

TRIAL UNDER FIRE

Chapter 8 Stress Fractures

by Loren L. Coleman

-No blastin' way! Tell me we didn't just see that!-

-All right, if it makes you happy. But what you didn't see was the bloody DropShip we needed to get out of here, launching.-

-Why am I not surprised?-

-We'll find another way, people! But for now we're still holed up inside the canyon and we can't stay here much longer. Argue later.-

Durghan City

Tranquil, Clan Homeworlds

5 May 3060

By the time Connor Sinclair recognized what had happened to his commando, it was almost too late.

He'd left behind Allen and Dominic just north of the canyon egress to deal with a force of armored vehicles and Elementals, as well as any 'Mech chasing after them from Durghan. Meanwhile he and Epona took after a *Cauldron-Born* and a *Mad Cat* tempting fate by placing themselves between the commando and spaceport. The DropShip might be gone, but the spaceport facilities were still a vital link in Galaxy Commander Corbett's logistics network. Since it appeared they would now be taking a much longer route to the *Eclipse*, anything which weakened Corbett was of top priority.

Then Allen had split away from Dominic to rejoin when a trio of *Avatars* answered the *Mad Cat*'s alert. He chased his *Sunder* after one of the *Avatar*'s further to the north than prudent.

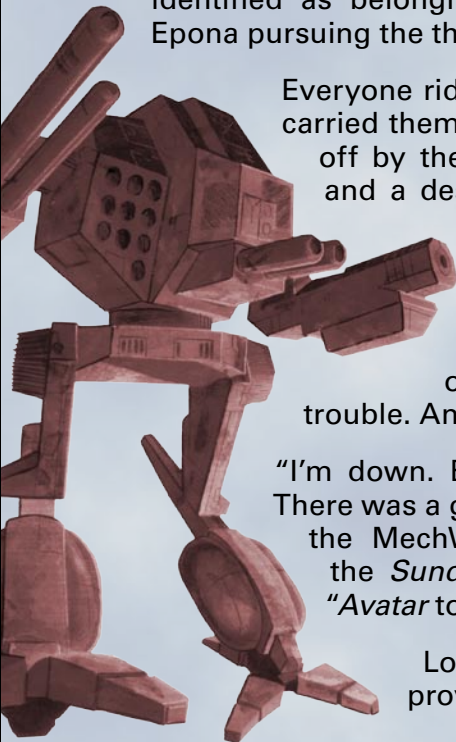
He and Epona put down the *Cauldron-Born* and another *Avatar* before splitting up. He moving after the *Mad Cat* Sorenson had identified as belonging to Star captain Dana Wimmer. Epona pursuing the third, wounded *Avatar*.

Everyone riding the adrenaline surge which had carried them through Durghan, and now thrown off by the DropShip's escape as well, anger and a desire for personal revenge overrode tactical sense as the lance broke up into four individual warriors chasing their own fight.

Realization broke cold and hard over Connor when Allen first ran into trouble. And found no one there to cover him.

"I'm down. Blake's blazing! Anyone, I'm down!" There was a grunt of pain which might have been the MechWarrior being bounced around as the *Sunder* struck hard against the ground. "*Avatar* took my leg off."

Losing their assault 'Mech could only prove disastrous. Then Epona punched



out, her *Shadow Cat* disintegrating in a fiery explosion as the fusion plant sought release. Sorenson informed him of that.

"It wasn't pretty, but she's alive. I have a vehicle splitting off to pick her up."

Breaking from his duel with Dana Wimmer's *Mad Cat*, he raced back to give Allen some cover as the *Avatar* tried to swing around behind the *Sunder* to finish it. He would never make it in time. Too far away. Epona might have had a shot, having chased her target further north. Now the *Avatar* which had brought her down moved in at Dominic who limped back into the battle after smashing the last of the Elementas.

From extreme range he cut loose with his LRMs, the missiles falling just short of the first *Avatar*. Still, they served to worry the Clan MechWarrior, turning him back into the *Sunder* before coming fully around at Allen's back.

