis, ilKhan of the Clans, died on Strana Mechty! The Star League must be victorious. Now what do you think the chances are that we can expect relief in time to do us any good?

Tranquil, Clan Homeworlds

30 April 3060

One hand shoving forward the throttle of his *Dire Wolf*, the other easy on the main stick, Galaxy Commander Brendon Corbett burst through the thin stand of pine and topped the small rise. The enemy column of *freebirth* Inner Sphere trash had spread itself along the wide valley, right along the path where he had predicted they would come. He had them by the flank. Tightening up on his triggers, the galaxy commander lanced out with his set of four large, extended-range lasers.

The sapphire bolts slammed into the side of an *Executioner* OmniMech leading the line, splattering molten armor to the ground as Brendon Corbett drew first blood in this latest harassing maneuver.

Corbett had hoped to put the *Executioner* down on one salvo, denying the *stravag* warriors use of such exceptional technology. A few of the enemy MechWarriors piloted captured Clan OmniMech designs such as the *Executioner*. They may have dubbed it a *Gladiator*—just as they referred to his assault 'Mech as a *Daishi*, lacking knowledge of the proper names—but it was still Clan technology and far above their deserving. Stolen from the Smoke Jaguar homeworld of Huntress without doubt.

He clenched his jaw in a mixture of anger and no small amount of shame as the *Executioner* managed to keep to its feet and return fire with its Gauss rifle and paired lasers. Shame, not for the Omni's strong armor, but that it was in the possession of the Inner sphere at all.

The damage caused when the large nickel-ferrous Gauss slug punched into the right leg of his *Dire Wolf* was nothing compared to the knowledge that the Inner Sphere now controlled the Jaguar homeworld.

Yet he had known it would happen. Forced from the Inner Sphere—*chased* from the Inner Sphere—the galaxy commander arrived back in Clan space to find out another task force had already landed on Huntress. Right then he saw the death of his Clan, unless someone worked to preserve it. Unless *he* fought to ensure the Jaguar lived onward. That Huntress fell validated his choice to regroup on Tranquil, to resurrect the Clan even as it entered its death throes.

It did not make the situation any more palatable.

The rest of his Star stepped up to flank Corbett; a pair of *Timber Wolves*, a *Cauldron-Born* and a *Warhawk*. Though faster than the *Dire Wolf*, none of his starmates would ever think of usurping his position in the lead. And behind them an auxiliary Star hung back, waiting for their turn should the Smoke Jaguar's command Star fail. Hardly thinkable. Except that no Clan warrior had ever thought to be driven from the Inner Sphere Occupation Zone either.

The company of enemy 'Mechs was already reacting to the threat his Star posed. Long-range weaponry flashed gem-colored laser pulses between the two forces and filled the air with fiery tracers that warned of stinging autocannon fire. The silvery blur of another Gauss slug flashed past his canopy ferroglass, impacting his right shoulder and raining more metal fragments to the ground.

Corbett hardly blinked at how close death had visited with the near miss of his cockpit. His next salvo of lasers again sliced into the *Executioner's* left side, this time working its way through the armored sleeve of the arm to stab into the barrel of the deadly Gauss rifle.

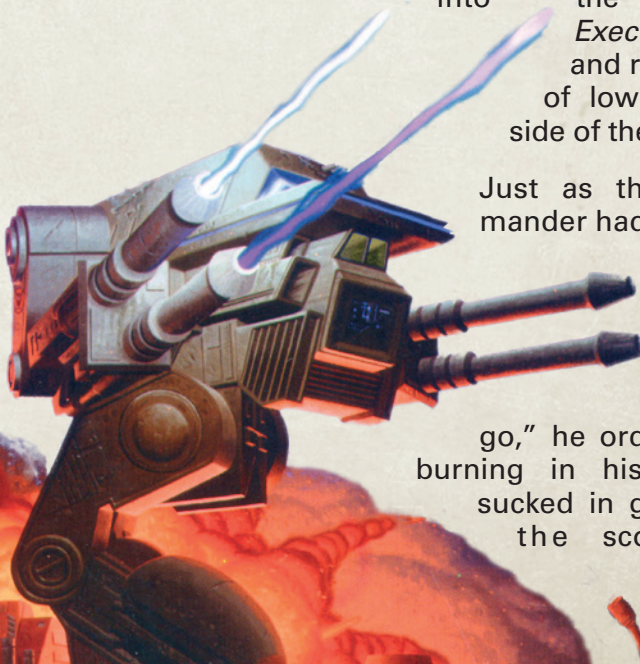
Acceleration coils exploded with stunning force, reducing the arm to a metal stub that poked from the shoulder of the man-shaped *Executioner*. The galaxy commander slapped at his shutdown override as the OmniMech's heat scale jumped far

into the red band. The *Executioner* turned and ran for the safety of low hills the other side of the valley.

Just as the galaxy commander had predicted.

Just as it had in the previous two battles.

"Let them go," he ordered, hot coals burning in his lungs as he sucked in great breaths of the scorched air.



He turned his lasers against a smaller *Owens* which lagged behind the main company as they all followed the *Executioner*. Two of the sapphire lances scored into the small 'Mech, coring past armor and into its back, but unfortunately finding no critical equipment. Then his enemy were gone, and his Star held the field. Alone.

With the Inner Sphere forces commanding faster 'Mechs, the Jaguar leader had little choice but to hunt them this way; harrying their advance toward the peninsula and taking them one small piece at a time. It didn't matter. In the end he would have them all. They would never make contact with the survivors of the first DropShip. The few 'Mechs still operating on the peninsula were easy targets for Ratache Osis, while Brendon Corbett claimed the greater victory—and the greater glory—by smashing this stronger company.

Could *he* make all twelve kills personally? Perhaps that would be the crowning achievement here that would vault him above all others when the Smoke Jaguars finally chose a new Khan. Finally chose *him* as the new Khan. Strength. Because that was what mattered. Strength and individual achievement.

It was the way of the Clans.



Good news, Lieutenant. We've made two more contacts. Epona Rhi from Team Three and Keith Andrew, from our own commando.

Epona Rhi is northeast of our position and moving to rendezvous. She was first from Commando Three to drop, but with her survival confidence is now high that we might find others and maybe even the *Black Hammer* itself.

—Misery loves company. Isn't that one of Blake's old sayings?—

Thank you, Dominic. I'm sure we all appreciate the sentiment.

Keith Andrew actually grounded inside Operations Area Three, where the Eclipse's commandos were all supposed to drop. Currently he's limited in movement by heavy Clan patrols. The rescue company is working their way in to break him free.

They really need us to take some of the pressure off them, Lieutenant. I think Keith is in trouble up there.

Tranquil, Clan Homeworlds

30 April 3060

The dark of the massive cavern was broken by large lighting systems used to flood the underground facilities with artificial day. Where the lights did not reach, Connor Sinclair relied on his new *Orion's* thermal imaging to chase enemies into the shadows, and back out again

Mashing down on the firing stud, his autocannon fire hammered into the discovered convoy's last half-track hauler. The eighty-millimeter slugs punched large holes through the drab-gray armor siding and hood to wreck the engine.

He was careful to avoid the fuel tanks and the cloth-covered back of the hauler. Preferred to not risk an explosion in this underground cavern, unsure of the ceiling's strength as well as being concerned with the reports Sorenson recovered earlier that placed corrosive-chemical storage tanks somewhere down here. It wouldn't do to have them go up in a sympathetic explosion.

Also, and just as important, was taking care with the salvage that raiding the destroyed convoy would bring. The commando's Mobile Field Base vehicles were moving in from the main entrance and would transfer all useable materials and equipment to their own cargo space. Having already run through provisioning provided on the original mission specifications, if the remnants of Team One were to continue operating they would depend heavily on such raiding techniques.

He noticed as the half-track driver bailed out and ran for the protection of a jumble of rocks piled against the cavern wall, and let him go. A Clan laborer-caste worker, he was no threat to the mission.

The *Puma*, and the *Shadow Cat* twin to Dominic's own OmniMech, however, were.

"Gamma Base, what is your situation?" Ratache Osis again, his voice identifiable even through the break-up caused by intercepted transmission and the meters of rock currently above their heads. Osis was becoming a fixed personality in Clan comms traffic. "Star Commander Isaark, respond! Gamma Base, respond now!"

"The star commander is dead. We are heavily engaged, Star Colonel."

Connor swung the *Orion* around to face the large quarry that the Smoke Jaguars had hollowed into the floor of the massive cavern. The heavy-class 'Mech had been repaired and pressed back into service as his personal 'Mech. It was far better armored, and had a working autocannon which made for a nice change of pace.

The *Puma* ducked behind a set of wood-built barracks which overlooked the quarried basin, likely waiting for his heat levels to drop—the PPC-equipped 'Mech glowed a reddish-orange on thermal scanners.

Leaving the Clan-piloted *Shadow Cat* to face both Dominic and Connor. Where a Clan warrior might never interfere in a duel, the Inner Sphere officer knew that such "ideal warfare" had no place on a thirty-first century battlefield. He added a flurry of autocannon fire and twin medium lasers to Dominic's Gauss rifle, the combined barrage savaging the front armor of the Clan Omni and driving it back against the barracks. One wall was staved in by the *Shadow Cat's* shoulder, but it helped the warrior keep to his feet where otherwise he would have fallen.

A burst of static in his ear warned him of a new Smoke Jaguar transmission. "Delta Point, stay hidden. Wait for it."

Sounded like more Elementals, the powered-armor infantry troops the Clans had devised. So far the Damocles Commando had run into them just once. An annoyance when alone or in pairs, the battle-armor infantry could be devastating in numbers. "Keep your eyes open, Dominic. Watch for toads."

The caution came a second too late. Dominic had walked his *Shadow Cat* forward to finish off his opponent, stepping within ten meters of the quarried depression. Rising up from camouflaged holes and mounds of hastily-piled ore they came. Two Points—ten soldiers wearing their power-assisted armored suits. Half of them launched a coordinated missile salvo at the *Orion*, which weathered the storm but not without sacrificing more of its precious armor.

The rest swarmed Dominic's Omni, tearing into its armor with their claws and thrusting small lasers into the rents to burn at the internal structure. One fell under the *Shadow Cat's*

feet, and was crushed. The MechWarrior wisely chose to distance himself from the trap before more Elementals fastened to him, and dodged aside. The Clan *Shadow Cat* pursued.

"Enemy has advanced to barracks area," a Clan warrior warned.

The voice tickled at the back of Connor's memory. The *Puma's* pilot! He had almost forgotten about the deadly light design in the face of the Elemental swarm. It had backed in behind the barracks building, and in a few seconds would be in perfect position to strike out at an unsuspecting Dominic Paine.

Throttling into a fast walk, Connor ignored the Elementals and aimed the massive *Orion* at the barracks. Wood and iron nails, no matter how well constructed, could never hold up against a determined BattleMech. Especially one with seventy-five tons to throw around. The wood splintered with rifle-shot echoes Connor heard even buttoned up in his cockpit. He kicked and shoved his way through, bulldozing the two-story building, and then stepping out into the blind alley right behind the *Puma*.

The emerald pulses of his two medium lasers flayed at the weak rear armor of the stoop-shouldered light 'Mech. The short-range missile pack riding his left shoulder hammered three of its charges home, expanding the destruction and leaving the *Puma* bare to the *Orion's* autocannon.

He toggled for clustering ammunition. The Kali Yama LB 10-X selected its alternate feed system, loading and firing special rounds that fragmented to shower the *Puma* with hundreds of smaller submunitions. Many of these found the gaps already melted and blasted into the armor, striking deeper to chip away at critical equipment.

A grayish-green cloud erupted out the back of the *Puma* as a heat sink shattered and spewed precious coolant.

Then the Omni shook violently as its gyro was assaulted by the shrapnel, losing its balance and dropping to the ground as if Connor had reached in and snapped its spine.

Outside the short alley two *Shadow Cats* lurched by, one still bearing three Elementals but both trading vicious punches with their left-arm Gauss rifles. The Clan warrior could not have missed the loss of her companion.

She didn't. "Enemy is advancing. MechWarrior Travis lost. Star Colonel Osis, please advise!"

Although Connor couldn't see what Ratache Osis hoped to accomplish over comms with one 'Mech and a double-handful of Elementals to work with, he couldn't help the sinking sensation that suddenly clawed at his stomach. Something he was missing. A strategy he hadn't considered.

The desperation that might be driving Ratache Osis.

"All units fall back to the chemical plant. Go!" No doubts colored the star colonel's order. "Target the storage tanks and flood the chamber with the corrosive waste. No more failures. No more excuses.

"Do not let those *surrats* out alive!"

"Oh, you've got to be—"

"Lieutenant! You have to stop them!" Dominic's stunned outburst was cut off as Sorenson overrode his transmission from the Mobile Field Base vehicles. "If those tanks blow, we're finished."

Exactly what Connor had thought the instant he heard Ratache Osis' order. In the confines of this underground complex, rupturing large tanks of corrosive and poisonous gas would ensure no one made it out alive—warrior or worker. Inner Sphere troops would have almost certainly refused such an order—besides being borderline inhumane, martyrdom held appeal for so few.

Of course, for Smoke Jaguar warriors the decision would be easier. The civilian laborer-caste workers would hardly matter in such a decision. As for their warriors' deaths, they relied on the Clan's eugenics program to carry on their genetic legacy—more often accomplished after death than before. It was part of their society. All they were required to do was prove themselves, and obeying such a command would certainly weigh heavily in their favor.

But this was still not quite the Clan way. At least, not as Connor had come to understand it. BattleMech combat and glory through victory! This latest tactic showed the same treacherous promise as the laser towers which had knocked the *Black Hammer* from space. Another order passed down from Galaxy Commander Brendon Corbett? Or was Ratache

Osiris also slipping down from that 'higher ideal' the Clans preferred to vaunt?

"Don't acknowledge it," he whispered to his empty cockpit, staring at the Smoke Jaguar *Shadow Cat* which had pulled back while Dominic busied himself smashing the Elementals from his own 'Mech. He tried angling for a shot, but Dominic stepped into his way and there was no maneuvering in the tight alley space.

"Refuse, damn you!"

"Aff, Star Colonel." The voice was heavy with one part resignation but two parts fanaticism. "Acknowledged." The *Shadow Cat* turned from the quarry and ran for the tunnel which connected this underground chamber to the next.

"No you don't," Connor said, more to himself than the phantom presence of the other MechWarrior.

He moved his *Orion* forward, out of the alley, and set his targeting reticle at the next tunnel entrance. He would have one shot. It had to score hard.

He had forgotten to toggle off the cluster ammunition feed to his autocannon. In the heat of combat, controlling a seventy-five ton war avatar and trying to keep several enemy targets placed, situational awareness could be strained past the point of remembering each little detail. His LRMs missed, slamming into the cavern wall just short of their target and raining out stone chips and slivers. Following up with fragmenting autocannon submunitions would normally be a mistake, the shrapnel rounds good at sanding away armor but rarely at forcing a breach.

Except that Dominic's Gauss rifle had punched two deep holes into the enemy OmniMech already, and now the fragments worked further into the *Shadow Cat's* leg and blocky torso than he would have thought. The ankle joint threw sparks and wispy blue-black smoke as the actuator tore apart, freezing the animation in that joint.

The *Cat's* thermal image also darkened into the dangerous red band as more shrapnel chipped away at the physical heat shield which surrounded its fusion reactor. It was a sluggish and crippled *Shadow Cat* which finally limped from the cham-

ber, followed a few seconds later by Dominic's own *Cat* and then Connor's *Orion*.

The passage tightened up at once, barely enough room for a 'Mech to walk. The rough-hewn corridor crawled around sharp bends that hid the Clan 'Mech from sight. Connor noticed a single Elemental still clinging to Dominic's shoulder, tearing away at the armor with the steel claw that replaced its left hand. He targeted it with a single medium laser, careful not to hit his lancemate.

The ruby beam sliced into and through the Elemental's leg, amputating it at the hip. He fell to the tunnel floor, but with the tough resilience Elementals were known and slightly feared for, the armored trooper quickly rose on hands and knee to fire its shoulder-mount missile two-pack. A last act of defiance, since Connor's next laser shot ended his life a second later, but the Jaguar warrior had still cost the *Orion* in savaged armor when the missiles slammed into its chest and right leg.

Connor made the next cavern only seconds behind Dominic. An extensive, three-story factory complex had been built to cover most of one wall, spreading vertically so as to leave the floor open. Next to it a broad ramp, large enough for BattleMech access, spiraled up toward a hint of daylight—a secondary entrance to the facility, and the commando's escape route.

If they lived to use it.

A pair of immense storage tanks dominated the wall across from the factory. The fled *Shadow Cat* was already targeting the large tanks. An *Orion*, twin to Connor's, moved down the ramp to bring its own weapons into play. He counted themselves fortunate that at least *here* the Jaguars had reinforced their construction, taking no chance with an accidental rupturing of the tanks.

The *Cat* was the most dangerous, hammering away with its Gauss rifle, the nickel-ferrous slug gouging large holes into the armor siding.

The enemy *Orion* had yet to clear the ramp's overhang.

"I said to blow those tanks! I want a report to that effect! Gamma Base?"

If the tanks had been blown, doubtful anyone would have time to report. Connor chalked it up to Ratache Osis' attempt

to command over a comm system rather than in person. If it wasn't officially reported, then obviously it hadn't happened yet. He framed his crosshairs with the outline of the enemy *Shadow Cat*.

Only to have Dominic ace him for that target. Dominic's left arm Gauss rifle spat out a silvery blur that punched straight through the thin rear armor of the Jaguar *Shadow Cat*, smashing aside support structure and shielding for the fusion reactor. The scarlet beam from of his two medium lasers followed, coring all the way through and releasing the blossom of golden fire at the 'Mech's heart.

The *Shadow Cat* blew apart and Connor winced, waiting for the chemical storage tanks to go up in a sympathetic explosion. One of the *Cat's* arms flew across the chamber to smash into the Clan *Orion* just as it cleared the ramp.

The impact spoiled the Jaguar warrior's aim, his first set of missiles flying wide of the targeted storage tanks.

