

Trial Under Fire

Chapter 4 Method & Madness

By 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.

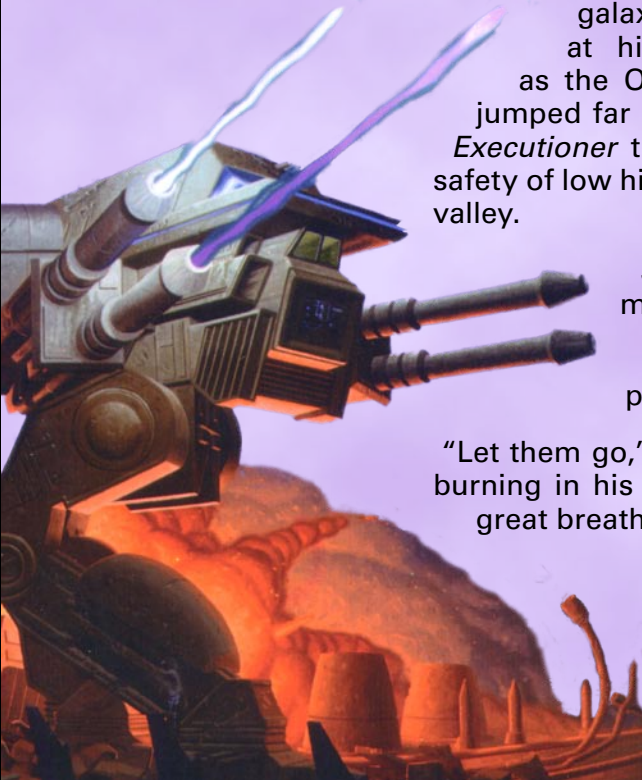
Corbett hardly blinked at how close death had visited with the near miss of his cockpit. His next salvo of lasers again sliced into the *Executioner's* left side, this time working its way through the armored sleeve of the arm to stab into the barrel of the deadly Gauss rifle.

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 Osis 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 chamber, 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 fade 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 notepad 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 re-

placed 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.