

TRIAL UNDER FIRE

Chapter 9 By a Thread

by Loren L. Coleman

Damocles Commando, this is Captain Taylor. I've confirmed with our JumpShip that Jaguar forces have, in fact, arrived and are burning hard for Tranquil. I'm pulling back the rescue team—they've taken heavy losses and the *Eclipse* will have to touch off soon as possible if we're to escape.

I don't see how we can make rendezvous.

I'm sorry, gentlemen.

Durghan City
Tranquil, Clan Homeworlds
6 May 3060

The destruction playing on the wall monitor inside the Mobile Field Base was all the more eerie for its lack of noise, Connor decided. The usual explosions of missiles and the crackling discharge of particle projector cannon. The arm-mounted guncam swung around at the pilot's needs for his weapons, offering brief glimpses of the hard-fought battle and at times shaking violently as the 'Mech took another salvo.

A fireball rose up to block the lens for a moment, an *Owens* losing containment on its fusion reactor.

"No ejection," Epona noted, her voice flat of its usual accent. Deadpan.

The view cleared as the filming BattleMech topped a small rise and hammered twin lines of ruby destruction into the flank of an enemy *Mad Cat*. Armor sloughed away, creating a weakened area over the right side. The Gauss rifle to which the guncam was mounted discharged a silvery blur that punched into and through the side, smashing reactor shielding and gyro and the missile launcher's ammunition bin. As the Omni exploded, red flames twisting around gouts of golden fire, the lasers spoke again to slice into and through the cockpit.

The scene swung away as the BattleMech turned, already seeking a new target.

"What kind of 'Mech is that?" Dominic asked, whispering. Even so his voice sounded unnaturally loud in the back of vehicle where the full commando had gathered.

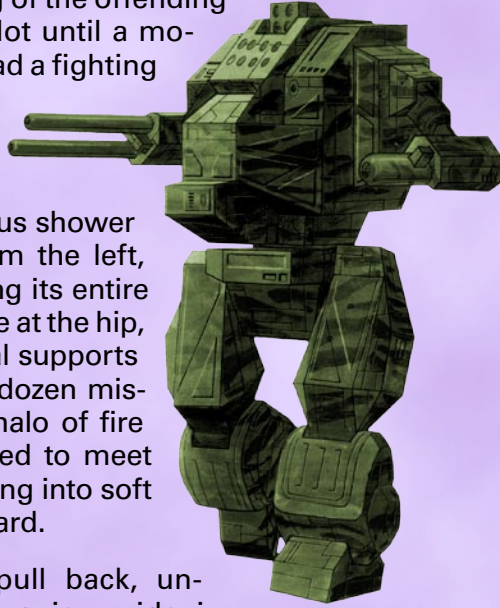
Knowing assault 'Mechs better than anyone else present, Allen fielded the question. "That's a *Gladiator*. A Clan OmniMech we must have captured. Ninety-five tons and mounting jump jets. That one is rigged for its primary configuration; two large lasers and Gauss rifle."

Sorenson nodded his agreement. "I thought you should all see this. The *Eclipse* routed us the guncam footage."

Despite the spectacular kill of the *Mad Cat*, one of Brendon Corbett's Starmates, the entire battle was shaping up into a stun-

ning defeat for the Inner Sphere company. Another light 'Mech, this one a *Strider*, was next to fall. The guncam caught a giant foot swinging in to stomp through its head, crushing cockpit and warrior inside. Nothing more than the leg of the offending 'Mech was captured, however. Not until a moment later, when the *Gladiator* led a fighting retreat and managed to film the death of a *Sunder*.

The assault 'Mech crossed the *Gladiator's* path when a furious shower of emerald darts stabbed in from the left, pulse laser fire carving deep along its entire side. A Gauss slug slammed home at the hip, bending the leg back as structural supports broke under the impact. Then a dozen missiles wreathed the *Sunder* in a halo of fire and shrapnel as the 'Mech rushed to meet the ground, its left shoulder digging into soft earth as the Omni sprawled forward.



The *Gladiator* continued to pull back, unaware or unable to help his companion, widening the angle and showing the approaching *Daishi*. The hundred-ton Clan OmniMech continued to rain devastating fire into the downed *Sunder*, beating it past its ability to rise again. Past the recovery of useful salvage and any hope of the warrior surviving. With casual cruelty the *Daishi* stepped onto the chest of the *Sunder*, crushing it inward as the 'Mech continued on its way.