The tanks held, and Connor shifted his crosshairs over the remaining enemy to unleash his BattleMech's full fury.

His heavy launcher spat out its flight of missiles, most of them drawing a straight line of gray contrail smoke to their target where they erupted in a storm of fire and armor shrapnel. One set of missiles slammed into the *Orion's* head, wreathing the cockpit canopy in flame and debris. Others worried the armor over chest and arms. His medium lasers carved deeper into the chest, but failed to penetrate the thick armor protection.

He had nearly resigned himself to another exchange of weapons fire, and one more chance for the Clan warrior to rupture the tanks. Then his autocannon spoke a throaty roar as it drilled a long burst of depleted-uranium rounds directly into the head behind the damage his missile flight had caused. The ferroglass canopy shattered and the wide face of the head assembly sagged inward under the onslaught.

The BattleMech toppled backward, slamming into the ground. A smashed ruin of its former strength.

"On your right, Lieutenant!"

Dominic's warning announced the arrival of the remaining Elementals, who had lagged behind the charging BattleMechs

but were no less motivated in carrying out their final orders from Star Colonel Ratache Osis.

After two 'Mechs, picking off the five remaining battlearmor troops seemed to present an easy challenge. It was only when one made it close enough to score the tanks with a laser that both Damocles Commando warriors realized the game at which they still played. Fire intensified for a few seconds, and then Dominic was putting down the final Elemental with his paired medium lasers.

"That should be the last of them," Connor said with relief. "We're clear."

And apparently none too soon for Dominic. "Can we get out of here now?" the other MechWarrior asked.

A burst of static heralded another transmission from Osis. "Gamma base! You will respond." The star colonel was still looking for verification the commando had been stopped for good.

Dominic's *Shadow Cat* pointed lasers and Gauss rifle at the ceiling, as if he could target the star colonel wherever his command center might be. "I'd like to respond, all right. Now they're willing to kill their own civilian workers to get at us? Whatever happened to the old Clan idea of honorable combat?"

Sorenson answered the question with frank seriousness. "When your back is to the wall, Dominic, people do what they can to survive. Corbett is wearing under the strain of a dying Clan. Now Ratache Osis is feeling the pressure from above as well."

"Gamma base!"

"I *could* transmit a report to the *Eclipse* on an open frequency," the corporal offered. "Let him know he's failed again. Clan officers tend to take that kind of news rather hard."

Connor considered it, just for a moment. In a way it would be satisfying, rubbing his enemy's nose in the fact that the desperate tactic had not only been of questionable merit, but that it had failed utterly. Then he lined up his first shot against the factory complex. A communications facility, his computer identified it. Obviously empty since no one had told Osis of the failure.

"No," he said, squeezing into his shot.

"Let him wonder."

* * *

The holographic map stretched from floor to ceiling in Ratache Osis' planning room, the projector humming a soft contrast to the growls rumbling in the star colonel's chest and throat.

The holo-image currently displayed a two-dimensional colored map of the peninsula, decorated with small pinpricks of white light to represent Smoke Jaguar forces and red flags where reports confirmed enemy troops. Near the base of the peninsula, in the shadow of the Cascade Mountain range which cut the northern stretch off from the main continent, a single shining star showed his position in Durghan City. A dim light moved around further north, tracking intermittent contact with the enemy 'Mech company deployed by the second Inner Sphere DropShip.

That dim light was Galaxy Commander—and likely future Khan—Brendon Corbett, relegated to insignificant status by his subordinate as Corbett ignored the greater danger of the small teams loose in the southern reaches.

On the inside of the peninsula's hook, rounding up to the headland where the decoy factory site had been, a red swath told of the damage already done. Now on the southern coast a mirror image of that destruction was unfolding, heading arrow-straight at the Smoke Jaguar's hidden mining venture and the real OmniMech production site. Other flags showed a few sporadic contacts along the peninsula's eastern coast, but nothing so important as the threat to the OmniMech factory.

Galaxy Commander Corbett did not realize the true scope of the damage already done to the Smoke Jaguar's very-limited resources. Osis only hinted at it in his reports. Tell Brendon Corbett outright that he, a member Lincoln Osis' sibko, could not handle a few rogue freebirth? *Neg!*

The galaxy commander could not appreciate the difficulty in tracking down a few determined warriors who faded away as fast as they hit. It took time to shift forces around. And the

Inner Sphere vermin struck only when at the advantage. In the star colonel's opinion, Brendon Corbett had taken a far easier—and therefore less glorious—task for himself in standing against the company pushing through the Cascades.

An area on his map began to flash as technicians updated it from news feeding in from the southern reaches. Battle had been joined near the underground OmniMech factory. This time his forces stood prepared. Ratache Osis had managed to shift an entire front-line Star into the enemy's path, manned by a set of his best warriors in that region. He did not expect the battle to last long.

He was right.

After only ten minutes the area flashed a dark amber and then on to red. A new red flag positioned itself at the administrative building for the factory and mine complex. The Smoke Jaguar Star Colonel snarled his rage in a fair approximation of the Clan's namesake.

He was at his desk in three quick strides, knocking aside his noteputer as he stabbed at his built-in communications console. The trembling technician who fielded his request made two wrong connections before establishing both an audio and visual link with the factory. Ratache Osis filed a mental note to have the tech replaced even as Star Commander Drevin—the warrior in charge of the factory's defense—made his report.

The technician was mercifully forgotten as a new rage gripped the star colonel.

"The entire Star? Lost? Incompetent *surats*! I am surrounded by the dregs of the iron wombs. I should have you all wiping the noses of sibko brats, not commanding BattleMechs."

Drevin quailed, but then rebounded. "We will hold them, star colonel."

"You will *destroy* them, or your legacy dies with you. Is that clear, Star Commander? Use your charges and seal the mountain. If you have to bring it down on top of you, those vermin will not escape. *Quiaff!*?"

"Aff, Star Colonel. Aff!"

Ratache Osis disconnected with another violent stab at the console. With more thoughtful motion, he sent orders through

his noteputer to ready his personal 'Mech and alert his Star that they would be taking to the field at once.

"They might destroy the factory," he admitted to himself in the security of his planning room. "Aff, they might. If they do, it proves them dangerous to the point that even Galaxy Commander Corbett will have to take notice. The warrior who brings them down will be positioned for great things as the Clan reforms here on Tranquil."

Command of a Galaxy? The position of saKhan? What might not be within reach? He stood, and strode from the room with deliberate energy.

"I will be that warrior," he vowed.

RAVING
FEAR



TRIAL UNDER FIRE

Chapter 5 Complex Solutions

Loren L. Coleman



BAVTL-LEOPARDS

Thanks to our raid on those administrative buildings, we have a good set of diagrams on this underground facility. And it is their 'Mech production site, Lieutenant. From what I've been able to sift through, it may be their only one on Tranquil. It is also lightly defended. The Jaguars counted too much on the facility staying hidden.

The front entrance has been intentionally collapsed, a crude but effective shield against an assault, while the Jaguars finish some new OmniMechs. Epona Rhi is on station at the entrance, and she thinks she might be able to blast her way through but no promises. Since we're running out of time I've found you another way. You are actually coming in through the back with a bit of applied engineering magic.

Stand by for data feed.

Tranquil, Clan Homeworlds

1 May 3060

Under the concentrated firepower of his *Orion* and Dominic's salvaged *Puma*, Conner knew the seventy-ton *Thor* hadn't a chance.

The first azure whip from Dominic's paired particle projector cannon drew a molten scar across its turret-style waist. The *Orion* hammered in afterward, missiles shredding the final remnants of armor on the enemy's left leg and driving through the rent over the left side to open up the OmniMech's skeleton. Connor's autocannon chewed deeper, tearing open the ammunition bin for the *Thor*'s SRM system and smashing delicate warheads and propellant chambers both.

Something gave way, and the entire collection of better than one hundred missiles detonated with armor-shredding force. The explosion tore out the entire left side of the Omni, critically damaging the heat shield and severing control of the left arm as the fireball blossomed. The *Thor*'s main weapon, the left-arm gauss rifle, dropped down to hang impotently against the Omni's side.

Only the cellular ammunition storage system prevented the 'Mech's death, channeling the explosion out back vents rather than allow it to eat further into the torso. Small consolation, as the tremendous force argued physics onto its side and spun the *Thor* into a wild, staggering step that finally toppled the war machine toward its left side.

And straight into Dominic's second PPC.

The manmade lightning arced and crackled, drawing a snaking path from the *Puma*'s large particle weapon to the *Thor*'s head. The stream of hellish energies slammed through armor and ferroglass to turn the cockpit into an instant crematorium. What might have been a recoverable fall turned into a graceless plunge into death, the state-of-the-art OmniMech now reduced to so many tons of parts and scrap metal.

Two mobile field bases rolled into the immense cavern, the third having been lost above ground when a Star of five Jaguar OmniMechs surprised the commando. Dominic lost his *Shadow Cat* toward the end of that battle, the OmniMech blown to scrap but the commando's warrior ejecting safely. If

the Clan warriors had worked together instead of as five separate warriors, they might have finished off Connor as well.

Panting for the escalated heat levels in his cockpit, he surveyed the underground mining complex—the twisted and smoking ruins left of the equipment. Three Clan 'Mechs littered the gravel-strewn ground as well. Their threat ended, he disregarded them and looked instead at the wrecked conveyor system—which Sorenson had promised they could use to gain access to the back of the factory complex.

The cavern holding the factory complex couldn't be more than a few hundred meters away. But through the seamless rock wall, it might as well have been a few thousand.

As if sensing his name in Connor's thoughts, the analyst spoke over the comms system. "We've picked up a weak signal from Epona Rhi. She has dug partway into the factory complex and will try to rendezvous as we press forward. Her last Mobile Field Base vehicle will guide me back around while you head in through the steel plant."

"Good to know," Connor said. "But how do we get in there if the conveyor system is smashed?"

The structure normally ran six meters over the ground in a long bridge from steel plant ore extractor to a ramp cut from the stone wall at the actual excavation site. Sorenson had planned to have the two 'Mechs walk up the ramp and onto the belt system, follow it over into the extractor, and blast through an interior wall that would allow them to exit out the other side of the steel plant. A sound plan, except that now the middle of their bridge was missing. And BattleMechs were not known for their climbing ability.

A spike in the background static warned of an intercepted Smoke Jaguar communication. "It is too quiet. What are they doing? All posts check in!"

Though clarity suffered, Connor placed it as Star Commander Drevin, the on-site warrior. Sorenson had intercepted a few transmissions between this Drevin and Ratache Osis. Drevin was desperate. Desperate men were dangerous. Desperate Clan warriors, he had learned, were doubly-so.

"I can't raise Epona," the corporal called out over the common frequency. "Too much rock in between." One of the

Mobile Field Bases began a tight three-point turn to head back the way it had come in. "We need to get around the side of this mountain quickly, or we'll lose her."

Connor shook his head. He couldn't have Sorenson panicking now. "Calm down, Corporal. Stop that field base." He waited until his order was carried out. "Now think, Thomas. You got us this far. Your first plans have been upset, so come up with something new. We're two hundred meters or so from our target. Figure it out." There had to be another way. Just because he couldn't see it no reason Sorenson shouldn't be able to. The man was a natural-born analyst. "It's what you do best. Do it."

Dominic paced his *Puma* in a tight square. Working off nervous energy while the intelligence analyst puzzled a new way through. Connor waited, muscles cramping with tension. He was gambling again, and this time every second lost placed Epona Rhi that much further from any support.

Finally, "Can't be done, Lieutenant. I'm sorry. No way you can blast through, and your 'Mechs are not made to climb like that. You need an elevator, or a ramp. A ramp!"

He allowed himself a tight smile. Sorenson might just as well have yelled "Victory!"

"You aren't two hundred meters from your target, sir. You're six meters. We need to get you onto that conveyer bridge and into the first extractor chamber." Data scrolled over one of Connor's several auxiliary screens. "Target the following supports beneath the conveyer bridge."

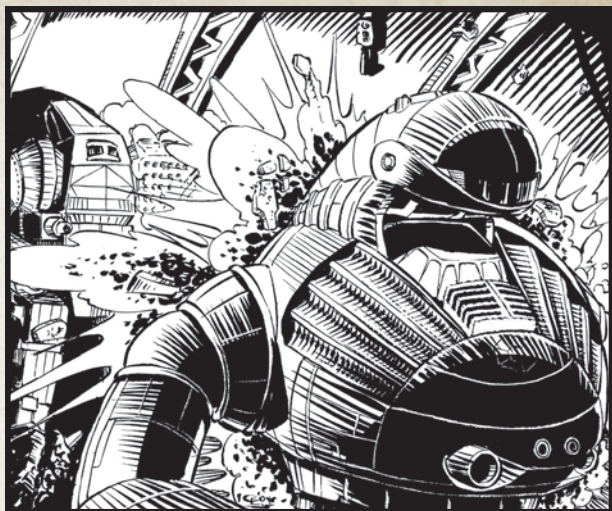
He didn't see what that gained them, blowing the rest of the bridge, but the corporal hadn't let him down yet. He selected for lasers only—no sense wasting precious ammunition, and if they made it through there would be no time for a refit and resupply. Epona was counting on them being there.

The ruby beams lashed out, slagging through first one heavy support, then another. The bridge twisted—and even through cockpit armor he heard the groan of stressed metal—but did not collapse.

The third and fourth support fell away, thick metal girders no match for 'Mech weaponry.

The conveyer system collapsed.

Its outer structure fell flat to the ground, but where the conveyer still maintained integrity it held up one end into an improvised ramp. A brute-force job of it, but he wouldn't complain if it worked. Connor was first up the slope, praying



for it to hold beneath the *Orion's* seventy-five tons. It did. He smashed his way through the preliminary crusher and into the extraction chamber.

"The south wall," Sorenson reminded him. "Burn through."

Lasers scored out, but where the girders had parted relatively easily here the metal resisted. Reddish-orange splatters of molten steel dripped slowly to the floor of the extractor. This was the best industrial grade alloy, meant to last years of regular scoring and pounding. It wouldn't give up easily.

Static flared. "They are coming. No one touches their commander! He is mine." Drevin again. No way he had figured out their plan yet—he was referring to Epona, as if she would be leading in the combined force. She was almost through the Jaguar's barricade, and with no support nearby!

He gave up on the lasers, raising his arms against the weakened metal and ramming piston-like blows against it. It cracked and bowed, but refused to give. Dominic held his place behind the *Orion*, unable to move up to help. Finally Connor leaned his leviathan machine back and then simply charged forward, lowering one angular shoulder into the damage already wrought against the wall.

It held for a very long second, then parted with a shriek of tearing metal.

The *Orion* stumbled through. Connor found himself in a tight passage meant more for exoskeleton-assisted laborers, but serviceable for 'Mechs if barely so.

No time for finesse, he gave the *Orion* as much throttle as he dared. Whenever he brushed the unforgiving wall he left behind more of his protective armor. The first indication of battle was a backflash of ruby light into the passage, coming from around the next bend.

The second was Epona's call for help. "Blake's Blood!" she yelled, her cultured accent softening the centuries-old curse only slightly. "I'm dancing with an *Annihilator* up here! Anyone about to cut in?"

Around the bend the passage widened quickly into a large antechamber, opening up onto the factory complex. Roughly pentagonal in shape, the complex boasted a level of sophisticated design not yet seen on Tranquil. As with the previous underground site, the Smoke Jaguars designed it to keep the floor as open as possible. The factory buildings had been built up the wall rather than outward, turning the entire cavern into one large, metal-walled chamber.

A strange tower in the middle of that chamber glowed with large power conduits, and ran heavy cable to three automated 'Mech construction bays that occupied different corners of the facility. Nearly complete were three new 'Mechs (two of them OmniMechs), nestled back in their cradles as machines continued to work on them.

Already complete was the monstrous *Annihilator* and the two 'Mechs flanking it, a second *Thor* and surprisingly an *Owens*.

One hundred tons and twelve meters tall, the *Annihilator* looked every gram of an assault 'Mech. The head was formed up like a thick comb over a bullet-shaped body which rested on massive legs. The arms spoke of lethal intent, ending in two large-bore autocannon barrels *each*. It was not a design that promoted a call for a reasonable solution. It was one which argued for unconditional surrender. Though not an OmniMech, it was still a Clan-technology machine and so followed their design theory in that it sacrificed mobility for hard-hitting firepower.

And at the moment that firepower was turned against Epona Rhi.

In her time on Tranquil, the new MechWarrior had salvaged and returned to service a Clan-design *Shadow Cat* similar to the one Dominic had lost, except this one had been configured for two extended-range large lasers and a six-pack short-ranged missile system.

Her ruby beams speared out, but not at the *Annihilator*. She ignored the titan and the damage it visited on her, targeting instead one of the smaller 'Mechs—the seventy-ton *Thor*. Her tactics had thrown the floor into confusion as the *Thor* ran around trying to avoid her rather than fire on the 'Mech which Star Commander Drevin had chosen for own. In the much-faster *Shadow Cat* Epona sprinted around the large chamber, making herself a very hard target as she continued to punish the *Thor* and chase it in any direction that took her away from the *Annihilator*. Delaying tactics as she waited for help.

Which had just arrived. Connor's first flight of missiles bracketed the *Annihilator's* back, blasting away armor but unable to penetrate. Though weaker than other locations, the assault 'Mech could withstand a few solid hits before opening itself up to debilitating internal damage.

The *Orion's* autocannon peeled away protection from the other's right leg. His lasers both concentrated their emerald energy into the left arm, unfortunately spreading the damage around rather than taking advantage of the already-savaged rear armor.

If the weapons barrage hadn't been enough to prove him a threat, that the *Orion* was nearly of a height with the *Annihilator* would call attention to him as the commando's leader. No Smoke Jaguar officer worth his heritage would refuse the call to battle.

As the threatening 'Mech turned to face him, he could not help the shudder which shook him. His *Orion* was no match for the *Annihilator*, and everyone in the complex knew it. Especially the Jaguar MechWarrior, who raised both arms to level a quartet of autocannon his direction.