The Jaguar warrior's elation colored his voice, even through the static of a comms intercept. "At your best!" he cried, trying to rally his comrades with the kill of the *Sunder*. "You heard the Star captain. We defend this spaceport or we die trying."

But Allen had propped his assault 'Mech up on one arm, targeting with his Gauss rifle. The silver ball of nickel-ferrous material cracked into the *Avatar's* chest, smashing aside the last of its protection and punching deep into its core to hammer at the OmniMech's sensitive gyro. Metal chunks spat out at high velocities as the critical piece of equipment tore itself apart, and the *Avatar* went down hard on its face.

Just to be safe, Allen pumped another Gauss round directly into the downed 'Mech's head.

"Wouldn't ya know it? He died trying."

Conner read the intense relief in Allen's voice. Knew the humor to be nervous energy seeking release. "Glad to hear you're still with us," he said.

"Thank you, sir. Sorry to say I'll be sitting out the rest of this battle."

A flight of five missiles gouging into his rear armor interrupted any reply Connor might make.

Alone on the field but for one *Avatar* now, Star captain Dana Wimmer press forward determinedly while she held the advan-

tage. "I will smash this upstart freebirth myself!" she vowed, never knowing her words carried into the enemy comm systems.

Connor ran a wide turn, trying to draw her back toward Dominic, but then gave that up as the remaining *Avatar* drove Domini's *Thor* back toward the canyon. From range he cut loose with missiles and lasers, using the last of the ammunition for his right-shoulder launcher. Better than half his flight struck home, though one laser missed low.

Wimmer's answering barrage gouged deeply into his arm and right leg, smashing an ankle actuator which stumbled the seventy-five ton *Mad Cat*. A deft hand on the control stick saved him from a fall, though left him open to a new attack. Even as Dominic crowed out his success at putting down the last *Avatar*, Wimmer rained another short flight of four missiles into Connor and splashed ruby darts from her pulse laser into his savaged left side. The energy pulses ate into his left-shoulder launcher, failing to detonate the missiles inside but ruining it as an effective weapon.

"Enough of this," he shouted to his cockpit.

He throttled back, limping his own *Mad Cat's* speed down until it stood still on the spaceport tarmac. With careful deliberation he drifted his targeting reticle over the enemy *Mad Cat's* outline, then speared out with both large lasers coring ruby energy into Wimmer's torso. The punch stopped her solid. Three hundred meters downrange Wimmer's *Mad Cat* stumbled to a halt. It shuddered as if from a gyro graze, but did not go down.

He slapped at his shutdown override as his heat spiked deep into the red band, then centered his lasers over her chest and fired again.

Golden-red fire blossomed at the *Mad Cat's* heart, ripping out through shoulder joints and at the turret-style waist of Wimmer's OmniMech. The raging fire touched off both ammunition bins, detonating a combined weight of half a ton of missiles. An orange fireball seemed to hang overhead for a second, and then the Omni flew into four large pieces which spun out from the central explosion.

Sorenson's voice overrode the others, the benefit of coordinating communications for the commando lance. "Well done, Lieutenant! That clears the field."

"Neg." A new voice. "It does not."

Cold. Almost devoid of any life. For a moment he couldn't place it. Absent the usual static that came with an intercepted transmission, he had thought it one of his team. Then a glance at the comms system showed it coming in on an open civilian channel reserved for lower castes. Sorenson had used the frequency as a matter of convenience, scanning the lower channels for intel. The new arrival selected for it to allow communication between the two warring sides.

Dominic picked it up first. "Oh, you've got to be kidding."

"It's him," Epona agreed, having taken over a headset in one of the mobile field bases. "Bloody cocksure."

Star colonel Ratache Osis walked a *Supernova* toward the spaceport, having arrived through the same canyon pass which the commando had used to escape Durghan City. His ninety-ton assault 'Mech put an *Annihilator* to shame, using Clan technology to field a superior war machine. Six extended-range large lasers—three in each arm. Slow but well-armored, this 'Mech was designed to destroy anything which came against it so long as the pilot could survive the heat spike.