The image froze, showing the *Daishi* at a full front picture.

Sorenson stabbed a finger toward the monitor. "That is the face of our final enemy. Galaxy Commander Brendon Corbett. He accounted for three kills in that battle, and I mean literally."

Connor rose from his chair, the tiny table too cramped with seating all four commando warriors and Sorenson to feel comfortable. He studied the *Daishi*, what the Clans called a *Dire Wolf*. Where an *Annihilator* had appeared a hulking menace and the *Supernova* a brute-force killer, this 'Mech somehow was worse. Its design spoke of carefully-crafted lethality; a compact and well-armored body on massive legs, with thick arms mounting an incredible array of weaponry. And, more important, this was an OmniMech, able to change its weapons to meet each new challenge.

Connor switched the monitor back to a simply geographic overview. Turning to one side, he stared at the ensign he'd salvaged

from the *Black Hammer*. Sorenson had hung it on the wall of the briefing area, a reminder to everyone.

"If we're going to see the *Eclipse*," he said, "we'll need to fight our way through. And fast. The Jaguar reinforcements will drop onto Tranquil soon, and we had better be gone."

The corporal nodded. "I guarantee the *Eclipse* will be," he said. "On the face of it, in fact, it would seem nearly impossible. Too many mountains in between us and them. If we have any hope, it's in this region." Leaning forward to tap on the monitor, Sorenson outlined a partially-developed stretch bordering the southern mountain stretch. "Picket stations. There is also some mention of an underground power development complex. Remote stations means supply runs, and supply runs means transport."

"A long shot," Dominic said.

To that, Connor only nodded. No candy-coating this one. "We move forward," he said, "hitting fast and hard. We won't be worrying about leveling everything in our path. We take what we need, what we can, and keep going."

Epona leaned forward, face tight. "What about Keith Andrew?" But Sorenson's uneasy glance answered her question, and she sat back slowly staring at her commander.

He nodded. "Keith didn't make it," he told them all, making it official. "Sorenson picked up the Clan report. They tracked his missile launches and fell on him hard. He didn't survive." A pause as he swallowed, hard. "Those missiles he delivered for us came at a high price." Everyone glanced away for a few seconds of silence.

"This is it," he said, giving them enough time to offer silent farewells to Keith but not about to allow them long trips into self-doubt. "Our last run—all or nothing." He knew his people were tired, without a lot more to give. But they would have to find it in themselves somewhere to continue. To slow down now meant abandonment on Tranquil and death at the hands of the Smoke Jaguars. He stepped over to allow the Star League flag to back-drop him. The last time he had given a briefing in the company of these colors, the world had fallen apart not long after. This time he hoped for a better result.

"Anyone feel like quitting?" he asked softly. No one raised a hand, and four sets of eyes blazed back with a determined intensity.

Connor smiled grimly. "I didn't think so."

Stand by for latest communications intercept:

...I do not want to hear excuses! I want those *stravag* freebirth exterminated! Do you hear me, Star Colonel Trace Kotare? Or you would rather join Ratache Osis in obscurity, *quineg*?

Neg, Galaxy commander! *Neg*! It will be done...

I'll say one thing for Corbett. He can motivate his warriors. Now it's our turn. The retreating rescue company is winning the race. Captain Taylor reports that survivors are already staggering in by singles and pairs.

—Any way they can walk a little slower?—

Taylor won't leave without giving us every chance. But those chances are slipping by fast. I won't deny that we need a bit of luck. Here's hoping we can make some.

With supplies low on long-ranged missiles, Connor Sinclair had reconfigured his *Mad Cat* for a pair of particle projector cannon in the arms and Streak SRM launchers riding over each shoulder. The Omni ran hotter than usual, but there was no denying the PPCs packed a harder punch than lasers.

Now the blue-white lightning crackled out in twin whips, one drawing a molten-tinged weal across the retreating *Orion's* undamaged leg while his second cut away the left arm which housed the other 'Mech's LRM launcher.

Epona's *Avatar* ignored the *Vulture* which accompanied the *Orion* in retreat, allowing it to limp away as she turned her weapons against Connor's target. Her autocannon's fragmenting rounds sanded away armor. Then she punched two medium pulse lasers into the *Orion's* head, bringing it down for good. The seventy-five ton 'Mech slowly crashed to the ground, almost in the shadow of a burning Striker vehicle that roiled thick greasy smoke into a pale sky.