Against the slow-moving *Orion* there would be little chance for Star Commander Drevin to miss.

The spark of tracers flared in the cavern, drawing four lines of destruction to the *Orion* where the heavy-caliber slugs tore across its chest and both arms. The seventy-five ton 'Mech

shook under the onslaught much as he had trembled the moment before. It stumbled backward, the commando leader fighting to keep the BattleMech upright by strength of will as much as by his piloting—failing.

The *Annihilator* juggernaut lumbered forward with slow but deliberate strides.

But stumbling backward, trying to regain control of the battered 'Mech as well as some measure of initiative in this battle, a lesson from his academy days flashed back to Connor.

The topic had been 'Situational Awareness.'

"It's a MechWarrior's lifeline," the lecturer had promised, speaking in shotgun sentences as if every word counted. "Some are born with it. It can be learned, true. But it can also be learned wrong. And that can kill you."

Situational awareness covered a wide range of factors. More than just knowing the lay of the battlefield, holding it in your head like some oversized chessboard on which the pieces moved, though that was part of it. When Connor gambled against the pull of gravity and shifted his *Orion* to the right, it was because he *knew* the rough rock wall of the cavern was there. The BattleMech slammed hard against it, and he heard the distant crunch of shattered armor as the plates over his back were crushed.

It was better, however, than toppling to the ground—likely never to rise again with the *Annihilator* bearing down on him.

The pieces themselves were also a major consideration. The advancing assault 'Mech. The *Owens*, only now moving in from the other side of the tower. Dominic's *Puma*—from the icon flashing across his HUD, it had cleared the antechamber to come up on the *Orion's* left.

Epona Rhi's *Shadow Cat* chasing the *Thor*, the Smoke Jaguar warrior running his Omni in between the *Orion* and *Annihilator*, stopping to twist back and track her advance. With his commander switching targets to the *Orion*, it left him free to finally answer her attacks.

Though he'd never fought at her side before, he simply trusted that Epona wouldn't be there to face the *Thor's* assault. A slight gamble, yes, but in his mind the picture came together in such perfect form he could imagine no other result. As

much as anything, situational awareness was coordinating all the factors and understanding how they related to each other. Predicting the decisions of your own lancemates as well as the enemy.

Recognizing that one moment when the opposition was most vulnerable, such as turning their back and disregarding a former target.

The Clans taught their warriors to prefer single combat above the normal chaos of a battlefield. Their warriors chose a target, and attempted to bring them down to the exclusion of all else. In Connor's opinion, they had learned wrong.

And it would kill them.

"With me, Dominic."

He barely had time for the order before tightening up on his triggers. Firing, not at the *Annihilator* which was presenting ten tons of fresh armor toward him, but at the *Thor* already wounded by Epona's earlier assaults. His autocannon spat out a hard stream of destruction, tearing into the seventy-ton 'Mech's left arm and cutting it off just below the shoulder.

The *Thor's* primary weapon was lost with the arm dropping away to smash against the cavern's rocky floor.

A split-second behind him, Dominic punched two PPC blasts into and through the Omni's right side. The blue-white lightning melted away a large portion of engine shielding and destroyed the control equipment of the right arm which sagged into uselessness. As good as dead, the *Thor* suffered one final barrage as one of Connor's short-range missiles and both medium lasers struck at its right leg. Already savaged by Epona, the limb had less to give than the salvo demanded. The leg bowed outward at the ruined knee joint, then snapped off as the *Thor* fell over onto its side, not to rise again.

Epona had already recognized her own advantage, splitting off from her pursuit of the *Thor* and slipping in behind the *Annihilator* which had spurned her for the larger *Orion*—obviously considering her an inferior target. Determined to chastise the Jaguar warrior for his presumption, she cut loose with both large lasers and a flight from her SRM launcher. Ruby energy flared at the assault BattleMech's back. One of

the energy weapons drifted low, cutting into the hip instead, but the other punched through to cut at the vital equipment at the *Annihilator's* core.

Molten shielding ran down to the floor, and then high-velocity metal spat out the rent as the assault machine's gyro tore itself into pieces. Three missiles smashing into the ruined socket sped its demise, and the *Annihilator* collapsed first to its knees and then slowly—almost gracefully—to the floor.

At once, the assault machine attempted to get its arms beneath it, to fight on despite the ruined gyro. The Jaguar warrior was not giving up.

Dominic had already split off to challenge the *Owens*. Connor advanced with Epona to pour more firepower into the downed assault 'Mech. It could not—would not—be allowed to regain its feet or even a prone position from which it might fire a pair of its large-bore autocannon. Gem-colored laser light flared, carving at the fallen 'Mech as the commando warriors struck again, and again. When the *Owens* fell under Dominic's PPCs a moment later, the fight suddenly seemed to flee the *Annihilator* which collapsed over its arms and lay silent.

Connor noticed the large hole burned through the back of its head, one of Epona's large lasers finally ending the star commander's struggle.

The three Damocles Commando BattleMechs held the floor, and the factory.

"Not bad work, Epona." Dominic walked his *Puma* over to face the *Shadow Cat*, presumably so he could wave through his own cockpit canopy. "We could have used you topside when that Star of Omnis hit us. Well, better late than never," he said, forgetting—conveniently, in Connor's opinion—that here it had been Epona who had arrived first.

"Late?" He could hear the adrenaline rush in her voice, shaking that usually-soft accent. "Paine, do you have any idea what it took to get here at all? Bloody mission cock-up, scattering us all over the peninsula."

Diplomatically, Dominic retreated. "Sorry, Rhi. I'm glad you made the party. Though all things being equal, I'd rather be seeing the *Black Hammer*."

Epona Rhi calmed, coming back into her own self-assured voice. "Every indication, including Jaguar comm intercepts I picked up, point toward its complete loss. Except for Keith Andrew, and he's still stuck up north, we're all that's left."

Connor sighed to himself, then dropped his jaw down low enough to engage the contacts and open a channel. "So much for the cavalry," he transmitted.

Not for the first time of late, Dominic's pessimistic view of the world was beginning to look the more clear. And with each addition to his motley force, the strains worsened rather than improved.

Epona's *Shadow Cat* shifted on mechanically-taloned feet to face the larger *Orion*. "It gets better. Keith ran into some heavy laser towers in the northern stretch of Operations Area Three—"

"We're acquainted with those," Dominic interrupted.

"Well, these can target ground forces as well as low-orbit ships. So don't expect much in the way of support until those are taken out."

She paused for a second, to let that news sink in, then, "In fact, play it safe, and don't expect much at all."

BATTLESCHOOPS

Extremely good salvage, everyone. Can't ask for much better than a Clan factory.

—We might ask for a working DropShip.—

I'm working on that, Dominic. In the meantime, Epona's earlier scouting has pointed out several good routes leading into the next Operations Area. With Osis closing on our position, we will do better on the move. Every step takes us that much closer to the *Eclipse*.

—You know, I don't remember signing on for the walking tour of Tranquil. But am I happy to be here? You bet I am.—

TRIAL UNDER FIRE

Chapter 6 Sundered

Loren L. Coleman

Everyone, listen to this. It's a piece of intercepted comms between Smoke Jaguar officers, brought in by Epona Rhi. I've cleaned it up a bit:

...does not matter. He requires constant re-supply, chasing those freebirth through the Cascade Ranges.

Ratache Osis ordered the DropShip kept ready for his own use.

You would like to argue that with Galaxy Commander Corbett, *quiaff?*

Neg. Just be prepared for the return of Star Colonel Osis to Durghan. He will be displeased, unless he has managed to destroy those surrats by then...

All right, did you hear that? Here:

...ordered the DropShip kept ready...

It's out there, boys and girl. Our ticket back to the *Eclipse*. I found it. Now you have to convince them to give us a ride. Either that or we rely on the rescue team finally making it through.

How 'bout it, Lieutenant?

Tranquil, Clan Homeworlds

2 May 3060

Clan forces pressed in hard as Connor Sinclair adjusted his grip on sweat-slick control sticks.

He gasped for air.

Perspiration stung at the corners of his eyes.

The commando's latest hard-hitting raid had turned into a deadly struggle for survival, and the only consolation was that his small commando had given a good accounting for themselves. Scattered remains of an enemy *Shadow Cat* and an *Annihilator* littered the ground, smoking pieces still hot enough to register red on thermal imaging. A *Mad Cat* struggled with a gimped leg, still unstable on its feet following the ammunition explosion which had ripped one side off the seventy-five ton OmniMech. It withdrew to temporary safety behind the fortified outpost, seeking a brief respite, but leaving the Damocles warriors to contend with the trap sprung by an advancing team of four, fresh, Smoke Jaguar OmniMechs.

This second unit had moved down from the northwest to bottle the commando on the coastal plains, pushing the Inner Sphere force back into an area framed by mountains on two sides and ocean on the third. Another *Mad Cat*, leading forward a *Shadow Cat*, *Thor* and *Vulture*.

Behind this advancing unit the ground opened up. Except Sorenson had already registered an intermittent contact which was likely a new 'Mech moving in to close off any easy escape. The corporal held their Mobile Field Base vehicles a quarter-kilometer back, crawling forward slowly, delaying their arrival. With the addition of Epona Rhi's single surviving MFB, the commando fielded a trio of the crucially-important vehicles again—a number that would diminish quickly if the Omnis turned any weapons their way.

Connor had already exchanged long-range fire with the new *Mad Cat*. His salvaged *Thor* came off the worse end, able to match only a single large laser against a devastating combination of heavy missile flights and laserfire. His ears rang from explosions which had rocked the side of the cockpit, a pair of missiles slamming into his 'Mech's head.

The match-up appeared hopeless, unless the enemy closed for hard-hitting combat where he might hope to bring his left-arm autocannon into play. The twelve-centimeter caliber weapon had a limited range, but would rip into the toughest 'Mech with ferocious results. In a series of single combats, with his lancemates holding back the flanking units, the commando might hope to blast through and escape.

A hope mercilessly shot down as his computer picked up new Smoke Jaguar comms traffic. "You will issue a challenge, *quiaff* Star Commander?"

"Neg, Stefen." A female voice. "No quarter offered. Full attack."

Connor throttled his *Thor* into a backward walk. "Give ground! Give ground!"

His warriors could not stand up to the kind of barrage this new unit delivered. The armor protecting Epona's *Shadow Cat* was more memory than material, and his own looked none too good as well. Thick gray smoke roiled out of a rent in the chest of Dominic's *Puma*, its skyrocketing heat levels causing one of his heat sinks to rupture.

That the commando's MechWarriors gave as good as they received didn't help. *Overwhelming force* was simply that.

"No mercy!" the star commander ordered her people, stepping her *Mad Cat* to the fore and probing at Connor's *Thor* with her lasers.

Her flanking 'Mechs each picked one of the other commando warriors, *Vulture* and *Shadow Cat* joining against Dominic's *Puma*, striking out with full salvos. From behind the nearby fortifications, the first *Mad Cat* stepped out to pin the Epona in a blistering crossfire with the enemy *Thor*. Epona's 'Cat weathered a flight of twelve missiles which pockmarked the remnants of her left side armor before a *Thor's* Gauss slug smashed into her torso. A laser flayed the last of the armor away from her right leg.

"Engine's hot," she transmitted, warning that she'd lost shielding. "Lost the active probe as well."

"Burst another heat sink," Dominic said. Almost as critical as Epona's damage, the double-PPC configuration of his *Puma* pulled massive heat spikes from the reactor. However, the

two of them together still managed to bring down the crippled *Mad Cat*, cutting its gimped leg out from beneath it and taking off its right arm as well.

"New contact," Sorenson called out. "We have a *Sunder* coming in from the west on a full run."

Connor had been angling for partial cover behind one of the access ramps to the battle-weathered outpost. With Sorenson's transmission, he cut back inside and raced forward to put himself between the advancing Smoke Jaguar line and his commando. The *Sunder* was a ninety-ton Inner Sphere-designed OmniMech—brought back as spoils of war no doubt. It approached in the blind spot of a rocky outcropping, as had the first four 'Mechs. With the assault machine completing a full star of five Omnis, there was little hope of escape. He'd sell himself as dearly as possible, buying time for his two warriors and Sorenson's MFBs to retreat toward the ocean and the dubious safety of the coastal foothills.



The maneuver worked in his favor, briefly, as he ran the *Thor* beneath the flight of a new wave of missiles. Against the *Mad Cat's* lasers he was not so lucky. Both cut deeply, one nearly severing the *Thor's* right arm and the other splashing the last of its right side armor to the ground in a molten puddle.

He struck back with his own laser, scarlet fire scoring the *Mad Cat's* left shoulder as it turned away from him, onto a facing at-odds with its previous line of advance. The maneuver made no sense, though his situational awareness was stretched at its limits in this chaotic firefight. Mentally flailing for what he might be missing, he readied the order which would send his lancemates fleeing for the coast.

Epona Rhi beat out her lance commander and Sorenson both. "Hey... HEY! Isn't that *Sunder* one of ours?!"

The *Sunder's* particle projector cannon arced out an azure whip of manmade lightning, slicing it horizontally across the



Mad Cat's bulbous torso. A Gauss slug blurred between the two war machines, punching in right behind the molten scar to smash the supports for one of the shoulder-mounted missile launchers. The box-like structure wrenched away from the Omni, protesting with a shriek of stressed metal, and crashed to the ground. Its load of missiles detonated on impact, throwing the mangled weapon back into the air and spinning off to one side.

Unbalanced by the impact of the *Sunder's* heavy weaponry and the loss of better than nine tons of armor and armament over the course of the battle, the heavy-class *Mad Cat* stumbled and fell, landing hard against its right side but immediately working to right itself.

"You reading me?" The transmission was faint—broken, and cloaked by more static than intercepted Smoke Jaguar comms—but there. "Hello Damocles Commando! Looks... you could use some help." Damaged comms system notwithstanding, Connor almost recognized that voice.

Again, Epona had no difficulty. "Allen Mattila! Master of understatement." A warrior from her original commando, Team Three.

Connor remembered meeting him once aboard the *Black Hammer*—a large, dark-skinned man from New Syrtis, with a confident attitude common to so many assault 'Mech pilots.

Deservedly common, he decided now as the trio of Clan Omnis pulled up short on their advance, suddenly defensive. The *Sunder's* arrival had them worried, and rightly so. Owning the only assault 'Mech on the field tipped the scales back toward even, and Connor was not about to pass up an advantage when it quite literally walked up and presented itself.

"Hit them hard, Damocles! Here's our chance."

Another battle and he would have finished off the downed star commander first. Here, hard-pressed by the forces still standing, it was better to target the most dangerous threat. None of the three remaining Omnis made the same mistake Star Commander Drevin had in the factory complex, turning their back directly against an enemy. Instead they throttled into reverse, angling back and left in hopes of putting distance between themselves and their enemies. Keeping all

hostile forces in front of them. Good tactics in most situations, except for one small fact in the *Thor's* favor.

It jumped.

His lifters flashed reaction mass into plasma, channeling it through magnetically sealed venturi baffles which provided enough vertical lift to rocket the *Thor* up to one hundred fifty meters along the ground. Rising on fiery jets, twisting around at the apex of its arc to power into a controlled descent, Connor brought it to earth directly at the back of the Clan machines.

Caught between the *Sunder's* heavy firepower and Connor's primed twelve-centimeter autocannon, the Smoke Jaguar line fell apart as each warrior worried at saving himself first. The ground-bound *Vulture* stuck it out, chancing its weak rear armor against Sinclair rather than the demonstrated effectiveness of the *Sunder*. The *Shadow Cat* and enemy *Thor* both took to the air on flaming jets, attempting to rocket out of the danger. The *Thor* jumped forward, trying to clear the far side of Dominic and Epona. The *Shadow Cat* rocketed back, going for distance.

In the end it wouldn't matter. They had been given a situation with no winning answer.

The autocannon's growling voice roared across the battlefield as Connor held into the trigger for an exceptionally long burst, risking the slim chance of a weapon jam against eviscerating an enemy 'Mech.

Depleted-uranium slugs raked jagged furrows across the back of the *Vulture*, starting at its left hip and ending just short of the right shoulder. Armor parted like eggshells smashed by a hammer, raining metal shards to the ground as the furious assault chewed deeply into the interior. Golden fire belched out in a tremendous gout as the reactor's physical shielding simply ceased to exist.

The *Vulture* exploded, its backwash of furious energies melting another half ton of armor from the front of Sinclair's *Thor* and driving it back several staggered paces.

Its companion *Shadow Cat* fared little better, though it did have time for one final volley. Dual large lasers cut with ruby knives, one of them worrying Connor's short-range missile launcher into a ruined, half-melted mass and the other finish-

ing the star commander's earlier work by cutting free his right arm at the elbow joint.

His *Thor* lurched to the left, keeping its balance as neurohelmet fed his own sense of balance down into the gyro. A light touch on the control stick corrected the final tremor to the machine's stance.

Then the *Sunder's* PPC reached down range to tear through armor and cripple the *Shadow Cat's* gyro. The Jaguar 'Mech staggered, and the MechWarrior inside had all of a second to stare down the wide bore of a Gauss rifle before the nickel-ferrous slug tore through the 'Cat's head and into the cockpit.

The 'Mech dropped next to the smoking ruins of the *Vulture*, out of the fight but definitely salvageable.

"Bloody hell!"

Alerted by her yell, Connor had time to twist the *Thor* around to see the canopy on Epona's *Shadow Cat* blow away. Her command chair rocketed up into the air on a short jet of flame, leaving behind her doomed 'Mech. The enemy *Thor* had not quite cleared the commando's reach, and had faced off against the two lighter machines, managing to put a Gauss slug directly through Epona's missile ammunition bin and on into the fusion reactor. The explosion which ripped her OmniMech to pieces followed right on the heels of her safe ejection.

Epona's parafoil deployed, gliding her away from the battlefield and the burning 'Mech for a safe landing.

"Don't worry, Lieutenant. We've got her." From the back, one of the MFBs powered ahead of the others to make pick-up.

