

TRIAL UNDER FIRE

Chapter 5 Complex Solutions

by Loren L. Coleman

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 ferro-glass 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 conveyer 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 conveyer 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 under-

ground 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.

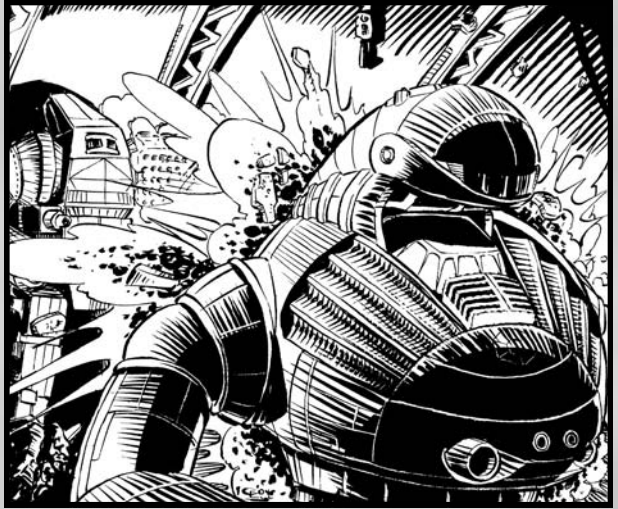
In her time on Tranquil, the new MechWarrior had salvaged and returned to service a Clan-design *Shadow Cat* similar to the one Dominic had lost, except this one had been configured for two extended-range large lasers and a six-pack short-ranged missile system.

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."

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.—