The *Vulture* speared back a single ruby beam which missed wide of the *Mad Cat*, and then limped at its best speed for the protection of a rocky outcropping which extended from the hills to the south.

Setting his crosshairs over the *Vulture's* outline, Connor held off firing as he gave his *Mad Cat* a few extra precious seconds to dissipate heat. He swallowed dryly, the cockpit's oven-like atmosphere wrenching the moisture from him, and surveyed the battlefield.

A few hundred meters back, Allen's *Sunder* and Dominic's *Thor* circled around a limping *Annihilator*—the hundred ton 'Mech already minus one arm and one autocannon on the remaining limb ruined past the point of use. That fight wouldn't last long enough for him to worry for his MechWarriors.

In the deeper backfield two field bases worked to salvage what they could from the supply base the commando had captured. Sorenson's vehicle had rolled forward to stay with the forward warrior, should they need any emergency field repair.

Wary of separating his team by too much, still Connor followed Epona in chasing the *Vulture*. Sorenson kept pace.

And on the next exchange he followed up Epona's salvo, a PPC and flight of missiles scoring through the gaps she tore into the *Vulture's* rear armor. The energy lance blew into and threw one of

the *Vulture's* ammunition bins, rupturing the CASE storage system and detonating its supply of missiles. The *Vulture* fell, its right side blowing into shrapnel and charred myomer. At the same moment, one of Allen's Gauss slugs crushed the gyro on the *Annihilator* while Dominic cut off one leg just above the knee. The assault 'Mech fell, no hope of getting back up but certainly salvageable.

Then Sorenson rode in on the commando's common channel, excitement coloring his voice. "Check your targeting computers. We have a shuttle sitting on a landing pad. That's our ride back to the *Eclipse*."

Rounding the same outcropping which the *Vulture* had been making for, he and Epona stepped into the head of a wide, dead-end valley. The computer painted new threat icons onto his heads-up display, but at their range he worried less about them than for the shuttle displayed on one auxiliary screen. Nowhere near the size to transport BattleMechs, still it could ferry the warriors back to the *Eclipse*. Connor would trade four 'Mechs and the field bases for his warriors' safety.

The Smoke Jaguars, however, also knew the importance of the shuttle. As Dominic and Allen hurried up from the backfield, static-laced voices argued over the comms system.

"Enemy sighted! Get that shuttle airborne!"

Star Colonel Trace Kotare—Connor recognized his voice from earlier transmission intercepts. Two *Annihilators* and a double-handful of Elementals moved to screen the shuttle's launch pad.

Trying to draw fire, Connor decided. He ignored them for now, instead settling his targeting reticle over the outline of an *Annihilator* and stabbing out with his particle projector cannon. The lead *Annihilator* rocked back as one of Connor's energy whips flayed away a ton of armor from over its heart.

"Star colonel, the Commander's shuttle has yet to be refueled. We cannot—"

"Fly it on vapor, then," Kotare interrupted, raging, "but get it out of here! Now!"

The Elementals were closing fast, but then Allen and Dominic were clear of the rocky hills and weapons-free.

"No!" Dominic's frustration colored his words, even as the *Thor's* laser sliced an Elemental in half. Epona's autocannon hammered

another into a mangle of metal and shredded flesh. "We can't let the shuttle get away."

"Forward in-line," Connor ordered, drawing a bead against the *Annihilator* again. "Allen, firing with me. Epona and Dominic, best targets available." Which would set them after the Elementals until closing with the pair of enemy assault 'Mechs. "Advance!"

The commando lance all stepped forward at once, weapons blazing as they reached out with their destructive power.

Between Allen and himself, three PPCs speared out azure lances to flail energy tendrils at the lead *Annihilator*. Two of them cut deep into left arm and leg, drawing angry wounds across the behemoth's armored skin. Allen's *Sunder* added a Gauss slug which smashed into the right shoulder, and then almost as an afterthought rained a half dozen missiles down onto the hapless machine.

Though not near enough to put the assault 'Mech down for good, the Clan pilot could not stand up under such a barrage. The rough treatment and loss of better than three tons of armor unbalanced the *Annihilator* which stumbled to its knees and then collapsed onto its left side, grinding more armor off its arm as it plowed into the ground.