She wouldn't be the only one needing a lift unless that *Thor* was brought down quickly. It slammed another of its crippling Gauss slugs into Dominic's *Puma*, crushing a hip joint and freezing the right leg immobile. An earlier round had already ruined one of the *Puma's* PPCs, halving his effective weaponry.

Recognizing a lancemate in trouble, Allen Mattila turned his *Sunder* to offer assistance.

As much as Connor also felt the desire to protect his warrior, there was still the Smoke Jaguar officer to worry about.

Or not. The *Mad Cat* was having trouble regaining its feet. Quite possibly the fall had thrown the Omni's gyro out of alignment.

Needing the *Mad Cat* to remain down but not about to rely on the star commander's willingness to surrender, he dropped his crosshairs over its back and selected his heavy-bore autocannon. Then the thought of salvage stayed his hand, and instead of coring out critical components he dropped the reticle further down to fall across the Omni's legs. His burst shredded armor from one leg and rocked the Omni back to a prone position. His next amputated the limb across its titanium femur, making it unlikely to ever rise again.

Then the canopy blew away as the star commander ejected herself along a horizontal path. The command chair slammed hard into the ground, tumbling along with rocket-assisted force as it left gouges and smears of blood against the earth.

"Such a waste," he whispered, careful not to transmit. Had the star commander's shame been so much? Or did she believe the commando would adopt Corbett's 'no prisoners' policy?

Not that it mattered. And if the pilot of the enemy *Thor* had a preference, it was taken from him when Allen's hard-hitting barrage drove the Omni to its knees and then Dominic's remaining PPC burned into the head and cored through the backside. In an instant the cockpit became a ready-made crematorium, the warrior inside reduced to ash and perhaps a few pieces of charred one.

Looking over the battlefield ruins, the eight 'Mech corpses littering the ground, Connor shook his head over the waste of valuable technology and the inestimable value of each fallen warrior. Better the Smoke Jaguars than his own people, of course, but still he read the warning left him on the scarred landscape.

The Clan had been within moments of victory if not for Allen Mattila's arrival, and their one vulnerability remained their lack of concerted effort. But in the collection of warriors forced under his command by the situation, he saw where the same problem could develop. Each Star League warrior held their previous loyalties to old units and companions, and every one of them felt heavily the strain of the situation. The commando had its breaking point, certainly. Thankfully, they had not found it yet.

But who knew what the next battle would bring.

Well, we know what happened to the *Black Hammer*. The news isn't good.

—Now doesn't that figure?—

I'll let him tell you his story. Go ahead, Allen:

...I was last out of the *Black Hammer*—Shawna and Carlos failed to launch by drop-pod.

...Grounded very near where the DropShip finally crashed. No other survivors—man it was a mess. I got shot up by a patrol my first trip. Long-range comms, trashed. No support vehicles. No way to make ammo reloads even. Been playing hide and seek ever since, waiting for someone to come lookin'. Today I caught your broadcasts, weak but there, so I hurried over to give you a hand. Glad I did, too, or none of us might have made it outta this mess...

Thanks, Allen. Lieutenant, the Smoke Jaguars have certainly stripped the *Black Hammer* for themselves, but they can't have gotten far. Keith Andrew picked up news of a convoy heading out from Durghan City. To pick up the salvage, or a good percentage of it, is my guess. It will be an easy run to stop that convoy and claim the salvage for ourselves. Then we'll be in good shape for hitting the city and making rendezvous with Keith.

The spaceport is just north of the city, hopefully complete with a functional DropShip.

Connor walked the ruined passageways of the *Black Hammer*. The DropShip laying on her side like some titan's discarded toy, he was forced to use bulkheads for a floor and at times had to lift himself up into the next passage by means of light fixtures and pipes.

In several places he detoured through maintenance crawl-spaces. The main passage smashed and impassable.

His footsteps echoed hollowly, and the walls when he touched them felt cold.

Dead.

He found the space he sought. The one for which he had pulled his team away from their path toward Durghan: his commando's original briefing room. Perhaps it hadn't been in their best interest to detour so far out to see the ship for themselves. The possibility of salvage left by the Jaguars had been remote at best. And, in fact, the brief battle waged against the patrol which had staked out the crashed vessel had cost them more than any salvage taken from their ruined 'Mechs.

But more than equipment salvage had drawn him back to the *Black Hammer*. Sinclair had come for one thing in specific.

A talisman?

The MechWarrior shook his head to the unvoiced question. Not exactly. A rallying point for his warriors, who were tired and fraying. A symbol.

A reminder.

The planning table remained bolted to the floor, now actually a wall. Several chairs had broken loose, and lay in a tangle. He pulled them apart, setting them outside the door as he worked his way down to the wall which had held the Star League ensign. It was still there, rumpled and creased, but intact. A silver Cameron star, its one tine spearing to the right, set against a black field. The colors under with the task force—the Damocles Command—fought.

Sinclair cut it free with the knife he'd brought along, then folded the ensign carefully and shoved it inside his cooling vest.

"Let's all remember why we are here," he asked of the empty room.

TRIAL UNDER FIRE

Chapter 7 Cityscape Challenge

Loren L. Coleman



According to communication intercepts, Ratache Osis is leading a force somewhere to the south. But he apparently has our measure, and he's been handed an ultimatum. Keith Andrew intercepted this and passed it along:

...These freebirth may get to Durghan City, Galaxy Commander, but they will die there. I promise.

They will die there, Ratache Osis, or I will have you in a Circle of Equals. Contain them. Destroy them. Or I will see your Blood Heritage dishonored and your DNA removed from our breeding cycles. Is. That. Clear?

Aff, Galaxy Commander! Sir? Galaxy Commander Corbett?...

Count on Osis to dog our tracks all the way in, Lieutenant. If you want to avoid him, I recommend fast action.

Durghan City

Tranquil, Clan Homeworlds

5 May 3060

Durghan City was not large. Hardly more than a good-sized town, really. Certainly, Connor decided, no replacement for Looteria back on Huntress. But here on Tranquil it was what the Smoke Jaguars had to work with as a new capital. Hastily-erected prefab barracks, built to house the expected influx of warriors as the Clan continued to regroup on Tranquil, doubled the number of buildings. Warehouses had been converted to crude 'Mech bays. And everywhere the various Clan castes worked to improve what they could.

When the Damocles Commando struck, they noticed at once the strains on Durghan. Administrative and logistics functions demanded by the military had so overburdened local resources that clear lines of communication no longer existed. Having the top two commanders currently absent from the city only compounded the problem—the number of junior warriors looking for direction were matched only by ambitious seniors ready to claim the mantle of leadership. A cacophony of conflicting reports and orders bombarded the airwaves.

They quickly escalated to the point where Connor ordered Corporal Sorenson to filter out all but the most critical intercepted communications.

The commando escorted forward their trio of field bases, heading into the city's southwest edge. Behind them they left a pair of smashed *Vultures*, whose pilots had thought themselves up to the task of taking on two hundred eighty tons combined weight in BattleMechs. Further back an *Annihilator* and a *Puma* were little more than burning hulks. Dominic's *Thor* limped along with a ruined leg actuator, but so far his was the only major damage.

In the cockpit of his salvaged *Mad Cat*, Connor felt the tremors of light autocannon fire slamming into the shoulder of his OmniMech. His scanners screamed new warnings a split second later, then painted a set of threat icons over his heads-up display. A trio of Bulldog armored vehicles, patrolling the outskirts of Durghan.

He measured the delay in time against the necessity of clearing the field behind them.

"Allen, you and Dominic deal with the tanks. Then circle around to meet us on the north side of Durghan. Epona, with me."

Splitting their forces was a calculated risk, but time was beginning to weigh against them. With Corbett and Osis away, the defense of Durghan was lighter than it should be. Patrols were being called in, however, and he had no intention of being here when they arrived.

The commando 'Mechs speared into the city proper. Epona's *Shadow Cat* paced along at Connor's best speed of eighty-five kph. They were after Galaxy Commander Corbett's command and control building, located in the southwest reaches of Durghan. Though the Smoke Jaguar's possessed a well-fortified base outside the city, the cramped conditions had forced several critical components to be relocated to an auxiliary site. It was a target they couldn't pass up, and in easy reach along their path to the spaceport.

At the second intersection, his HUD painted a *Puma* off to his right. Quickly lost as he passed by and was again shielded by buildings—but three hundred meters range was too close. At the next intersection he turned left, and then back to the right. Two more intersections straight through, and the *Mad Cat's* computer identified a building at the end of this block as his target. The *Puma* might have paced them to the north, but it wasn't about to catch the two MechWarriors before they hammered Corbett's command facility to rubble. He nodded his satisfaction.

A sense of contentment which quickly fled as an *Annihilator* stepped into the next intersection, its torso already twisted about to give it a line of sight down the street on which he approached. Behind it, just out of the intersection, his computers tagged an *Avatar* waiting to follow in the larger 'Mech's shadow.

It would have to wait its turn.

Four autocannon suddenly filled the street with fragmenting, eighty-millimeter rounds. The deadly storm sanded armor away from the *Mad Cat's* every surface. Several rounds rang off the cockpit, throwing a violent shake to the entire 'Mech

and threatening to unbalance it. Past the intersection and too late to dodge away, Connor quickly thought to his lancemate's survival.

"Break right, Epona!"

Still fighting for control, he noted with an instant's relief the *Shadow Cat's* icon splitting away from his own on the HUD. It headed north, toward the rendezvous with Allen and Dominic, out of immediate danger.

The *Mad Cat* ran forward, directly into the *Annihilator's* embrace.

Having faced up such a monstrous BattleMech a few times already, the *Annihilator* no longer held any special terror for him except in what it could do to his *Mad Cat* if given a chance. The seventy-five ton Omni could not withstand such abuse for long. But with Epona safely away, he was determined to not give the assault 'Mech a second chance to finish him. Framed on both sides by tall buildings, cut off ahead and not about to slow down for a turn back to the rear, he braced himself as he continued forward in a race against the cycling time of the *Annihilator's* weapons.

The lethal autocannon thrust forward again in anticipation of a new barrage. Connor turned his *Mad Cat* into the large building on his right. Hands tight on control stick and throttle, he powered his way into the wall. The 'Mech bucked hard, shaking him violently against the restraining harness, and almost rebounded into the street where the *Annihilator* would certainly have destroyed it. Slowly, it seemed, the *Mad Cat* chewed its way inward, smashing through two stories of floors, walls, desks, computer consoles and communication stations. Crushed brick, plaster and tile rained a cloud of debris around the canopy, fogging his view. Once far enough inside he worked his way left again—guessing, but trusting his natural instincts.

In an avalanche of brick, and glass bursting out from shattered windows, the *Mad Cat* tore its way from the structure and regained the street around the corner from its original path. Behind him the building began a slow and ungainly collapse, unable to stand up under the damage to its foundation and lower floors. Wrenching his targeting crosshairs into the right side of his main screen, he twisted the *Mad Cat* at the waist to drop the reticle over the backside of the *Avatar*. The

seventy-ton 'Mech was just now stepping into the intersection that the *Annihilator* had vacated.

As the building collapsed the assault 'Mech became mired in a pile of rubble and the *Avatar* pulled up short. Sensors no doubt screaming the danger of an enemy *Mad Cat* at his rear, the *Avatar* began to turn.

Not fast enough.

Connor cut loose with everything his *Mad Cat* had to give except for long-ranged missiles, not about to waste ammunition or run up his heat on such a chancy close-up shot. His large lasers cut across the *Avatar's* back and the rear left leg. A trio of medium-ranged lasers scored out with gem-bright pulses, adding to the damage, and even his machine guns, generally used as anti-infantry weapons, scratched into the other 'Mech.

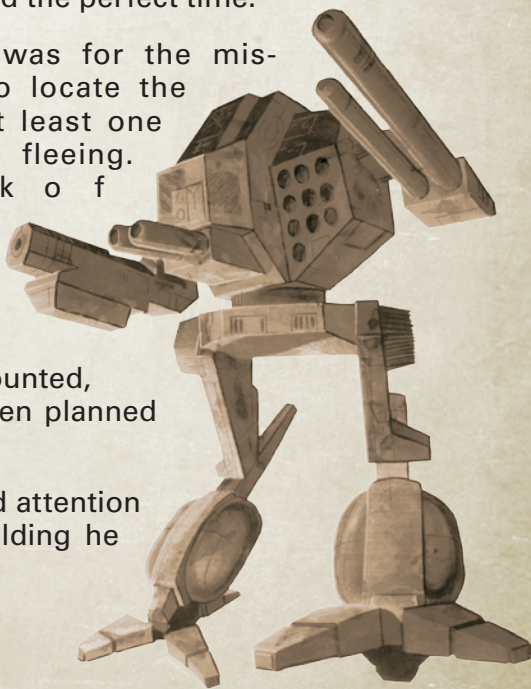
The *Avatar's* thermal image flared red and then white-hot as engine shielding was cut away, but the other warrior was faster than most on the reactor's emergency shutdown fields, preventing a catastrophic explosion. The *Avatar* stood where it had been, blocking the intersection and belching smoke out terrible rents in its back.

Connor's first thought was for his escape. The *Annihilator* fought to extract itself from the collapsed building, and after such a close call it seemed the perfect time.

His second thought was for the mission, and he turned to locate the command center for at least one good barrage before fleeing. Then with a short bark of relieved laughter he turned his *Mad Cat* northward and throttled up into a fast run.

Results were what counted, regardless if it hadn't been planned this way.

Truthfully he hadn't paid attention at the time to which building he was running through.



It still came down to a race, however, as the *Annihilator* fought for freedom and to take up the chase. Pushing his *Mad Cat's* throttle to its limit stop, running for the northern edge of the city, Connor checked up on the status of his commando and on the rallying Jaguar warriors.

"All forces. This is Star Captain Dana Wimmer."

Connor listened to the intercepted comms Sorenson routed him. One senior warrior had finally won out for dominance.

"Enemy is moving north. Regroup at the canyon. Stop them!"

A narrow bluff separated Durghan City from the plains area on which the spaceport was situated. A jumping BattleMech might have cleared the steep cliff face and walked down the far side, but not the mobile field bases. Even so close to escape, the commando was not about to abandon their critical vehicles. Too many things could still go wrong.

Too many things already had.

Recon probe data, originally meant for Commandos Four through Six and provided by the *Eclipse*, had located a short canyon splitting the bluff. It also showed a wall with fortified gates warding the far end of the narrow pass. Sorenson arranged with Keith Andrew to provide artillery support, his *Catapult* equipped with Arrow IV assault missile launchers. Epona's *Shadow Cat* was modified to carry a TAG spotting laser, which would direct the artillery strike against the wall and blow open the gates. A simple plan, as the best ones usually were.

He gripped his control sticks tighter. "Who was it that said 'no plan survives contact with the enemy.'"

Autocannon turrets protected the pass along its entire length, slowing the commando to a crawl. An *Avatar* had also been stationed in the way, but by the time Connor reached the site one field base had deployed a crane arm to raise the 'Mech's blasted hulk to a carrying trailer. The *Avatar's* leg looked to have been crushed by giant hammer blows, a testament to the Gauss rifle Allen Mattila's *Sunder* wielded. Allen was already several hundred meters into the canyon, his *Sunder's* armor protecting him while he methodically scrapped each turret along the way. Dominic's *Thor* and Epona's *Cat* protected the field base vehicles.

"Keith Andrew ran into trouble with an enemy patrol," Sorenson informed him at once. "He's trying to get in the clear to launch an Arrow IV strike, but it'll take time."

"I can launch soon as your ready," Keith interrupted on the commando's common channel. The transmission did not rob his voice of the tense determination. "Just say the word."

Connor shook his head. "Keith, you get clear of any Smoke Jaguars first. They'll see the missile launch and trace it back."

He stepped his *Mad Cat* up to the head of the pass, facing it back toward the city. The field base finished its work and began to roll forward, into the relative safety of the canyon.

"Dominic, back up Allen," he ordered. Though the assault 'Mech pilot had yet to say so, and wouldn't until seriously injured, Connor knew the autocannon had to be exacting a toll against Allen's *Sunder* by now. "Epona, with the MFBs."

Then, his commando safely into the canyon, Connor backed up the *Mad Cat* to block the entrance.

Almost at once an enemy *Puma* raced up from behind, likely hoping to catch one of the field bases or a smaller commando 'Mech by the backside. Instead it found his *Mad Cat* holding the defile entrance. Recovering quickly from any surprise, twin PPC strikes arced out and slammed into the *Mad Cat's* side. Molten armor runneled to the ground as large sections sloughed away, baring the right arm to its titanium skeleton and leaving a red-tinged scar angling from shoulder down to hip.

The seventy-five ton 'Mech rocked back, but righted itself under his touch. The *Puma* spun around in a tight turn, ready to race back the safety of the city.

He was not about to let it off so easily. His heavy missile launchers speared out a full flight of forty missiles, raining destruction over the *Puma's* upper torso. The 'Mech staggered, but did not go down.

Following up with the large lasers carried in each arm, both ruby-red beams stabbed into the *Puma's* left leg. The intensely-concentrated fire demanded more than the *Puma* had to give, slicing through just below the hip and amputating the leg. The thirty-five ton Omni plunged forward head-first from its ninety kilometers-per-hour sprint, tearing

itself apart against the ground as it rolled into and through a nearby warehouse.

No time for congratulatory thoughts. On his HUD, the *Annihilator* and a second *Puma* maneuvered into the outskirts of the city directly facing the defile. The assault 'Mech had finally cleared itself from the collapsed building and come looking for the commando, picking up some support along the way. Conner dropped crosshairs over the assault machine, and squeezed off a pair of ruby lances.

"Things are heating up back here," he transmitted.

The literal truth, actually, as his fusion reactor spiked from the power demands of his weapons. Waste heat bled into his cockpit and he gasped for breath.

"Tell me you're to the gates."

Allen Mattila answered him. "Working on it."

Working on it? A probing attack by the *Annihilator* walked autocannon fire across the canyon wall to his right. Stone chips and ricochets pinged off the OmniMech's chest. Connor throttled into a backward walk, moving his *Mad Cat* further into the canyon's protection.