A fact which did not seem to worry the Star colonel. "My death has been assured," he said simply, with no trace of personal concern. "At least one of yours will be too, I promise. One at time, if you have the courage, or all together. It no longer matters."

On the ground to the north, Allen's *Sunder* stirred as if it might try to raise itself back on one leg. "He wants a fight, I'll give it to him."

Dominic said nothing but simply reversed his path, sweeping back from the southwest to place himself between Ratache Osis and Connor Sinclair.

"Dominic, Allen, stand down both of you!"

Connor had switched over to the same channel as Osis, wanting the Star colonel to remain focused on his *Mad Cat* rather than one of his severely-damaged lancemates. He turned his wounded 'Mech west to face Osis' advance.

"This is my fight. You two hold your positions."

Sorenson cut in, interrupting. "Sir, you can't duel him. That *Supernova's* in pristine condition. You won't have a chance. Allen can still fire his Gauss rifle, and Dominic—"

"And no one will fire without my order," Connor cut him off sharply. He was playing a dangerous game here and could not afford distractions. He blinked away the sweat burning at the corners of his eyes.

"No one," he repeated, "without my order."

"Yessir," Allen acknowledged, a bit too easily.

Dominic at least managed to invest a bit of his usual sullen nature, saying nothing but pulling his *Thor* back to stand exactly south of Allen's downed *Sunder* and just out of the path which separated Connor from Osis.

The Star colonel bothered no more with words. Thrusting an arm forward, three lasers stabbed scarlet destruction at the commando *Mad Cat*. Two of them scored wounds across its outline, an impressive salvo from such long range. One splashed away armor from the chest, and another dug into the ruined left side though failed to damage any critical equipment.

Having lost his shoulder-mounted missile launchers and now limited to a pair of lasers only, Connor knew he couldn't hope to match Osis in raw firepower. His hastily-snapped return shot passed both ruby beams wide.

Careful of his damaged ankle actuator, he stepped his *Mad Cat* backward, trying to maintain distance on the Star colonel.

In disgrace or not, Osis apparently knew to wait for his chance at a full barrage of all six lasers. He stalked the *Supernova* forward, heedless of anything but closing with his enemy. His other arm stabbed forward, and three new beams sliced the air. Only one hit this time, laying bare the *Mad Cat's* left leg down to titanium bones. But this time Connor made Osis pay, grazing both of his own lasers over the *Supernova's* chest.

Trying to make up for his poor showing, Osis fired five lasers on his next salvo. Again only one hit as Connor struggled to keep his *Mad Cat* at long range. The heat spike cost the Star colonel, his *Supernova* slowing down as myomer muscles reacted negatively to the high heat. But once begun, the heavier barrages were hard to give up. Osis fired four lasers the next time, then five again hoping to increase his damage ratio against the already-savaged OmniMech that limped back always just on the outside of optimal range.

Conner took two more laser cuts against his left leg and arm, but easily shrugged them aside.

Now, he decided, throttling out of his reverse walk and limping forward to close with Osis. His ruby-bright lances sliced into the right side of the *Supernova*. Molten armor runneled to the ground, splashing bits of fire against the spaceport tarmac as better than a ton of armor sloughed away.

Osis thrust both arms forward as Connor stepped over the line and into optimum range, and six separate lances of scarlet energy converged on the stricken *Mad Cat*.

But the Star colonel had already been fighting a rising heat curve, myomer muscles responding sluggishly. Only half of his lasers struck at Connor, two of them working to sever his left arm and the third coring into his *Mad Cat's* right leg to claim his other ankle actuator.

The Omni staggered back under the assault, giving up two tons of armor and structural support. Connor knew that to fall was to die, and his command with him. The gyro protested, having already lost its struggle with gravity. The MechWarrior worked control sticks to regain his center of balance.

He finally managed to drag around his wounded right leg, careful of the damaged actuator, to get a leg solidly beneath him.