The second *Annihilator* chose the *Sunder* as the more deadly enemy, and scoured at it with three of its four assault autocannon. The eighty-millimeter slugs ripped into armor across the chest and right leg, chipping away at its protection. One burst found and exploited a flaw in the *Sunder's* protection, punching depleted-uranium slugs into its gyro. The *Sunder* trembled violently, took an unsteady step, but held itself upright to continue the coordinated advance.

The commando continued to walk forward in a line-abreast formation. Connor noted the death of three more Elementals as Epona this time brought her twin pulse lasers into the fight, claiming two of the small armored troops while Dominic's laser found another. In this battle, his team held the advantage. Despite the damage visited upon them earlier when taking the supply depot, they still mounted a blistering barrage capable of bringing down the Clan forces. He knew he controlled almost every important aspect of this fight but the most important.

The shuttle.

If he diverted enough of his firepower to try and ground the shuttle, he ran the risk of destroying it or at least crippling it past use. That also left his people open to a savage counterattack by the *Annihilators*.

He might try placing a well-aimed salvo into the pad's control building, though likely that would do little but convince the shuttle pilot to make a rapid retreat. So it would only be the *threat* of destruction which could prevent the shuttle from taking off. That meant a display of martial ability by quickly bringing down the *Annihilators*.

Not fast enough.

On the next exchange of weapons fire, Allen's *Sunder* went down under the concentrated autocannon fire of both *Annihilators*. The downed 'Mech had fired from a prone position rather than fight its way to its feet at once. Allen managed to score against the prone 'Mech with his Gauss rifle again, crushing one of its legs beyond use, but then the violent assault shoved him off balance. Unable to rely on a fully-capable gyro, the *Sunder* lost its fight with gravity and slammed into the ground on its right side.

Connor hoped Allen might fight the machine upright again, but couldn't count on it. "Redirect. Finish off that *Annihilator*!"

His own PPCs lanced out their manmade lightning, twin arcs digging into the side of the assault 'Mech. A bloom of heat on thermal imaging promised he had clipped the reactor's shielding, but the *Annihilator* ran too cool for the heat spike to cause much more than mild discomfort.

Epona and Dominic fared better. Though out of range for its twelve-centimeter autocannon, Dominic's *Thor* managed to carve its large laser into the wound his PPCs had made, cutting away more shielding and then coring into one of the *Annihilator's* ammunition storage bins. A gout of fire and debris geysered into the air as the explosion gutted one side of the assault 'Mech and then was channeled out the back and upward by special cellular construction. The twin lasers of Epona's *Avatar* then struck into the *Annihilator's* chest, melting armor into a molten pool and coring into more shielding. The warrior managed to bring his dampening fields down to prevent an explosion of the fusion reactor, but the assault 'Mech was out of the battle.

The remaining *Annihilator* set itself between the shuttle and advancing commando. "Shuttle Edo, you are cleared," Kotare said.

"Copy, but we cannot make it far. Just to the next pad."

The intercepted comms told Connor his team was too late. Not even close enough to risk a chancy shot at wounding the shuttle and preventing it from taking off. There was nothing they could do as the craft lifted into the air and set off northeast, toward snow-capped peaks of the nearby mountain range.

"There it goes." Dominic sounded physically wounded.

But not far. The shuttle pilot had said 'only to the next pad.' Connor still hoped to find it, and use it to get his warriors back to the *Eclipse*. But first there was a battle to be won.

Redirecting his commando's fire at the *Annihilator* had allowed the Elementals to close. Now the remaining five leapt for Allen's *Sunder*, alighting on it like scavengers after a corpse. Their suit claws ripped open armor enough for the small lasers they carried to pump energy into vital equipment. Two of them also launched missiles from the shoulder pack they wore, slamming them into the *Sunder's* head.

The assault Omni collapsed again, its struggle to rise undercut by the swarm attack.

"Epona, clear those Elementals off Allen. Dominic, with me." The line broke apart as Epona held her *Avatar* back and the *Mad Cat* and *Thor* raced forward.

Connor edged out in front, hoping to draw the Star colonel's fire. Trace Kotare bit at the lure, hammering at the onrushing OmniMech with all autocannon. Two parallel lines of destruction were stitched across Connor's chest, peeling away the last of his armor protection but finding no critical components. The other two hammered into his 'Mech's right arm, blasting away the final fragments of protection and chewing through the titanium substructure.

One PPC smashed to the ground, robbing him of a major weapon.