"Work a little faster, will you?"

"We're trying," Sorenson cut in. "The wall has PPC turrets arranged for a savage crossfire, and they're backing up an *Annihilator*."

Another *Annihilator*, this one playing Horatio at the bridge. Time was slipping out from beneath the Damocles Commando like quicksand.

"Allen, can you handle it with Dominic?"

"If it has to be now, yes." Frustration was evident in the MechWarrior's voice. "But it will hurt. The *Annihilator* ripped a large hole into the leg of my *Sunder* that Sorenson wants to patch up before it costs me an actuator."

"We've pulled back and the *Annihilator* isn't pursuing," the corporal added.

Of course not. Its job was to hold the pass until city defenders could rally to the canyon. Selecting for his large lasers



only, he chanced a long-range shot at the *Puma* which had run out to fire its PPCs. Both beams flew wide of their mark and low, scoring instead a parked groundcoach which exploded into an orange fireball. If nothing else it hurried the *Puma's* pilot, his own shots also missing though coming closer than Connor had. The manmade lightning scarred the ground ten meters in front of the *Mad Cat*.

"Do we have ten minutes?" Sorenson asked, able to pull Connor's sensor feed and no doubt aware of the enemy 'Mechs pressing from behind. To the corporal's credit, he didn't worry the rest of the lance with details. That decision was left to the commando leader.

Now an *Owens* had moved up into the *Annihilator's* shadow. The one hundred ton assault 'Mech waded through a single-story warehouse and was briefly lost from site behind a parking garage. "I don't think so," Connor admitted, the heat now drawing a river of sweat which stung his eyes and left a salty taste on his lips. He arced another flight of missiles toward the *Annihilator's* position, just to give the Jaguar warrior something to think about before it broke cover, then wheeled around to pace deeper into the canyon.

"I'm moving up to rejoin. Sorenson, get the *Sunder* fixed. We'll need it the other side of those gates."

There would be room for two 'Mechs to fight abreast in the canyon. Between his *Mad Cat* and Dominic's *Thor*, they could *hope* to bring down the *Annihilator* and both PPC turrets without losing a 'Mech. Chances are, one of them would be risking an ejection. Such tight quarters favored the assault 'Mech too much.

"Launching," a voice whispered into his ear, soft but steadfast in its determination. "First missile away. Second missile away."

"No!"

Too late, he still tried to countermand Keith's missile launch. The MechWarrior had been monitoring communications, knowing the commando to be in trouble. He was trying to give them an edge, putting artillery-grade missiles into the air which Epona might call down in a massive strike.

Throttling into a run, coming upon and passing the spot where Sorenson's mobile field bases tended the wounded *Sunder*,

Connor was just in time to see both Epona and Dominic move forward into the wider stretch of canyon held by the turrets and *Annihilator*. Already the blue-white glares flashed in the deeper shadows of the canyon as the turrets speared out their lethal energies. The *Mad Cat* moved around a final outcropping of rock to witness Dominic's *Thor* taking a full barrage of the assault 'Mech's autocannon.

With Dominic in his line of fire and Epona crowding his right as she turned her lasers against the PPC turrets crowning the wall, there was little he could do but watch the *Annihilator's* four autocannon tear into the *Thor*. The depleted uranium rounds hammered into an already-savaged right side, smashing Dominic's large laser and leaving the right arm hanging from the shoulder by a ruined tangle of myomer musculature. Fragmenting rounds sanded away armor, scoured deep into the *Thor's* torso. Thick, dark smoke roiled out of the ruined right side chest.

And Connor winced, anticipating the explosion that would render the seventy-ton *Thor* down into scrap metal and ruined equipment.

The explosion threw a cloud of gray dust over all four BattleMechs. Not from the destruction of Dominic's *Thor*, however. The huge gates barring the pass fell under a gout of fire which ate into the ferrocrete walls, raining out shards of poured stone and then a blanket of debris which blinded natural vision. The thunderclap explosion almost drowned out Epona's, "First missiles down."

The Arrow IV missile which Keith Andrew launched had demolished the gate and part of the wall with it.

Heavy particles fell to earth quickly, leaving only a light haze to cover the area. By some miracle, Dominic's *Thor* was still standing. The right side was cored, showing several holes penetrating front to back when the smoke cleared. Reactor shielding had obviously been damaged, but not to the point where the power plant was in danger of immediate explosion.

And though his right arm was all but severed, Dominic still retained possession of his most lethal weapon, the same twelve-centimeter autocannon Connor had put to such good use.

The rapid-fire weapon spat out a blizzard of hard-hitting slugs, raking intense fire over the *Annihilator's* chest and left

leg. To add insult to such grievous injury, the *Thor's* SRM system hammered in with five of six missiles, scattering more damage over chest and arms and even slamming one into the head near the cockpit.

The assault 'Mech stumbled up against one of the canyon walls. Catching itself from falling, but clearing the *Thor* by just enough for Connor to bring his own weapons into play. Ruby-bright lasers cut into the other 'Mech's side and down into a leg already torn apart by Dominic's furious assault. One beam stabbed in past shreds of armor, worrying the titanium skeleton and cutting free an actuators.

The Annihilator toppled this time, gyro and pilot's efforts not enough to stand up under the combined assault of commando 'Mechs. Ponderously slow it seemed. The twelve-meter tall machine crashed down to the ground where it immediately struggled to right itself.

Then Epona stepped in and focused her *Shadow Cat's* spotting laser onto the *Annihilator's* broad back. Like a divine strike of retribution, Keith's second Arrow IV missile hammered down into the assault 'Mech.

And it was simply no more.

The force of the exploding *Annihilator* drove everyone back several paces. The *Thor's* arm finally gave way, some razor-sharp shrapnel slicing through the last of its myomer arm muscles. The limb crashed to the ground to lay among the litter of the ravaged assault 'Mech.

Allen's *Sunder*, still walking on a partially-ruined right leg, walked in just as the three commando 'Mechs were starting to pull back from the ruin which had been the *Annihilator*.

"Man, talk about your big guns."

Epona echoed his sentiment, though in more direct appreciation. "Thanks for the assist, Keith. It made the difference." Pause. "Keith? Keith Andrew?"

Her only answer came from an intercepted Clan transmission, riding in on a burst of static. "They are through the gates. Striker Star, defend the north pass. Gamma Auxiliaries, hold your line at the spaceport. Any warrior who falls without taking a *stravag* enemy with you will never pilot a 'Mech again."

Connor ignored Star Captain Wimmer. "Keith Andrew, respond please."

"He's gone silent, lieutenant." Sorenson, pulling forward the trio of MFBs. "The sideband Clan channels I'm monitoring report that he broke past one picket line, but they're after him, chasing north. Let's hope he can make rendezvous with *Eclipse's* company, because for helping us he's now out of reach of the spaceport."

"Yeah, well we might as well be, too," Allen said, sullen and shocked at the same time. He pivoted his *Sunder* to stare northeast. "All this way for nothing."

Three other 'Mechs swung around to stare after the *Sunder's* gaze. Seen above the lip of the canyon, what looked like a large spheroid-shaped skyscraper rocketed skyward on a tongue of argent-white flame. It rose slowly at first, quickly gaining speed even as it gained more altitude, until it looked like an early star in the pale blue sky.

The sight of a DropShip, rocketing for orbit.

TRIAL UNDER FIRE

Chapter 8 Stress Fractures

Loren L. Coleman



BATTLEFOOTPS

-No blastin' way! Tell me we didn't just see that!-

-All right, if it makes you happy. But what you didn't see was the bloody DropShip we needed to get out of here, launching.-

-Why am I not surprised?-

-We'll find another way, people! But for now we're still holed up inside the canyon and we can't stay here much longer. Argue later.-

Durghan City

Tranquil, Clan Homeworlds

5 May 3060

By the time Connor Sinclair recognized what had happened to his commando, it was almost too late.

He'd left behind Allen and Dominic just north of the canyon egress to deal with a force of armored vehicles and Elementals, as well as any 'Mech chasing after them from Durghan. Meanwhile he and Epona took after a *Cauldron-Born* and a *Mad Cat* tempting fate by placing themselves between the commando and spaceport. The DropShip might be gone, but the spaceport facilities were still a vital link in Galaxy Commander Corbett's logistics network. Since it appeared they would now be taking a much longer route to the *Eclipse*, anything which weakened Corbett was of top priority.

Then Allen had split away from Dominic to rejoin when a trio of *Avatars* answered the *Mad Cat*'s alert. He chased his *Sunder* after one of the *Avatar*'s further to the north than prudent.

He and Epona put down the *Cauldron-Born* and another *Avatar* before splitting up. He moving after the *Mad Cat* Sorenson had identified as belonging to Star captain Dana Wimmer. Epona pursuing the third, wounded *Avatar*.

Everyone riding the adrenaline surge which had carried them through Durghan, and now thrown off by the DropShip's escape as well, anger and a desire for personal revenge overrode tactical sense as the lance broke up into four individual warriors chasing their own fight.

Realization broke cold and hard over Connor when Allen first ran into trouble. And found no one there to cover him.

"I'm down. Blake's blazing! Anyone, I'm down!" There was a grunt of pain which might have been the MechWarrior being bounced around as the *Sunder* struck hard against the ground. "*Avatar* took my leg off."

Losing their assault 'Mech could only prove disastrous. Then Epona punched out, her *Shadow Cat* disintegrating in a fiery explosion as the fusion plant sought release. Sorenson informed him of that.

"It wasn't pretty, but she's alive. I have a vehicle splitting off to pick her up."

Breaking from his duel with Dana Wimmer's *Mad Cat*, he raced back to give Allen some cover as the *Avatar* tried to swing around behind the *Sunder* to finish it. He would never make it in time. Too far away. Epona might have had a shot, having chased her target further north. Now the *Avatar* which had brought her down moved in at Dominic who limped back into the battle after smashing the last of the Elementas.

From extreme range he cut loose with his LRMs, the missiles falling just short of the first *Avatar*. Still, they served to worry the Clan MechWarrior, turning him back into the *Sunder* before coming fully around at Allen's back.

The Jaguar warrior's elation colored his voice, even through the static of a comms intercept. "At your best!" he cried, trying to rally his comrades with the kill of the *Sunder*. "You heard the Star captain. We defend this spaceport or we die trying."

But Allen had propped his assault 'Mech up on one arm, targeting with his Gauss rifle. The silver ball of nickel-ferrous material cracked into the *Avatar's* chest, smashing aside the last of its protection and punching deep into its core to hammer at the OmniMech's sensitive gyro. Metal chunks spat out at high velocities as the critical piece of equipment tore itself apart, and the *Avatar* went down hard on its face.

Just to be safe, Allen pumped another Gauss round directly into the downed 'Mech's head.

"Wouldn't ya know it? He died trying."

Conner read the intense relief in Allen's voice. Knew the humor to be nervous energy seeking release. "Glad to hear you're still with us," he said.

"Thank you, sir. Sorry to say I'll be sitting out the rest of this battle."



A flight of five missiles gouging into his rear armor interrupted any reply Connor might make.

Alone on the field but for one *Avatar* now, Star captain Dana Wimmer press forward determinedly while she held the advantage. "I will smash this upstart freebirth myself!" she vowed, never knowing her words carried into the enemy comm systems.

Connor ran a wide turn, trying to draw her back toward Dominic, but then gave that up as the remaining *Avatar* drove Domini's *Thor* back toward the canyon. From range he cut loose with missiles and lasers, using the last of the ammunition for his right-shoulder launcher. Better than half his flight struck home, though one laser missed low.

Wimmer's answering barrage gouged deeply into his arm and right leg, smashing an ankle actuator which stumbled the seventy-five ton *Mad Cat*. A deft hand on the control stick saved him from a fall, though left him open to a new attack. Even as Dominic crowed out his success at putting down the last *Avatar*, Wimmer rained another short flight of four missiles into Connor and splashed ruby darts from her pulse laser into his savaged left side. The energy pulses ate into his left-shoulder launcher, failing to detonate the missiles inside but ruining it as an effective weapon.

"Enough of this," he shouted to his cockpit.

He throttled back, limping his own *Mad Cat's* speed down until it stood still on the spaceport tarmac. With careful deliberation he drifted his targeting reticle over the enemy *Mad Cat's* outline, then speared out with both large lasers coring ruby energy into Wimmer's torso. The punch stopped her solid. Three hundred meters downrange Wimmer's *Mad Cat* stumbled to a halt. It shuddered as if from a gyro graze, but did not go down.

He slapped at his shutdown override as his heat spiked deep into the red band, then centered his lasers over her chest and fired again.

Golden-red fire blossomed at the *Mad Cat's* heart, ripping out through shoulder joints and at the turret-style waist of Wimmer's OmniMech. The raging fire touched off both ammunition bins, detonating a combined weight of half a ton of missiles. An orange fireball seemed to hang overhead for a

second, and then the Omni flew into four large pieces which spun out from the central explosion.

Sorenson's voice overrode the others, the benefit of coordinating communications for the commando lance. "Well done, Lieutenant! That clears the field."

"Neg." A new voice. "It does not."

Cold. Almost devoid of any life. For a moment he couldn't place it. Absent the usual static that came with an intercepted transmission, he had thought it one of his team. Then a glance at the comms system showed it coming in on an open civilian channel reserved for lower castes. Sorenson had used the frequency as a matter of convenience, scanning the lower channels for intel. The new arrival selected for it to allow communication between the two warring sides.

Dominic picked it up first. "Oh, you've got to be kidding."

"It's him," Epona agreed, having taken over a headset in one of the mobile field bases. "Bloody cocksure."

Star colonel Ratache Osis walked a *Supernova* toward the spaceport, having arrived through the same canyon pass which the commando had used to escape Durghan City. His ninety-ton assault 'Mech put an *Annihilator* to shame, using Clan technology to field a superior war machine. Six extended-range large lasers—three in each arm. Slow but well-armored, this 'Mech was designed to destroy anything which came against it so long as the pilot could survive the heat spike.

A fact which did not seem to worry the Star colonel. "My death has been assured," he said simply, with no trace of personal concern. "At least one of yours will be too, I promise. One at time, if you have the courage, or all together. It no longer matters."

On the ground to the north, Allen's *Sunder* stirred as if it might try to raise itself back on one leg. "He wants a fight, I'll give it to him."

Dominic said nothing but simply reversed his path, sweeping back from the southwest to place himself between Ratache Osis and Connor Sinclair.

"Dominic, Allen, stand down both of you!"

Connor had switched over to the same channel as Osis, wanting the Star colonel to remain focused on his *Mad Cat* rather than one of his severely-damaged lancemates. He turned his wounded 'Mech west to face Osis' advance.

"This is my fight. You two hold your positions."

Sorenson cut in, interrupting. "Sir, you can't duel him. That *Supernova's* in pristine condition. You won't have a chance. Allen can still fire his Gauss rifle, and Dominic—"

"And no one will fire without my order," Connor cut him off sharply. He was playing a dangerous game here and could not afford distractions. He blinked away the sweat burning at the corners of his eyes.

"No one," he repeated, "without my order."

"Yessir," Allen acknowledged, a bit too easily.

Dominic at least managed to invest a bit of his usual sullen nature, saying nothing but pulling his *Thor* back to stand exactly south of Allen's downed *Sunder* and just out of the path which separated Connor from Osis.

The Star colonel bothered no more with words. Thrusting an arm forward, three lasers stabbed scarlet destruction at the commando *Mad Cat*. Two of them scored wounds across its outline, an impressive salvo from such long range. One splashed away armor from the chest, and another dug into the ruined left side though failed to damage any critical equipment.

Having lost his shoulder-mounted missile launchers and now limited to a pair of lasers only, Connor knew he couldn't hope to match Osis in raw firepower. His hastily-snapped return shot passed both ruby beams wide.

Careful of his damaged ankle actuator, he stepped his *Mad Cat* backward, trying to maintain distance on the Star colonel.

In disgrace or not, Osis apparently knew to wait for his chance at a full barrage of all six lasers. He stalked the *Supernova* forward, heedless of anything but closing with his enemy. His other arm stabbed forward, and three new beams sliced the air. Only one hit this time, laying bare the *Mad Cat's* left leg down to titanium bones. But this time Connor made Osis pay, grazing both of his own lasers over the *Supernova's* chest.

Trying to make up for his poor showing, Osis fired five lasers on his next salvo. Again only one hit as Connor struggled to keep his *Mad Cat* at long range. The heat spike cost the Star colonel, his *Supernova* slowing down as myomer muscles reacted negatively to the high heat. But once begun, the heavier barrages were hard to give up. Osis fired four lasers the next time, then five again hoping to increase his damage ratio against the already-savaged OmniMech that limped back always just on the outside of optimal range.

Conner took two more laser cuts against his left leg and arm, but easily shrugged them aside.

Now, he decided, throttling out of his reverse walk and limping forward to close with Osis. His ruby-bright lances sliced into the right side of the *Supernova*. Molten armor runneled to the ground, splashing bits of fire against the spaceport tarmac as better than a ton of armor sloughed away.

Osis thrust both arms forward as Connor stepped over the line and into optimum range, and six separate lances of scarlet energy converged on the stricken *Mad Cat*.

But the Star colonel had already been fighting a rising heat curve, myomer muscles responding sluggishly. Only half of his lasers struck at Connor, two of them working to sever his left arm and the third coring into his *Mad Cat's* right leg to claim his other ankle actuator.

The Omni staggered back under the assault, giving up two tons of armor and structural support. Connor knew that to fall was to die, and his command with him. The gyro protested, having already lost its struggle with gravity. The MechWarrior worked control sticks to regain his center of balance.

He finally managed to drag around his wounded right leg, careful of the damaged actuator, to get a leg solidly beneath him.

The *Supernova* stood still on the tarmac, smoke curling from nearly every joint in its armor as the extreme buildup of waste heat all but shut the machine down. A geyser of gray-green coolant jetted from one jagged scar in the BattleMech's torso; a heatsink overworked to the point of bursting. Connor was amazed the machine did not shutdown, or that Osis was still alive in that furnace. The man was all the more dangerous for his fury, caring nothing for himself so long as he struck at his enemy.