The *Supernova* stood still on the tarmac, smoke curling from nearly every joint in its armor as the extreme buildup of waste heat all but shut the machine down. A geyser of gray-green coolant jetted from one jagged scar in the BattleMech's torso; a heatsink overworked to the point of bursting. Connor was amazed the machine did not shutdown, or that Osis was still alive in that furnace. The man was all the more dangerous for his fury, caring nothing for himself so long as he struck at his enemy.

For Connor Sinclair, he cared everything for his team. And so would strike down his enemy in any way he could.

"Allen, Dominic," he said over the Clan common frequency, letting Osis hear the death sentence. "Commence firing."

Both lancemates had been ready. On Connor's order, Allen swung his *Sunder's* Gauss rifle into line with the heat-stricken *Supernova* and Dominic raced forward autocannon already hammering out lethal streams of heavy-caliber slugs.

Connor continued to limp at his best pace, stabbing out with his lasers again. And again.

The *Supernova* rained armor to the ground in shards and splinters and molten streams. The initial onslaught shook the assault 'Mech under a violent cascade of weapons fire. It toppled to the tarmac, though was far from dead.

Allen's second and third Gauss slug combined to tear off one arm, depriving the assault 'Mech of half its firepower. A rapid-fire burst from Dominic's autocannon chewed into the right torso and scrapped enough of the reactor's physical shielding to drive its heat scale up another large jump. On the thermal imaging scanners, the *Supernova* read white-hot.

The Star colonel was still alive in that furnace and defiant to the last. "I will not fail! I will not..."

Walking right up to the downed 'Mech, Connor set the barrel which capped his right arm directly over the *Supernova's* head. "Last time pays for all," he said, and squeezed into the trigger.

A burst of static overrode Ratache Osis' dying scream.

Connor's *Mad Cat* and Dominic's *Thor* stood over the smoking BattleMech corpse; both of them savaged, both down to a few last working weapons. Perhaps two tons of armor between them and looking one small laser hit away from joining the vanquished *Supernova*. The *Mad Cat* swayed unsteadily on its feet, destroyed actuators leaving it borderline unstable. Connor kept a careful hand on the control stick, muscles still tense from their exertion and nerves singing tight as if he expected Ratache Osis to rise again and complete the commando's destruction.

He apparently was not the only one to feel that way.

Dominic's *Thor* leaned in over the *Supernova*. "Can we be sure he's dead?"

"I don't trust him," Epona said as two field bases pulled up. The third had stopped by Allen's fallen *Sunder*. "What say we pump a few more shots into the wreckage?"

A hail of slugs ripped into the *Supernova's* corpse, chased by a tongue of flame belching out of the *Thor's* autocannon.

He opened a channel. "Dominic! Stand down. Osis is dead." There wasn't much left of the assault 'Mech's head but a charred cavity where the cockpit and various control components had been housed.

"He's dead," Sorenson echoed, "and we have bigger problems. We just picked up a new transmission, Lieutenant. Clan sideband frequency, no scrambling, repeating itself over and over. Sir, you'll want to hear this. Patching in."

A brief pause, and then a new voice filled Connor's neurohelmet. Calm and almost conversational except for the hard edge to the words.

"This is Galaxy Commander Brendon Corbett. You have caused enough trouble, freebirth. I relieved Star colonel Osis of his command when he failed to contain you in Dhurgan. He had no authority to offer you batchall, amusing as it was to hear. If you think his death bought you any reprieve, any measure of vindication in my eyes, you are sadly disillusioned."

Allen broke in over the transmission as Corbett paused for breath or simply to let the news sink in before continuing. "I don't believe this sh—"

"I do," Dominic interrupted, then quieted as the galaxy commander began talking again.

"You denied me the pleasure of hunting Osis myself. If for nothing else, I would kill you for that. I am nearly finished with this annoyance in the mountains, and then I will return for you. The bulk of the Smoke Jaguar fleet has arrived at the jump point, and I plan to have all resistance ended on Tranquil before they land.

"As for the DropShip you were chasing, it has relocated to a remote spot far from reach. You are stranded," he said with obvious satisfaction. "Cut off."

"Dead."