

Trial Under Fire

Chapter 2 First Contact

By Loren L. Coleman

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 mountain-side 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 neurohelmet'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 the odds stacked against him, he could hardly blame Taylor for not wanting to risk the *Eclipse*—their only way off Tranquil—after what happened to the *Black Hammer*. *Whatever* had happened to the *Black Hammer*.

He dialed for a confident voice. "If we move fast enough, and hit hard enough, we might make the factory complex out at the peninsula's tip. Commando tactics. That was our mission, and we can still accomplish it."

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?