For Connor Sinclair, he cared everything for his team. And so would strike down his enemy in any way he could.

"Allen, Dominic," he said over the Clan common frequency, letting Osis hear the death sentence. "Commence firing."

Both lancemates had been ready. On Connor's order, Allen swung his *Sunder's* Gauss rifle into line with the heat-stricken *Supernova* and Dominic raced forward autocannon already hammering out lethal streams of heavy-caliber slugs.

Connor continued to limp at his best pace, stabbing out with his lasers again. And again.

The *Supernova* rained armor to the ground in shards and splinters and molten streams. The initial onslaught shook the assault 'Mech under a violent cascade of weapons fire. It toppled to the tarmac, though was far from dead.

Allen's second and third Gauss slug combined to tear off one arm, depriving the assault 'Mech of half its firepower. A rapid-fire burst from Dominic's autocannon chewed into the right torso and scrapped enough of the reactor's physical shielding to drive its heat scale up another large jump. On the thermal imaging scanners, the *Supernova* read white-hot.

The Star colonel was still alive in that furnace and defiant to the last. "I will not fail! I will not..."

Walking right up to the downed 'Mech, Connor set the barrel which capped his right arm directly over the *Supernova's* head. "Last time pays for all," he said, and squeezed into the trigger.

A burst of static overrode Ratache Osis' dying scream.

Connor's *Mad Cat* and Dominic's *Thor* stood over the smoking BattleMech corpse; both of them savaged, both down to a few last working weapons. Perhaps two tons of armor between them and looking one small laser hit away from joining the vanquished *Supernova*. The *Mad Cat* swayed unsteadily on its feet, destroyed actuators leaving it borderline unstable. Connor kept a careful hand on the control stick, muscles still tense from their exertion and nerves singing tight as if he expected Ratache Osis to rise again and complete the commando's destruction.

He apparently was not the only one to feel that way.

Dominic's *Thor* leaned in over the *Supernova*. "Can we be sure he's dead?"

"I don't trust him," Epona said as two field bases pulled up. The third had stopped by Allen's fallen *Sunder*. "What say we pump a few more shots into the wreckage?"

A hail of slugs ripped into the *Supernova's* corpse, chased by a tongue of flame belching out of the *Thor's* autocannon.

He opened a channel. "Dominic! Stand down. Osis is dead." There wasn't much left of the assault 'Mech's head but a charred cavity where the cockpit and various control components had been housed.

"He's dead," Sorenson echoed, "and we have bigger problems. We just picked up a new transmission, Lieutenant. Clan sideband frequency, no scrambling, repeating itself over and over. Sir, you'll want to hear this. Patching in."

A brief pause, and then a new voice filled Connor's neurohelmet. Calm and almost conversational except for the hard edge to the words.

"This is Galaxy Commander Brendon Corbett. You have caused enough trouble, freebirth. I relieved Star colonel Osis of his command when he failed to contain you in Dhurgan. He had no authority to offer you batchall, amusing as it was to hear. If you think his death bought you any reprieve, any measure of vindication in my eyes, you are sadly disillusioned."

Allen broke in over the transmission as Corbett paused for breath or simply to let the news sink in before continuing. "I don't believe this sh—"

"I do," Dominic interrupted, then quieted as the galaxy commander began talking again.

"You denied me the pleasure of hunting Osis myself. If for nothing else, I would kill you for that. I am nearly finished with this annoyance in the mountains, and then I will return for you. The bulk of the Smoke Jaguar fleet has arrived at the jump point, and I plan to have all resistance ended on Tranquil before they land.

"As for the DropShip you were chasing, it has relocated to a remote spot far from reach. You are stranded," he said with obvious satisfaction. "Cut off."

"Dead."

TRIAL UNDER FIRE

Chapter 9 By a Thread

Loren L. Coleman



BATTLESCHOOPS

Damocles Commando, this is Captain Taylor. I've confirmed with our JumpShip that Jaguar forces have, in fact, arrived and are burning hard for Tranquil. I'm pulling back the rescue team—they've taken heavy losses and the *Eclipse* will have to touch off soon as possible if we're to escape.

I don't see how we can make rendezvous.

I'm sorry, gentlemen.

Durghan City

Tranquil, Clan Homeworlds

6 May 3060

The destruction playing on the wall monitor inside the Mobile Field Base was all the more eerie for its lack of noise, Connor decided. The usual explosions of missiles and the crackling discharge of particle projector cannon. The arm-mounted guncam swung around at the pilot's needs for his weapons, offering brief glimpses of the hard-fought battle and at times shaking violently as the 'Mech took another salvo.

A fireball rose up to block the lens for a moment, an *Owens* losing containment on its fusion reactor.

"No ejection," Epona noted, her voice flat of its usual accent. Deadpan.

The view cleared as the filming BattleMech topped a small rise and hammered twin lines of ruby destruction into the flank of an enemy *Mad Cat*. Armor sloughed away, creating a weakened area over the right side. The Gauss rifle to which the guncam was mounted discharged a silvery blur that punched into and through the side, smashing reactor shielding and gyro and the missile launcher's ammunition bin. As the Omni exploded, red flames twisting around goutts of golden fire, the lasers spoke again to slice into and through the cockpit.

The scene swung away as the BattleMech turned, already seeking a new target.

"What kind of 'Mech is that?" Dominic asked, whispering. Even so his voice sounded unnaturally loud in the back of vehicle where the full commando had gathered.

Knowing assault 'Mechs better than anyone else present, Allen fielded the question. "That's a *Gladiator*. A Clan OmniMech we must have captured. Ninety-five tons and mounting jump jets. That one is rigged for its primary configuration; two large lasers and Gauss rifle."

Sorenson nodded his agreement. "I thought you should all see this. The *Eclipse* routed us the guncam footage."

Despite the spectacular kill of the *Mad Cat*, one of Brendon Corbett's Starmates, the entire battle was shaping up into a

stunning defeat for the Inner Sphere company. Another light 'Mech, this one a *Strider*, was next to fall. The guncam caught a giant foot swinging in to stomp through its head, crushing cockpit and warrior inside. Nothing more than the leg of the offending 'Mech was captured, however. Not until a moment later, when the *Gladiator* lead a fighting retreat and managed to film the death of a *Sunder*.

The assault 'Mech crossed the *Gladiator's* path when a furious shower of emerald darts stabbed in from the left, pulse laser fire carving deep along its entire side. A Gauss slug slammed home at the hip, bending the leg back as structural supports broke under the impact. Then a dozen missiles wreathed the *Sunder* in a halo of fire and shrapnel as the 'Mech rushed to meet the ground, its left shoulder digging into soft earth as the Omni sprawled forward.



The *Gladiator* continued to pull back, unaware or unable to help his companion, widening the angle and showing the approaching *Daishi*. The hundred-ton Clan OmniMech continued to rain devastating fire into the downed *Sunder*, beating it past its ability to rise again. Past the recovery of useful salvage and any hope of the warrior surviving. With casual cruelty the *Daishi* stepped onto the chest of the *Sunder*, crushing it inward as the 'Mech continued on its way.

The image froze, showing the *Daishi* at a full front picture.

Sorenson stabbed a finger toward the monitor. "That is the face of our final enemy. Galaxy Commander Brendon Corbett. He accounted for three kills in that battle, and I mean literally."

Connor rose from his chair, the tiny table too cramped with seating all four commando warriors and Sorenson to feel comfortable. He studied the *Daishi*, what the Clans called a *Dire Wolf*. Where an *Annihilator* had appeared a hulking menace and the *Supernova* a brute-force killer, this 'Mech somehow was worse. Its design spoke of carefully-crafted lethality; a compact and well-armored body on massive legs, with thick arms mounting an incredible array of weaponry. And, more

important, this was an OmniMech, able to change its weapons to meet each new challenge.

Connor switched the monitor back to a simply geographic overview. Turning to one side, he stared at the ensign he'd salvaged from the *Black Hammer*. Sorenson had hung it on the wall of the briefing area, a reminder to everyone.

"If we're going to see the *Eclipse*," he said, "we'll need to fight our way through. And fast. The Jaguar reinforcements will drop onto Tranquil soon, and we had better be gone."

The corporal nodded. "I guarantee the *Eclipse* will be," he said. "On the face of it, in fact, it would seem nearly impossible. Too many mountains in between us and them. If we have any hope, it's in this region." Leaning forward to tap on the monitor, Sorenson outlined a partially-developed stretch bordering the southern mountain stretch. "Picket stations. There is also some mention of an underground power development complex. Remote stations means supply runs, and supply runs means transport."

"A long shot," Dominic said.

To that, Connor only nodded. No candy-coating this one. "We move forward," he said, "hitting fast and hard. We won't be worrying about leveling everything in our path. We take what we need, what we can, and keep going."

Epona leaned forward, face tight. "What about Keith Andrew?" But Sorenson's uneasy glance answered her question, and she sat back slowly staring at her commander.

He nodded. "Keith didn't make it," he told them all, making it official. "Sorenson picked up the Clan report. They tracked his missile launches and fell on him hard. He didn't survive." A pause as he swallowed, hard. "Those missiles he delivered for us came at a high price." Everyone glanced away for a few seconds of silence.

"This is it," he said, giving them enough time to offer silent farewells to Keith but not about to allow them long trips into self-doubt. "Our last run—all or nothing." He knew his people were tired, without a lot more to give. But they would have to find it in themselves somewhere to continue. To slow down now meant abandonment on Tranquil and death at the hands of the Smoke Jaguars. He stepped over to allow the

Star League flag to backdrop him. The last time he had given a briefing in the company of these colors, the world had fallen apart not long after. This time he hoped for a better result.

"Anyone feel like quitting?" he asked softly. No one raised a hand, and four sets of eyes blazed back with a determined intensity.

Connor smiled grimly. "I didn't think so."

REVENGE



Stand by for latest communications intercept:

...I do not want to hear excuses! I want those *stravag* freebirth exterminated! Do you hear me, Star Colonel Trace Kotare? Or you would rather join Ratache Osis in obscurity, *quineg*?

Neg, Galaxy commander! *Neg*! It will be done...

I'll say one thing for Corbett. He can motivate his warriors. Now it's our turn. The retreating rescue company is winning the race. Captain Taylor reports that survivors are already staggering in by singles and pairs.

-Any way they can walk a little slower?-

Taylor won't leave without giving us every chance. But those chances are slipping by fast. I won't deny that we need a bit of luck. Here's hoping we can make some.

With supplies low on long-ranged missiles, Connor Sinclair had reconfigured his *Mad Cat* for a pair of particle projector cannon in the arms and Streak SRM launchers riding over each shoulder. The Omni ran hotter than usual, but there was no denying the PPCs packed a harder punch than lasers.

Now the blue-white lightning crackled out in twin whips, one drawing a molten-tinged weal across the retreating *Orion's* undamaged leg while his second cut away the left arm which housed the other 'Mech's LRM launcher.

Epona's *Avatar* ignored the *Vulture* which accompanied the *Orion* in retreat, allowing it to limp away as she turned her weapons against Connor's target. Her autocannon's fragmenting rounds sanded away armor. Then she punched two medium pulse lasers into the *Orion's* head, bringing it down for good. The seventy-five ton 'Mech slowly crashed to the ground, almost in the shadow of a burning Striker vehicle that roiled thick greasy smoke into a pale sky.

The *Vulture* speared back a single ruby beam which missed wide of the *Mad Cat*, and then limped at its best speed for the protection of a rocky outcropping which extended from the hills to the south.

Setting his crosshairs over the *Vulture's* outline, Connor held off firing as he gave his *Mad Cat* a few extra precious seconds to dissipate heat. He swallowed dryly, the cockpit's oven-like atmosphere wrenching the moisture from him, and surveyed the battlefield.

A few hundred meters back, Allen's *Sunder* and Dominic's *Thor* circled around a limping *Annihilator*—the hundred ton 'Mech already minus one arm and one autocannon on the remaining limb ruined past the point of use. That fight wouldn't last long enough for him to worry for his MechWarriors.

In the deeper backfield two field bases worked to salvage what they could from the supply base the commando had captured. Sorenson's vehicle had rolled forward to stay with the forward warrior, should they need any emergency field repair.

Wary of separating his team by too much, still Connor followed Epona in chasing the *Vulture*. Sorenson kept pace.

And on the next exchange he followed up Epona's salvo, a PPC and flight of missiles scoring through the gaps she tore into the *Vulture's* rear armor. The energy lance blew into and threw one of the *Vulture's* ammunition bins, rupturing the CASE storage system and detonating its supply of missiles. The *Vulture* fell, its right side blowing into shrapnel and charred myomer. At the same moment, one of Allen's Gauss slugs crushed the gyro on the *Annihilator* while Dominic cut off one leg just above the knee. The assault 'Mech fell, no hope of getting back up but certainly salvageable.

Then Sorenson rode in on the commando's common channel, excitement coloring his voice. "Check your targeting computers. We have a shuttle sitting on a landing pad. That's our ride back to the *Eclipse*."

Rounding the same outcropping which the *Vulture* had been making for, he and Epona stepped into the head of a wide, dead-end valley. The computer painted new threat icons onto his heads-up display, but at their range he worried less about them than for the shuttle displayed on one auxiliary screen. Nowhere near the size to transport BattleMechs, still it could ferry the warriors back to the *Eclipse*. Connor would trade four 'Mechs and the field bases for his warriors' safety.

The Smoke Jaguars, however, also knew the importance of the shuttle. As Dominic and Allen hurried up from the backfield, static-laced voices argued over the comms system.

"Enemy sighted! Get that shuttle airborne!"

Star Colonel Trace Kotare—Connor recognized his voice from earlier transmission intercepts. Two *Annihilators* and a double-handful of Elementals moved to screen the shuttle's launch pad.

Trying to draw fire, Connor decided. He ignored them for now, instead settling his targeting reticle over the outline of an *Annihilator* and stabbing out with his particle projector cannon. The lead *Annihilator* rocked back as one of Connor's energy whips flayed away a ton of armor from over its heart.

"Star colonel, the Commander's shuttle has yet to be refueled. We cannot—"

"Fly it on vapor, then," Kotare interrupted, raging, "but get it out of here! Now!"

The Elementals were closing fast, but then Allen and Dominic were clear of the rocky hills and weapons-free.

"No!" Dominic's frustration colored his words, even as the *Thor's* laser sliced an Elemental in half. Epona's autocannon hammered another into a mangle of metal and shredded flesh. "We can't let the shuttle get away."

"Forward in-line," Connor ordered, drawing a bead against the *Annihilator* again. "Allen, firing with me. Epona and Dominic, best targets available." Which would set them after the Elementals until closing with the pair of enemy assault 'Mechs. "Advance!"

The commando lance all stepped forward at once, weapons blazing as they reached out with their destructive power.

Between Allen and himself, three PPCs speared out azure lances to flail energy tendrils at the lead *Annihilator*. Two of them cut deep into left arm and leg, drawing angry wounds across the behemoth's armored skin. Allen's *Sunder* added a Gauss slug which smashed into the right shoulder, and then almost as an afterthought rained a half dozen missiles down onto the hapless machine.

Though not near enough to put the assault 'Mech down for good, the Clan pilot could not stand up under such a barrage. The rough treatment and loss of better than three tons of armor unbalanced the *Annihilator* which stumbled to its knees and then collapsed onto its left side, grinding more armor off its arm as it plowed into the ground.

The second *Annihilator* chose the *Sunder* as the more deadly enemy, and scoured at it with three of its four assault autocannon. The eighty-millimeter slugs ripped into armor across the chest and right leg, chipping away at its protection. One burst found and exploited a flaw in the *Sunder's* protection, punching depleted-uranium slugs into its gyro. The *Sunder* trembled violently, took an unsteady step, but held itself upright to continue the coordinated advance.

The commando continued to walk forward in a line-abreast formation. Connor noted the death of three more Elementals as Epona this time brought her twin pulse lasers into the fight, claiming two of the small armored troops while Dominic's laser found another. In this battle, his team held the advantage. Despite the damage visited upon them earlier when taking

the supply depot, they still mounted a blistering barrage capable of bringing down the Clan forces. He knew he controlled almost every important aspect of this fight but the most important.

The shuttle.

If he diverted enough of his firepower to try and ground the shuttle, he ran the risk of destroying it or at least crippling it past use. That also left his people open to a savage counterattack by the *Annihilators*.

He might try placing a well-aimed salvo into the pad's control building, though likely that would do little but convince the shuttle pilot to make a rapid retreat. So it would only be the *threat* of destruction which could prevent the shuttle from taking off. That meant a display of martial ability by quickly bringing down the *Annihilators*.

Not fast enough.

On the next exchange of weapons fire, Allen's *Sunder* went down under the concentrated autocannon fire of both *Annihilators*. The downed 'Mech had fired from a prone position rather than fight its way to its feet at once. Allen managed to score against the prone 'Mech with his Gauss rifle again, crushing one of its legs beyond use, but then the violent assault shoved him off balance. Unable to rely on a fully-capable gyro, the *Sunder* lost its fight with gravity and slammed into the ground on its right side.

Connor hoped Allen might fight the machine upright again, but couldn't count on it. "Redirect. Finish off that *Annihilator*!"

His own PPCs lanced out their manmade lightning, twin arcs digging into the side of the assault 'Mech. A bloom of heat on thermal imaging promised he had clipped the reactor's shielding, but the *Annihilator* ran too cool for the heat spike to cause much more than mild discomfort.

Epona and Dominic fared better. Though out of range for its twelve-centimeter autocannon, Dominic's *Thor* managed to carve its large laser into the wound his PPCs had made, cutting away more shielding and then coring into one of the *Annihilator's* ammunition storage bins. A gout of fire and debris geysered into the air as the explosion gutted one side of the assault 'Mech and then was channeled out the back and

upward by special cellular construction. The twin lasers of Epona's *Avatar* then struck into the *Annihilator's* chest, melting armor into a molten pool and coring into more shielding. The warrior managed to bring his dampening fields down to prevent an explosion of the fusion reactor, but the assault 'Mech was out of the battle.