Shaken against his restraining harness, he kept a firm hand against his control stick as he aided the gyro in keeping the seventy-ton Omni's balance.

Still, the Star colonel had chosen poorly, looking at the approaching Omnis only in terms of weight-class rather than configuration. From range, yes, the *Mad Cat* was the more deadly foe and could hold up longer under sustained fire. But close up,

nothing on the field could match Dominic's twelve-centimeter assault-class autocannon.

The *Thor* raced around the *Mad Cat's* flank, left arm raised and sighting in against the *Annihilator's* profile. Too late Kotare realized his mistake. He tried to swing his quartet of autocannon around to stave off the assault. Then a rapid-fire burst tore into the *Annihilator's* left side, caving it inward under a storm of depleted-uranium slugs that smashed aside armor and skeleton and struck sparks against the autocannon ammo stored there. The missiles did not detonate, though they remained vulnerable.

A flight of SRM's from Connor's *Mad Cat* failed to find the breach, though two exploded against the head of the *Annihilator*. His remaining PPC scarred the assault 'Mech's left leg, sloughing away a ton of armor protection.

He imagined the pounding Kotare must have taken in his cockpit. But Trace Kotare held his 'Mech to its feet through force of will and an impressive touch on his controls. "No! I refuse to admit defeat!" The Star colonel obviously spoke for his own benefit, with no starmates left on the field. "Not at the hands of Inner Sphere *surats*."

The star colonel would not make the same mistake again. Four autocannon spat out lethal streams to hammer at the *Thor*, two with regular armor-piercing rounds and two with fragmenting cluster ammunition. Dominic had come through this battle in fairly good shape so far, but still his *Thor's* armor protection was nowhere near its best. The depleted uranium slugs smashed aside the last of his protection over both legs, exposing the skeleton framework and critical components to the devastating hail of shrapnel which followed. High-velocity fragments cut into actuators and caused one hip joint to bind. The *Thor* shuddered, stumbled and almost kept upright. But the damage to the legs was too much, even with Dominic fighting to compensate. The Omni toppled over backward, slamming down against the ground with its left leg twisted beneath it. The left foot broke off at the ankle, stressed past the point of forgiveness.

Then it was Connor's turn.

The *Mad Cat's* remaining PPC whipped destructive energy across the *Annihilator's* chest, opening up new rents in Kotare's protection. Then four SRM launchers speared out with full flights, thundering two dozen of the hard-hitting missiles into the *Annihilator's* profile. Two more found the head, gouging at the ar-

mor and punishing Kotare by shaking the head violently. Seven of them grouped into the left leg, smashing aside the last of its armor and ruining two actuators. The rest scattered widely across the chest of the BattleMech, at least half a dozen finding gaps in the protective armored skin to explode against the titanium skeleton, engine shielding, and the luckless missile bin which Dominic had exposed earlier.

Tongues of flame licked out of several rents as engine shielding was lost. Then the missiles began to cook off. First singly, and then in pairs, before the entire collection finally gave way in one thunderous detonation.

"...can not...believe..." Kotare's words were lost in bursts of static and the thunderclap detonation which destroyed the *Annihilator*.

"Let him refuse to believe," Sorenson said in the silence which followed. "Doesn't make him any less dead."

The field base vehicles had all gathered at the valley's head. Epona was assisting Allen in standing the *Sunder* back up, readying him for Sorenson's technicians. Dominic wasn't going anywhere until his foot was reattached. The battle was over, but not the fight.

"One hour for repairs and refits as possible," he ordered. "Pull it together commando. We have a shuttle to track down!"

News from the *Eclipse*:

...Damocles Commando, this is Captain Taylor. Brendon Corbett caught the last two 'Mechs we've been waiting on. Butchered them. We're safe enough for now—no Mech is about to charge a DropShip—but time is running out.

On the chance you can snag that shuttle or perform a miracle and get over the mountains in time, I'll hold on to the last possible moment. But whether you're here or not we'll clear Tranquil before the incoming Smoke Jaguars get in our way. I'm sorry, but that's the way it has to be. If it comes to that, dig a deep hole and hide yourselves in it. I'm sure we'll be back for you...

—I'll dig him a hole. Dig it and throw his...—

Let's not make it any harder than it already is, all right Dominic?

Allen Mattila's initial comment had pretty much summed it up for the others. "I always wondered what Hell looked like."

"All we're missing is Corbett standing nearby waving a pitchfork," Dominic agreed.

