

TRIAL UNDER FIRE

Chapter 6 Sundered

by Loren L. Coleman

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

...does not matter. He requires constant resupply, chasing those freebirth through the Cascade Ranges.

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

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

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

All right, did you hear that? Here:

...ordered the DropShip kept ready...

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

How 'bout it, Lieutenant?

Tranquil, Clan Homeworlds

2 May 3060

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

He gasped for air.

Perspiration stung at the corners of his eyes.

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

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

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

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

The match-up appeared hopeless, unless the enemy closed for hard-hitting combat where he might hope to bring his left-arm

autocannon into play. The twelve-centimeter caliber weapon had a limited range, but would rip into the toughest 'Mech with ferocious results. In a series of single combats, with his lancemates holding back the flanking units, the commando might hope to blast through and escape.

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

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

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

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

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

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

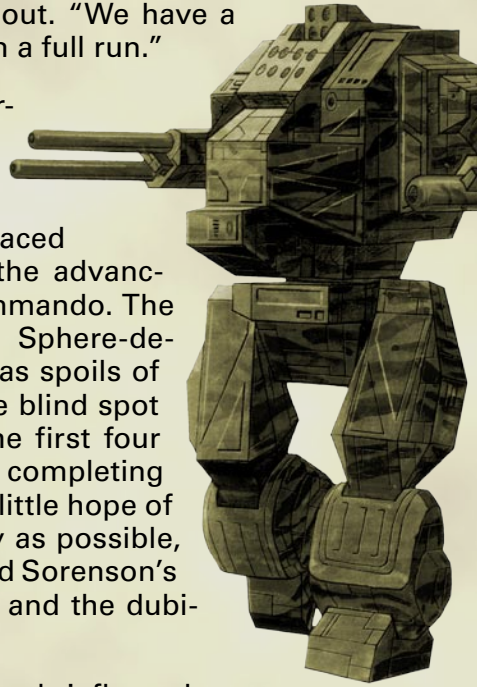
Her flanking 'Mechs each picked one of the other commando warriors, *Vulture* and *Shadow Cat* joining against Dominic's *Puma*, striking out with full salvos. From behind the nearby fortifications, the first *Mad Cat* stepped out to pin the Epona in a blistering cross-fire with the enemy *Thor*. Epona's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

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

"Burst another heat sink," Dominic said. Almost as critical as Epona's damage, the double-PPC configuration of his *Puma* pulled massive heat spikes from the reactor. However, the two of them together still managed to bring down the crippled *Mad Cat*, cutting its gimped leg out from beneath it and taking off its right arm as well.

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It jumped.

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

Caught between the *Sunder's* heavy firepower and Connor's primed twelve-centimeter autocannon, the Smoke Jaguar line fell

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

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

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

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

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

Its companion *Shadow Cat* fared little better, though it did have time for one final volley. Dual large lasers cut with ruby knives, one of them worrying Connor's short-range missile launcher into a ruined, half-melted mass and the other finishing the star commander's earlier work by cutting free his right arm at the elbow joint.

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

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

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

"Bloody hell!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But who knew what the next battle would bring.

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

—Now doesn't that figure?—

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

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

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

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

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

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

In several places he detoured through maintenance crawlspaces. The main passage smashed and impassable.

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

Dead.

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

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

A talisman?

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

A reminder.

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

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

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

