

Trial Under Fire

Chapter 3 Into the Fire

By 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.

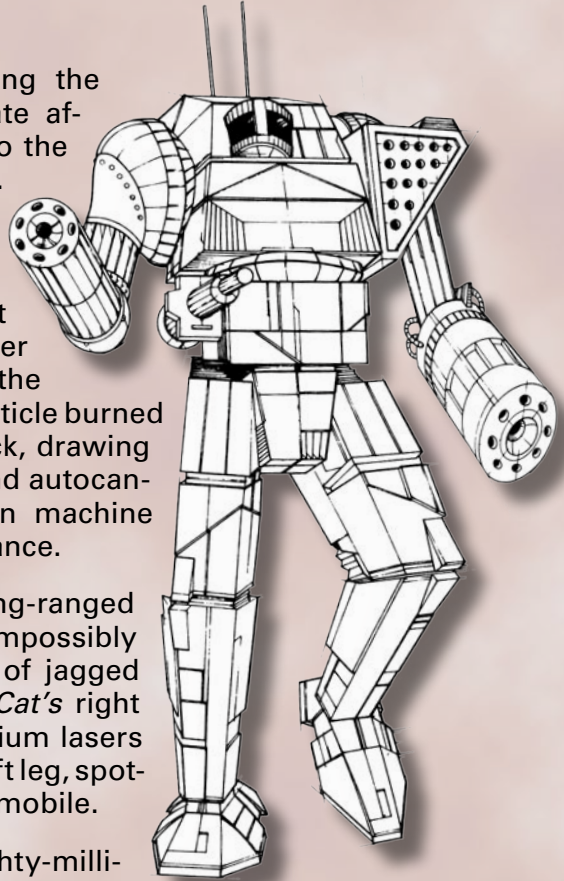
Too late.

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 lancemate'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 anytime 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?