It was a scene out of nightmare. One they had stumbled upon not far from the shuttle pad, following a service road into a deep cleft.

A grand cavern, crusted over with soot. Lava pooled and bubbled inside craters and flowed through in one large river of orange-yellow molten rock. The Smoke Jaguar's geothermal energy stations had been built over the flow—four of them, rising up toward the cavern ceiling like massive columns to hold the rock overhead. BattleMech-scale catwalks bridged the stations, anchored to the various platforms and columns or driving supports down into areas of rock not endangered by the lava. A reddish-orange cast colored everything. The rock walls and ceiling. The facility and catwalks.

The BattleMechs.

The battle had been brief and violent, much in keeping with the character of the Core Tap Facility. A trio of *Sunders* supported by Elementals attacked the commando as they attempted to move through the facility, the team seeking an elevator or ramp that would return them to the surface and hopefully into the caldera of—what they had thought would be—the extinct volcano.

The battle ran in favor of the Inner Sphere at once when Connor rammed his *Mad Cat* into one *Sunder*, knocking it backward from the catwalk and into the lava flow. The assault Omni attempted to rise, struggling for the safety of an island of rock above the flow. It didn't make it.

Meanwhile Epona's *Avatar* dealt mercilessly with the Elementals, her array of medium-scale weaponry perfect for taking out two to three at a time.

Now Dominic's *Annihilator* and Allen's *Sunder* worked together to put the finish to the last enemy 'Mech. The *Annihilator* tore away armor from an enemy *Sunder*, exposing its internal components to Allen's weapons. When the gyro and engine shielding went at once, the Jaguar warrior punched out barely ahead of the explosion which ripped his Omni to scrap.

There was a quick burst of static in Connor's ear as the computer intercepted the Clan pilot's call of, "Ejected!"

"And right into the lava," Sorenson noted. "He's not coming back."

"Bloody lava lake." Epona limped her *Avatar* toward the final platform where the Mobile Field Base vehicles waited near a titanic elevator lift. "I'm looking forward to the snow and ice again after that sauna."

The vehicles were already extending gantries and deploying the technician crews. "You'll have to wait for that, Epona." A brief pause. "And you're not likely to get the cool reception you think."

Connor sensed Sorenson's mixture of excitement and concern which rode behind his hesitation. "What do you have for us, Thomas?"

In space-surveillance shots taken of the region before the loss of the *Black Hammer*, the crater of the supposedly-extinct volcano had looked to hold a shuttle landing pad. The commando had gambled on finding a way through the facility to the caldera above, hoping to find Corbett's shuttle which had escaped them before.

"I sent some men topside for a quick look, so we wouldn't be coming up blind." He spoke to an aide, his voice muted but still transmitting. "Load the shot."

On an auxiliary screen, the video still-image of a shuttle rested on a pad. The steep rims of the massive caldera could be seen rising behind it.

"Oh yeah!" Allen said. "We got a ride."

"Have you informed the *Eclipse*?" he asked, sensing that might be the reason behind the hesitation in Sorenson's voice. The shuttle did them no good if Taylor had moved the DropShip beyond reach.

The corproal's voice turned deadly serious. "The *Eclipse* lifted as soon as I told Captain Taylor about the shuttle. He'll meet us in low orbit if we manage to pull this off."

Epona was first with the question. "Pull what off, exactly?"

The screen changed to display a new image. A *Daishi*, caught in midstride with weapons blazing as it stepped on a fallen enemy. He recognized the shot from the guncam footage the commando

had watched earlier, of Corbett's victory over the rescue team from the *Eclipse*. A sinking sensation hollowed out his stomach.

"He's here," Sorenson said with heavy voice, validating his fear. "Up in the caldera. We picked up an open broadcast set on a repeating transmission. Relaying now."

"This is Galaxy Commander Brendon Corbett of Clan Smoke Jaguar." His voice was cold, yet still managed to deliver a feeling of self-importance. If the message was not so hostile, Connor might have called it pomp. "I and my warriors await you in the caldera. It shall be our Circle of Equals. Though you hardly rate the honor, I am left with no further time to deal with *freebirth* vermin. My Clan arrives, and you may not be left alive to stain the soil with your presence. Claim the shuttle if you can, but I promise that I shall deal with you as I have all others who thought to stand against me and the rebirth of the Smoke Jaguars.

"Stand and fight or be hunted like the *surats* you are, but you will not survive this day."