The remaining *Annihilator* set itself between the shuttle and advancing commando. "Shuttle Edo, you are cleared," Kotare said.

"Copy, but we cannot make it far. Just to the next pad."

The intercepted comms told Connor his team was too late. Not even close enough to risk a chancy shot at wounding the shuttle and preventing it from taking off. There was nothing they could do as the craft lifted into the air and set off northeast, toward snow-capped peaks of the nearby mountain range.

"There it goes." Dominic sounded physically wounded.

But not far. The shuttle pilot had said 'only to the next pad.' Connor still hoped to find it, and use it to get his warriors back to the *Eclipse*. But first there was a battle to be won.

Redirecting his commando's fire at the *Annihilator* had allowed the Elementals to close. Now the remaining five leapt for Allen's *Sunder*, alighting on it like scavengers after a corpse. Their suit claws ripped open armor enough for the small lasers they carried to pump energy into vital equipment. Two of them also launched missiles from the shoulder pack they wore, slamming them into the *Sunder's* head.

The assault Omni collapsed again, its struggle to rise undercut by the swarm attack.

"Epona, clear those Elementals off Allen. Dominic, with me." The line broke apart as Epona held her *Avatar* back and the *Mad Cat* and *Thor* raced forward.

Connor edged out in front, hoping to draw the Star colonel's fire. Trace Kotare bit at the lure, hammering at the onrushing OmniMech with all autocannon. Two parallel lines of destruction were stitched across Connor's chest, peeling away the last of his armor protection but finding no critical components. The other two hammered into his 'Mech's right arm, blasting away the final fragments of protection and chewing through the titanium substructure.

One PPC smashed to the ground, robbing him of a major weapon.

Shaken against his restraining harness, he kept a firm hand against his control stick as he aided the gyro in keeping the seventy ton Omni's balance.

Still, the Star colonel had chosen poorly, looking at the approaching Omnis only in terms of weight-class rather than configuration. From range, yes, the *Mad Cat* was the more deadly foe and could hold up longer under sustained fire. But close up, nothing on the field could match Dominic's twelve-centimeter assault-class autocannon.

The *Thor* raced around the *Mad Cat's* flank, left arm raised and sighting in against the *Annihilator's* profile. Too late Kotare realized his mistake. He tried to swing his quartet of autocannon around to stave off the assault. Then a rapid-fire burst tore into the *Annihilator's* left side, caving it inward under a storm of depleted-uranium slugs that smashed aside armor and skeleton and struck sparks against the autocannon ammo stored there. The missiles did not detonate, though they remained vulnerable.

A flight of SRM's from Connor's *Mad Cat* failed to find the breach, though two exploded against the head of the *Annihilator*. His remaining PPC scarred the assault 'Mech's left leg, sloughing away a ton of armor protection.

He imagined the pounding Kotare must have taken in his cockpit. But Trace Kotare held his 'Mech to its feet through force of will and an impressive touch on his controls. "No! I refuse to admit defeat!" The Star colonel obviously spoke for his own benefit, with no starmates left on the field. "Not at the hands of Inner Sphere *surats*."

The star colonel would not make the same mistake again. Four autocannon spat out lethal streams to hammer at the *Thor*, two with regular armor-piercing rounds and two with fragmenting cluster ammunition. Dominic had come through this battle in fairly good shape so far, but still his *Thor's* armor protection was nowhere near its best. The depleted uranium slugs smashed aside the last of his protection over both legs, exposing the skeleton framework and critical components to the devastating hail of shrapnel which followed. High-velocity fragments cut into actuators and caused one hip joint to bind. The *Thor* shuddered, stumbled and almost kept upright. But

the damage to the legs was too much, even with Dominic fighting to compensate. The Omni toppled over backward, slamming down against the ground with its left leg twisted beneath it. The left foot broke off at the ankle, stressed past the point of forgiveness.

Then it was Connor's turn.

The *Mad Cat's* remaining PPC whipped destructive energy across the *Annihilator's* chest, opening up new rents in Kotare's protection. Then four SRM launchers speared out with full flights, thundering two dozen of the hard-hitting missiles into the *Annihilator's* profile. Two more found the head, gouging at the armor and punishing Kotare by shaking the head violently. Seven of them grouped into the left leg, smashing aside the last of its armor and ruining two actuators. The rest scattered widely across the chest of the BattleMech, at least half a dozen finding gaps in the protective armored skin to explode against the titanium skeleton, engine shielding, and the luckless missile bin which Dominic had exposed earlier.

Tongues of flame licked out of several rents as engine shielding was lost. Then the missiles began to cook off. First singly, and then in pairs, before the entire collection finally gave way in one thunderous detonation.

"...can not...believe..." Kotare's words were lost in bursts of static and the thunderclap detonation which destroyed the *Annihilator*.

"Let him refuse to believe," Sorenson said in the silence which followed. "Doesn't make him any less dead."

The field base vehicles had all gathered at the valley's head. Epona was assisting Allen in standing the *Sunder* back up, readying him for Sorenson's technicians. Dominic wasn't going anywhere until his foot was reattached. The battle was over, but not the fight.

"One hour for repairs and refits as possible," he ordered. "Pull it together commando. We have a shuttle to track down!"

News from the *Eclipse*:

...Damocles Commando, this is Captain Taylor. Brendon Corbett caught the last two 'Mechs we've been waiting on. Butchered them. We're safe enough for now—no Mech is about to charge a DropShip—but time is running out.

On the chance you can snag that shuttle or perform a miracle and get over the mountains in time, I'll hold on to the last possible moment. But whether you're here or not we'll clear Tranquil before the incoming Smoke Jaguars get in our way. I'm sorry, but that's the way it has to be. If it comes to that, dig a deep hole and hide yourselves in it. I'm sure we'll be back for you...

—I'll dig him a hole. Dig it and throw his...—

Let's not make it any harder than it already is, all right Dominic?

Allen Mattila's initial comment had pretty much summed it up for the others. "I always wondered what Hell looked like."

"All we're missing is Corbett standing nearby waving a pitchfork," Dominic agreed.

It was a scene out of nightmare. One they had stumbled upon not far from the shuttle pad, following a service road into a deep cleft.

A grand cavern, crusted over with soot. Lava pooled and bubbled inside craters and flowed through in one large river of orange-yellow molten rock. The Smoke Jaguar's geothermal energy stations had been built over the flow—four of them, rising up toward the cavern ceiling like massive columns to hold the rock overhead. BattleMech-scale catwalks bridged the stations, anchored to the various platforms and columns or driving supports down into areas of rock not endangered by the lava. A reddish-orange cast colored everything. The rock walls and ceiling. The facility and catwalks.

The BattleMechs.

The battle had been brief and violent, much in keeping with the character of the Core Tap Facility. A trio of *Sunders* supported by Elementals attacked the commando as they attempted to move through the facility, the team seeking an elevator or ramp that would return them to the surface and hopefully into the caldera of—what they had thought would be—the extinct volcano.

The battle ran in favor of the Inner Sphere at once when Connor rammed his *Mad Cat* into one *Sunder*, knocking it backward from the catwalk and into the lava flow. The assault Omni attempted to rise, struggling for the safety of an island of rock above the flow. It didn't make it.

Meanwhile Epona's *Avatar* dealt mercilessly with the Elementals, her array of medium-scale weaponry perfect for taking out two to three at a time.

Now Dominic's *Annihilator* and Allen's *Sunder* worked together to put the finish to the last enemy 'Mech. The *Annihilator* tore away armor from an enemy *Sunder*, exposing its internal components to Allen's weapons. When the gyro and engine shielding went at once, the Jaguar warrior punched out barely ahead of the explosion which ripped his Omni to scrap.

There was a quick burst of static in Connor's ear as the computer intercepted the Clan pilot's call of, "Ejected!"

"And right into the lava," Sorenson noted. "He's not coming back."

"Bloody lava lake." Epona limped her *Avatar* toward the final platform where the Mobile Field Base vehicles waited near a titanic elevator lift. "I'm looking forward to the snow and ice again after that sauna."

The vehicles were already extending gantries and deploying the technician crews. "You'll have to wait for that, Epona." A brief pause. "And you're not likely to get the cool reception you think."

Connor sensed Sorenson's mixture of excitement and concern which rode behind his hesitation. "What do you have for us, Thomas?"

In space-surveillance shots taken of the region before the loss of the *Black Hammer*, the crater of the supposedly-extinct volcano had looked to hold a shuttle landing pad. The commando had gambled on finding a way through the facility to the caldera above, hoping to find Corbett's shuttle which had escaped them before.

"I sent some men topside for a quick look, so we wouldn't be coming up blind." He spoke to an aide, his voice muted but still transmitting. "Load the shot."

On an auxiliary screen, the video still-image of a shuttle rested on a pad. The steep rims of the massive caldera could be seen rising behind it.

"Oh yeah!" Allen said. "We got a ride."

"Have you informed the *Eclipse*?" he asked, sensing that might be the reason behind the hesitation in Sorenson's voice. The shuttle did them no good if Taylor had moved the DropShip beyond reach.

The corproal's voice turned deadly serious. "The *Eclipse* lifted as soon as I told Captain Taylor about the shuttle. He'll meet us in low orbit if we manage to pull this off."

Epona was first with the question. "Pull what off, exactly?"

The screen changed to display a new image. A *Daishi*, caught in midstride with weapons blazing as it stepped on a fallen

enemy. He recognized the shot from the guncam footage the commando had watched earlier, of Corbett's victory over the rescue team from the *Eclipse*. A sinking sensation hollowed out his stomach.

"He's here," Sorenson said with heavy voice, validating his fear. "Up in the caldera. We picked up an open broadcast set on a repeating transmission. Relaying now."

"This is Galaxy Commander Brendon Corbett of Clan Smoke Jaguar." His voice was cold, yet still managed to deliver a feeling of self-importance. If the message was not so hostile, Connor might have called it pomp. "I and my warriors await you in the caldera. It shall be our Circle of Equals. Though you hardly rate the honor, I am left with no further time to deal with *freebirth* vermin. My Clan arrives, and you may not be left alive to stain the soil with your presence. Claim the shuttle if you can, but I promise that I shall deal with you as I have all others who thought to stand against me and the rebirth of the Smoke Jaguars.

"Stand and fight or be hunted like the *surats* you are, but you will not survive this day."



TRIAL UNDER FIRE

Chapter 10 Circle of Equals

by Loren L. Coleman



We'll come out of the elevator here, at this northwest corner just behind the shuttle pad. That might buy as a moment to organize, but we can't hang back too long. Given the usual Clanner conceit, Corbett and his warriors will likely wait for us in the center of the caldera.

We need to move the fight away from the shuttle—if it's damaged, we're stuck on Tranquil.

Over to you, Lieutenant:

...No mistake, this is a tough one. Galaxy commander Corbett is commanding an elite team fitted with the best equipment the Jaguars possess. Our one lucky break is that he lost one of his warriors against the rescue company, so he's down to four 'Mechs instead of the usual Clan Star of five. He's dangling the shuttle in front of us for bait. He knows we need it. And we'll have to go through him to get it.

Who isn't ready?

Durghan City

Tranquil, Clan Homeworlds

6 May 3060

First off the elevator, his *Sunder's* superior armor ready to shield the rest of the commando, Allen Mattila picked up the first readings. "Got them. Right out in the middle and waiting for us."

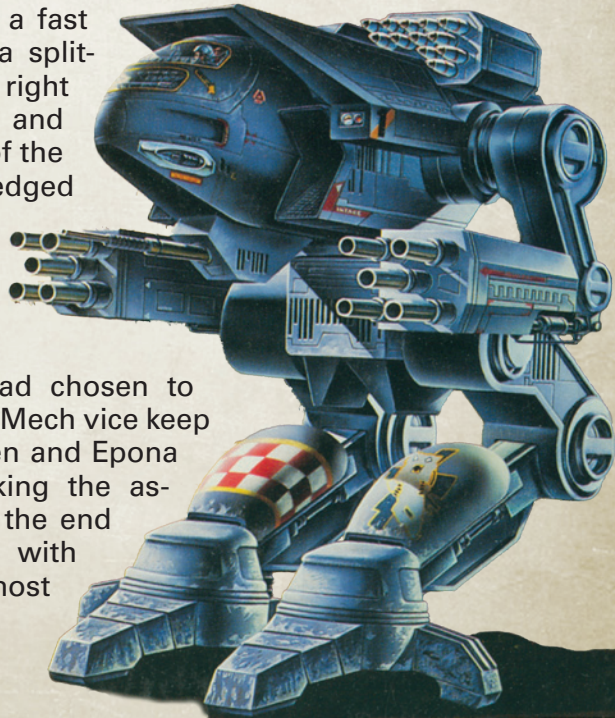
The shuttle screened visual sighting, but scanners fed the information to Connor's HUD fast enough. A *Daishi*, flanked by a *Mad Cat*, *Cauldron-Born* and one of the lethal *Supernovas*. Three hundred thirty tons of war machines commanded by Smoke Jaguar elite. They stood a silent vigil in the center of the caldera, spaced far enough apart to give each other plenty of room to maneuver as needed.

He swallowed dryly against a metallic taste. Dialed for his most confident voice. "By pairs," he ordered, "around the shuttle before the Jaguars come through it to get at us."

Already Thomas Sorenson was leading the field base crews forward to take and inspect the shuttle. The vehicles would be abandoned here.

There would be no time for battlefield repairs anyway.

Throttling up into a fast walk, he and Epona splitting off around the right side of the shuttle and landing pad. Clear of the stubby wing, they edged up into a run. The other side of the pad, Dominic's *Thor* followed in the shadow of the *Sunder*. Dominic had chosen to go back to the OmniMech vice keep the *Annihilator*. Allen and Epona had considered taking the assault 'Mech, but in the end everyone stayed with what they were most



comfortable. As they ran onto the field of battle, the 'Mechs separated until each one ran straight for an enemy.

"No mercy!" Corbett ordered, transmitting on an open frequency so that his enemy could hear. "Crush them!"

"Aff, Galaxy commander," someone answered.

The first exchange of weapons fire lit the caldera in a wash of gem-colored light and the sparks of autocannon tracers. A few PPCs added to the energy display, snaking blue-white tracks across the open ground to runnel armor to the ground in impotent splatters. Missiles arced overhead on gray contrails, falling in a lethal rain. Epona had squared off against the *Cauldron-Born* while Allen chose to match his *Sunder* against the *Supernova*. Dominic challenged the enemy *Mad Cat*, while Connor traded weapons fire with Corbett himself.

The *Daishi* was configured for dueling, sporting four large lasers, a pair of light autocannon and a medium-weight LRM rack. Starting in the median range for his weapons, Corbett hit with better than half of his offensive power. Connor's *Mad Cat* bled armor from its chest and arms, and the gyro swung out of balance under the savage onslaught.

Fighting his controls, trying to force the crosshairs to remain centered over the assault Omni, Connor brought the *Mad Cat* back under control and then triggered off his response.

With any luck, he managed to surprise the Galaxy commander. Sorenson's techs had managed to customize the *Mad Cat*, giving Connor the best weapons of two different configurations. His right arm held a pair of extended-range large lasers, while his left the deadly punching power of a Gauss rifle. Streak SRMs rode over each shoulder, sharing a single load of ammunition. It gave him an optimal heat curve, able to hit at range or trade one laser up close for his missiles without risking an overheating condition.

Now both lasers speared into the *Daishi*'s left side, carving away armor and dropping large sections of protective plating to the ground. His Gauss rifle slammed a nickel-ferrous slug into the OmniMech's gut. A mist of gray-green fluid geysered out as the impact cracked through a flaw and ruptured the *Daishi*'s centerline heat sink. It would make Corbett's furious assault that much more costly in terms of heat buildup.

He smiled grimly as he watched the *Daishi's* thermal image blossom a red flower at the heart of a yellow outline.

"Draw in," he ordered, lining up for his next shots.

On his flanks, the warriors of his commando angled in to bring the lance slowly back together. They held to their own targets, however, keeping to the single combat which Clan warriors preferred above all else. Both sides were hitting—and being hit—hard.

Another furious exchange, and several 'Mechs stumbled but none fell. There would be no obvious mistakes made today. Corbett's warriors were the elite product of breeding cycles and a lifetime of fighting their way to the top. Connor's people had learned the ropes on Huntress and Tranquil, fighting for their lives, but the Damocles Commando still held one advantage, which he played now to devastating effect.

They worked together, as a team.

"Now!" he shouted, the adrenaline giving extra strength to his voice.

On the far left, Dominic turned and ran a sharp angle in against Allen's opponent, the *Supernova*. Epona tried that on the far right, though ended up cut off by the *Cauldron-Born*. Connor simply throttled back, twisted his *Mad Cat* at the waist, and dropped crosshairs over the *Supernova*.

Though Epona was forced to stay engaged against her previous opponent, the firepower of three OmniMechs managed to converge on the *Supernova*. With its ability to provide overwhelming firepower, Connor had judged it the 'Mech likely to cripple one of his warriors early on in the fight. He wanted it destroyed.

He was granted his wish.

Dominic's assault-class autocannon tore through the already-damaged right arm, raking fire into two of the large lasers and cutting the *Supernova's* effectiveness down to sixty-odd percent. The *Thor's* large laser combined with one of Connor's to splash away armor from over the enemy 'Mech's chest, while his follow-up Gauss slug delivered a hard blow to its left leg stripping it of protection.

Allen's *Sunder* hammered home a Gauss slug right behind Connor's, the impact wrenching the leg away at the hip

joint. The *Sunder's* PPC had aimed arrow-straight for the *Supernova's* head, but the loss of the leg twisted it about so that instead the energy cannon finished cutting away the damaged right arm instead.

Minus a leg, the *Supernova* had no hope of remaining on its feet after so savage an assault. It fell in a near-graceful pirouette, slamming into the rocky ground with enough force to shake the earth.

"First blood," Allen crowed over the same open frequency Corbett had used earlier.

The Galaxy commander's reply was soft and venomous. "You shall pay for that."

The Clan force reacted instantly to the Inner Sphere tactics of concentrated fire. All weapons shifted toward the center of the commando line, spearing Connor Sinclair's *Mad Cat*.

Sensor alarms rang the shrill warnings of multiple target locks. He tried to throttle into reverse, spoiling their aim, knowing all the while he would be too late. His muscles tensed into the impending assault.

Then a shadow passed over his cockpit canopy, turning solid as Dominic's *Thor* fell back to earth on jets of plasma to place itself between the Smoke Jaguars and the commando leader.

Thrusting the *Thor's* left arm directly at the face of the onrushing *Daishi*, Dominic dared the Galaxy commander to meet his most impressive weapon at point-blank range. Corbett cut away on his attack run, twisting the top half of his Omni to track on the new threat. Their own commander at risk, Corbett's two remaining Starmates also abandoned their line on the *Mad Cat* and instead tracked on the *Thor*.

One long peal from his twelve-centimeter autocannon was all Dominic had time for. The slugs hammered into the *Daishi*, ripping a jagged furrow into the edge of the assault 'Mech's left arm.

Then a flurry of gem-colored lasers beams slammed into the *Thor*, followed quickly by a wave of missiles and two Gauss slugs.

The wreath of fire and debris which shrouded the *Thor* was so thick Connor almost missed the canopy blowing away and

the quick glimpse of a command chair rocketing up into the air. He opened a channel on the commando's private frequency.

"That's it for Dominic. Sorenson, he'll be gliding back your way. Watch for him."

Still, the sacrifice would not be in vain. Besides protecting his commander, Dominic had forced the Smoke Jaguar's to split their line. Corbett had acted in his own best defense first, not thinking about his command. Again, the difference in fighting on the same side, and fighting *together*. Now the *Cauldron-Born* was isolated on the right side of the battlefield.

Rather than try to challenge Connor and cover his Starmate, the Galaxy commander pushed forward his own *Mad Cat* to threaten the commando's only assault 'Mech—Allen's *Sunder*. Allen was already fading back to draw Corbett further out of position, so Connor rounded on the smaller *Cauldron-Born* hoping to knock it out of the fight with Epona's help.

Not that she had much left to give.

In a brief but savage duel, the *Avatar* had already lost its right arm—and with it her best weapon. Now, at point-blank range, her LRM launchers were all but useless as well. She managed to cut away more of the armor protecting the *Cauldron-Born*'s Gauss rifle, but failed to ruin it.

The squat *Cauldron-Born* pummeled the stricken commando 'Mech with light autocannon and a single laser, tearing at the left flank of the *Avatar*, and then punched through with the Gauss slug to tear open one whole side of the fusion reactor. Golden fire belched outward, gobbling everything into its expanding core.

Then the *Avatar* flew apart in a massive explosion the flash-blinded Connor.

"I see her," Allen said. "She's out clean."

Blinking his vision clear, fighting away the explosion's after-image, he did not bother searching for his warrior's parafoil against Tranquil's pale sky. Instead, dropping his reticle over the profile of the *Cauldron-Born*, he waited until it burned from red to the deep gold of a solid targeting lock before hitting the sixty-five ton Omni with everything at his disposal and damn the *Mad Cat*'s stunted heat curve!

Lasers stabbed scarlet destruction into the side of the enemy machine, and missiles reached out at their maximum range to pepper small explosion all along the *Cauldron-Born's* profile.

It was the Gauss rifle which paid off, however, drawing a bead over the forward-thrust head and smashing a large slug through the left "cheek" of the cockpit and out the other side. The 'Mech toppled to the right, spinning about to slam head-first into the ground and bury its pilot beneath a mountain of metal and myomer.

A wave of heat slammed through the *Mad Cat's* cockpit, flash-drying sweat on his arms and legs. His shoulders ached from the strains of constant combat—his third battle this day—though he had no time to ease their discomfort.

"All right," Connor whispered into the confines of his neuro-helmet, voice loud in his own ears, "this ends now."

Pivoting his *Mad Cat* back toward Brendon Corbett's *Daishi*, Connor found the last two Clan warriors pressing forward against Allen's *Sunder*. The commando's assault 'Mech soaked up a flurry of brightly-colored laser darts and the azure cascades of two particle projector cannon, trading wide swaths of armor for its continued survival.

Then extra-long bursts from Corbett's fifty-millimeter autocannon pounded in, ripping into the *Sunder's* right hip joint and tearing it apart.

Stumbling backward, fighting the pull of gravity, Allen managed to scar a new molten weal across the *Daishi's* chest with his PPC though his Gauss rifle missed wide. Then the frozen hip joint betrayed him and the *Sunder* crashed roughly to the ground.

Allen immediately rolled the assault Omni back to its front, trying at once to get his feet beneath him as the enemy 'Mechs closed.

Two on two. Teamwork meant a great deal less at such odds, and the Clan equipment and training would begin to tell as the fighting turned desperate. Throttling forward, Connor shrugged aside a few glancing blows from the other *Mad Cat's* weapons. His intention was to bring down the Galaxy commander. Without Corbett, the remaining enemy *Mad Cat* could not hope to stand against the two commando MechWarriors.

He walked forward to clear the Jaguar *Mad Cat* from his line of sight, toggling for all long-range weaponry as the *Daishi's* profile eased under his targeting crosshairs. The sluggish response of his heat-addled OmniMech cost him a few precious seconds, working his way into a prime firing solution. But finally the reticle burned the deep gold of a hard lock, and he eased into the salvo.

Only to have an urgent transmission from Thomas Sorenson stay his hand.

"We're in the shuttle," the corporal reported, "but it's wired with explosives! They're set to trigger off an engine startup as well as remote detonation—a dead-man's switch if I had to guess. We're working on defusing it, but you have to buy us time.

"And whatever you do, do not fire on Brendon Corbett!"

* * *

The *Dire Wolf's* sensor alarms warned Galaxy Commander Corbett that another 'Mech had a strong targeting lock on him:

The Inner Sphere commander, turning away from the ruined *Cauldron-Born* to come at his right flank.

But the *Dire Wolf's* right-side armor was still strong, so he ignored the customized *Mad Cat* long enough to put an end to the *Sunder*. Only a chance hit against his cockpit could stop him, and then it would be over so fast the Galaxy commander would hardly know it. A glorious death in the fires of battle.

Not that he believed it possible. His destiny was to lead Clan Smoke Jaguar back to dominance, and nothing would prevent that. Nothing, and no one. Let the *surat* try his best—it wouldn't save his warrior in the *Sunder* and in the end it would not save him.

The troublesome raiders would never leave Tranquil alive. He had seen to that when ordering his shuttle wired with explosives, tying a remote detonator into his own computer. Even with the destruction of his OmniMech—though certainly he would escape alive—his revenge would still be complete.

He silently dared the enemy commander to fire on the *Dire Wolf*, believing himself far more ready—far more *prepared*—to tempt the fates than his counterpart could ever be.

Then the alarms cut out as the enemy officer broke off his attack to run in at the back of Corbett's Starmate instead. Amanda Wimmer's *Mad Cat* stumbled into view, driven forward by a pair of scarlet laser beams coring into its back. Then the silver-gray blur of a Gauss slug slammed in behind them, crushing armor and titanium supports as it punched through the housing which protected the OmniMech's massive gyroscope. The *Mad Cat* stumbled to its knees then sprawled out over the ground, high-velocity metal still spitting out the near-mortal wound. A rain of missiles slammed into the stricken 'Mech, finishing the job.

His Starmate managed to bring down the emergency dampening fields, saving the corpse of her ruined machine, but it would not continue this battle.

"*Freebirth!*" he shouted, slamming a fist down on the auxiliary monitor he'd had watching Amanda's *Mad Cat*. The glass smashed inward, and a backlash of electrical fire burned his hand. He ignored the pain and the caustic scent of melting insulation which now burned in his lungs.

A large part of him wanted to turn on the enemy commander, punishing the *stravag* warrior for the loss of his Starmate. But the smoke jaguar, totem animal for his Clan, did not deter from the deathstrike once blood was scented and neither would he. Corbett centered his crosshairs over the struggling *Sunder*, bringing all weapons to bear and raining death upon the assault 'Mech.

All four lasers struck deeply into the *Sunder's* already-savaged armor, two of them combining to slice the Gauss rifle in half. Blue energy flared as the acceleration coils erupted in a wash of stored electricity, the small explosion gouging deeply into the left side as well. A hail of autocannon fire opened up angry wounds over the left leg, crushing actuators, and his missiles exploited further damage to the right hip.

A final burst of emerald darts from the *Dire Wolf's* medium pulse lasers cut through the *Sunder's* left side and into the main body where it melted the gyro.

The assault 'Mech collapsed back to the ground, its efforts to rise permanently thwarted.

Heat scoured his cockpit, fusion reactor spiking severely to meet the constant power draw for so many weapons. He backed off a step from the *Sunder*, allowing the heat to bleed away through the *Dire Wolf*'s many heat sinks. Then a single laser scored into his right side, slashing away armor from that formerly-pristine location, shoving him roughly to the left.

Cursing, swiveling his 'Mech's upper torso around, he stabbed out again with all four lasers, forcing his heat curve higher into the red. The Inner Sphere commander, back for more punishment. Just the two of them now! Two lasers carved into the *Mad Cat*'s left arm and side. The enemy 'Mech rocked under the blow but did not come close to faltering. Instead, it cut inward to circle around the *Dire Wolf*'s left flank.

Why only a single laser?

The incongruous fact hit the Galaxy commander as he forced the sluggish *Dire Wolf* into a turn to keep his weapons centered on the *Mad Cat*. A feral grin split his lips, showing the teeth behind. Opening a common channel, he allowed a bit of that satisfaction to bleed into his voice.

"Having trouble with the shuttle?" he asked, certain now that the explosives had been discovered and that they were worried about destroying his Omni. And with good reason. "You will never leave Tranquil alive. I told you that once before. It is still true."

And Brendon Corbett walked his *Dire Wolf* forward, certain now of his invulnerability as he triggered another full spread of weapons.

* * *

"We're still working on the explosives. We need a few more minutes."

Any reply to Sorenson's update was lost as Connor's full attention was demanded by Brendon Corbett's latest hard-hitting assault. The *Mad Cat* shook violently as two lasers and a pair of light autocannon stripped his 'Mech of more armor, denuding his right leg and side down to titanium skeleton and

worrying his left arm within its last half-ton of protective plating.

A glance at the wireframe schematic showed the heavy losses to his protection, promising that the Galaxy commander's next hit would penetrate somewhere to the vital systems which kept the *Mad Cat* fighting.

He allowed himself to return fire with both lasers this time but not the Gauss rifle, holding back the headhunting weapon for a slow peeling away of the *Daishi's* armor. It would take both lasers into the head of the assault Omni to manage a killing blow, and he deliberately held his fire low to prevent such an occurrence. The scarlet energy splashed over the *Daishi's* left side and leg, eating away the last of their armor but unable to penetrate deeper.

He turned in tighter, shifting his circling maneuver into a shrinking spiral.

Corbett matched him with a shuffling gait, though the heat buildup was obviously slowing the OmniMech's response. Connor's heat curve, however, had fallen back into the yellow with his restricted weapons fire and was now riding low in the band. Myomer musculature responded with greater efficiency, allowing him to approach the *Mad Cat's* top speed of eighty-five kph as he cut in again.

"Make something happen fast," he warned Sorenson. "I'm running out of room to maneuver."

The literal truth, as he ran within sixty meters of the large assault Omni.

He stabbed out with lasers again, bumping his heat upward but nowhere near a debilitating level. The energy weapons struck the *Daishi* midline and into the left leg, sloughing armor to the ground in half-melted plates.

Over his right side, Corbett could hope to take several more hard hits. If the *Daishi* reversed itself suddenly Connor would lose the angle and be pitted against fresh armor while his own damage profile looked like little more than a walking skeleton. But the *Daishi's* left side stood open to almost any shot, now. A flurry of missiles from the SRM packs riding the *Mad Cat's* shoulders could conceivably finish the Galaxy commander off, while

Except that Brendon Corbett had the dead-man's switch to his advantage, and was so obviously more concerned with tracking in on the *Mad Cat* than the risk at which he placed his own 'Mech.

"No hope!" the Jaguar commander taunted over the open channel. "You will all die here today. Your bodies will be left for the scavengers."

His next salvo did little to back up his boast. One laser only and a rapid-fire burst from the *Daishi's* fifty-millimeter autocannon scored against Connor. The depleted-uranium slugs ripped into his left leg, smashing aside the last of his armor but failing to damage the critical actuators. The laser sliced into the *Mad Cat's* left torso substructure, cutting away one of his shoulder-mounted launchers. The SRM system twisted free of the damaged mounts, smashing against the ground and spilling a load of missiles over the caldera floor. None of them detonated, though they remained a dangerous obstacle if a 'Mech decided to walk over that area again.

"We've almost got it," Sorenson promised, his voice on edge. The corporal had to realize the time pressure his lieutenant was under.

Sinclair almost hedged, delaying another exchange with Corbett. No. Time had slipped out from under them, and it was now or not at all. He would take Sorenson at his word, counting on the other man to come through just as he would any other member of the commando. Turning sharply, he raced almost directly at the *Daishi* and then cut around the Omni's left flank. Not quite at the assault 'Mech's back, but out of full line for most of Corbett's weapons.

Only two of the *Daishi's* large lasers flared out this time, one of them coring into the left leg to cripple the *Mad Cat's* upper leg actuator. He worked with the gyroscopic stabilizer to overcome the OmniMech's violent tremble, but he wouldn't be going anywhere else very fast. He dropped crosshairs over the *Daishi's* side, by eye scoping out the large rents already carved through its protective armor.

He toggled every weapon and squeezed into the trigger. "C'mon, Sorenson!"

"Got it! Drop that last Clanner!"

Connor would never be certain if he had waited for the corporal's assurance or had already committed to the barrage, and in the end it really did not matter. If he hadn't fired, the opportunity would have been wasted. The two of them had to succeed together, or not at all.

Large lasers cut into the *Daishi's* arm and left flank, both splashing through the last of the armor and pumping destructive energy into the vital equipment beneath. The shoulder joint melted beneath the focused energy, locking the arm in its awkward position. The second laser blew threw two of the three heat sinks stored in the left torso, carving a path for the Gauss slug which punched in afterward to slam full force into the ammunition bin for Corbett's LRM system. Missiles compacted and then detonated, warheads and propellant touching off in one grand explosion. Gouts of flame shot out the back as the cellular construction channeled most of the energy out special vents. The explosion eviscerated the entire left side of the Omni which staggered violently to the right, teetering on one leg. Heat blossomed in white-hot fury on the thermal imager, the combination of destroyed shielding and the loss of heat sinks.

"This is not happening."

Brendon Corbett had not closed the channel earlier, and his shock and pain were clear.

"By Kerensky's Blood, it cannot be happening!"

Then Connor's remaining short-ranged missile system rocketed out a flight of a half dozen stubby warheads.

Three of them speared through the ruin which was now the *Daishi's* left side, blasting away the last of the armor over the Omni's midline and gouging into the shielding protecting the core of the fusion reactor. No dampening field was going to override the destruction visited on the engine, and golden fire spilled out to eat away what remained of the *Daishi's* chest. Flames licked up and around the forward-thrust head, the intense heat melting armor and bursting the cockpit canopy into shards of ferroglass. Not the usual catastrophic failure, but a death drawn out over several long seconds.

"No! No! Nooooo...." The denial trailed off into a scream and then static as the *Daishi* and Galaxy commander Brendon Corbett finally died.

The Smoke Jaguar commander fully aware of his failure.

* * *

Connor clambered down from the *Mad Cat*, leaving the Omni as it belonged—as the last 'Mech standing over the caldera's battlefield.

He approached the *Daishi's* burned-out corpse with care, wary of the intense heat it radiated. Sooty black smoke rolled into Tranquil's pale sky, pushed around by the chill breeze blowing through the caldera. A beacon proclaiming the battlefield and also reminding him of the incoming Jaguar forces which would be dropping down from space soon. Still he wanted to be—*had* to be—certain.

Allen Mattila walked over from his abandoned *Sunder*. The shuttle had powered up under thrust, and now rolled up nearby so that the rest of the Damocles Commando could join Conner as he hopped back from the scorching metal which framed what was left of the cockpit. Sorenson hung back behind the MechWarriors, carrying a square of folded black cloth. Dominic and Epona looked a bit rough from their combat ejections, but well enough to walk unassisted. Epona Rhi managed a brief smile and a nod. Not any form of celebration, not after the cost Tranquil had demanded of the Inner Sphere operation, but simple recognition for a job finished and done.

"Well?" Dominic asked, frowning at the ruined *Daishi*. "Is he?"

No need to elaborate more than that. Everyone knew the question. He nodded once. "Corbett is dead. His move to resurrect the Smoke Jaguars is finished."

"It was finished when we tore the heart out of Durghan City," Sorenson said. "Knocking out the Core Tap Facility below only clinched it. According to Captain Taylor, Clan Wolf is already issuing batchalls against incoming Jaguar forces." It was news received with great relief around the small circle of tired warriors. "Corbett's dream had died. But he refused to admit it." Sorenson glanced over at the smoking wreckage. "You just planted the final stake in his heart is all."

He shook his head. "Not a stake. A sword." He glanced to his lancemates and then back to the analyst. "The Sword of

Damocles. We all helped wield it. Not that the Smoke Jaguars likely understand the reference. Their own leaders lived under the blade for so long, it was bound to fall eventually."

Sorenson smiled thinly and offered Conner the cloth he carried. "Maybe this will be enough for them, then."

The commando leader accepted the package with both hands, feeling the weight behind it. Allen nodded, scrounged a metal rod from some nearby wreckage and drove it down into the caldera's ground while Connor shook the flag open. He tied two corners around the makeshift pole, then stepped back as the breeze tugged at the ensign—the silver Cameron star against the black field. The Star League colors, left flying over the caldera battlefield.

A funeral shroud, for Clan Smoke Jaguar.

Connor Sinclair gathered his commando in by eye, leading them back toward the waiting shuttle. "The *Eclipse* is waiting," he reminded them.

"Let's go home."





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