

TRIAL UNDER FIRE

Chapter 10 Circle of Equals

by Loren L. Coleman

We'll come out of the elevator here, at this north-west corner just behind the shuttle pad. That might buy as a moment to organize, but we can't hang back too long. Given the usual Clanner conceit, Corbett and his warriors will likely wait for us in the center of the caldera.

We need to move the fight away from the shuttle—if it's damaged, we're stuck on Tranquil.

Over to you, Lieutenant:

...No mistake, this is a tough one. Galaxy commander Corbett is commanding an elite team fitted with the best equipment the Jaguars possess. Our one lucky break is that he lost one of his warriors against the rescue company, so he's down to four 'Mechs instead of the usual Clan Star of five. He's dangling the shuttle in front of us for bait. He knows we need it. And we'll have to go through him to get it.

Who isn't ready?

Durghan City

Tranquil, Clan Homeworlds

6 May 3060

First off the elevator, his *Sunder's* superior armor ready to shield the rest of the commando, Allen Mattila picked up the first readings. "Got them. Right out in the middle and waiting for us."

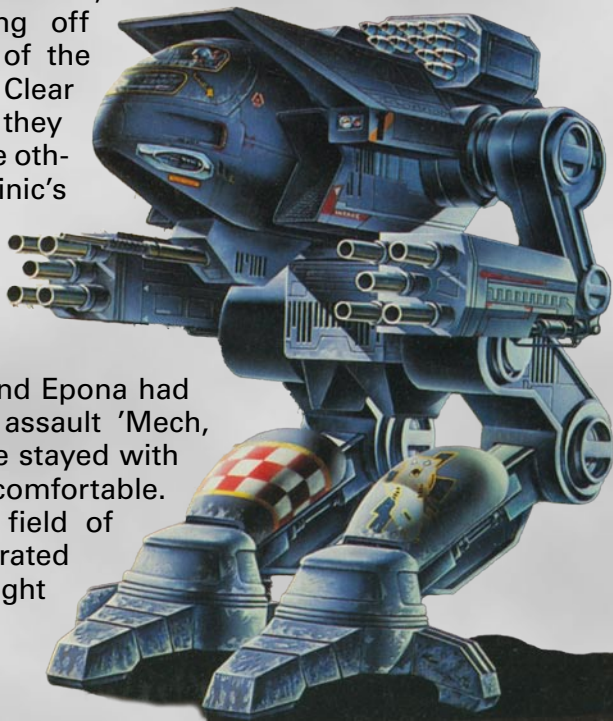
The shuttle screened visual sighting, but scanners fed the information to Connor's HUD fast enough. A *Daishi*, flanked by a *Mad Cat*, *Cauldron-Born* and one of the lethal *Supernovas*. Three hundred thirty tons of war machines commanded by Smoke Jaguar elite. They stood a silent vigil in the center of the caldera, spaced far enough apart to give each other plenty of room to maneuver as needed.

He swallowed dryly against a metallic taste. Dialed for his most confident voice. "By pairs," he ordered, "around the shuttle before the Jaguars come through it to get at us."

Already Thomas Sorenson was leading the field base crews forward to take and inspect the shuttle. The vehicles would be abandoned here.

There would be no time for battlefield repairs anyway.

Throttling up into a fast walk, he and Epona splitting off around the right side of the shuttle and landing pad. Clear of the stubby wing, they edged up into a run. The other side of the pad, Dominic's *Thor* followed in the shadow of the *Sunder*. Dominic had chosen to go back to the OmniMech vice keep the *Annihilator*. Allen and Epona had considered taking the assault 'Mech, but in the end everyone stayed with what they were most comfortable. As they ran onto the field of battle, the 'Mechs separated until each one ran straight for an enemy.



"No mercy!" Corbett ordered, transmitting on an open frequency so that his enemy could hear. "Crush them!"

"Aff, Galaxy commander," someone answered.

The first exchange of weapons fire lit the caldera in a wash of gem-colored light and the sparks of autocannon tracers. A few PPCs added to the energy display, snaking blue-white tracks across the open ground to runnel armor to the ground in impotent splatters. Missiles arced overhead on gray contrails, falling in a lethal rain. Epona had squared off against the *Cauldron-Born* while Allen chose to match his *Sunder* against the *Supernova*. Dominic challenged the enemy *Mad Cat*, while Connor traded weapons fire with Corbett himself.

The *Daishi* was configured for dueling, sporting four large lasers, a pair of light autocannon and a medium-weight LRM rack. Starting in the median range for his weapons, Corbett hit with better than half of his offensive power. Connor's *Mad Cat* bled armor from its chest and arms, and the gyro swung out of balance under the savage onslaught.

Fighting his controls, trying to force the crosshairs to remain centered over the assault Omni, Connor brought the *Mad Cat* back under control and then triggered off his response.

With any luck, he managed to surprise the Galaxy commander. Sorenson's techs had managed to customize the *Mad Cat*, giving Connor the best weapons of two different configurations. His right arm held a pair of extended-range large lasers, while his left the deadly punching power of a Gauss rifle. Streak SRMs rode over each shoulder, sharing a single load of ammunition. It gave him an optimal heat curve, able to hit at range or trade one laser up close for his missiles without risking an overheating condition.

Now both lasers speared into the *Daishi's* left side, carving away armor and dropping large sections of protective plating to the ground. His Gauss rifle slammed a nickel-ferrous slug into the OmniMech's gut. A mist of gray-green fluid geysered out as the impact cracked through a flaw and ruptured the *Daishi's* center-line heat sink. It would make Corbett's furious assault that much more costly in terms of heat buildup.

He smiled grimly as he watched the *Daishi's* thermal image blossom a red flower at the heart of a yellow outline.

"Draw in," he ordered, lining up for his next shots.

On his flanks, the warriors of his commando angled in to bring the lance slowly back together. They held to their own targets, however, keeping to the single combat which Clan warriors preferred above all else. Both sides were hitting—and being hit—hard.

Another furious exchange, and several 'Mechs stumbled but none fell. There would be no obvious mistakes made today. Corbett's warriors were the elite product of breeding cycles and a lifetime of fighting their way to the top. Connor's people had learned the ropes on Huntress and Tranquil, fighting for their lives, but the Damocles Commando still held one advantage, which he played now to devastating effect.

They worked together, as a team.

"Now!" he shouted, the adrenaline giving extra strength to his voice.

On the far left, Dominic turned and ran a sharp angle in against Allen's opponent, the *Supernova*. Epona tried that on the far right, though ended up cut off by the *Cauldron-Born*. Connor simply throttled back, twisted his *Mad Cat* at the waist, and dropped crosshairs over the *Supernova*.

Though Epona was forced to stay engaged against her previous opponent, the firepower of three OmniMechs managed to converge on the *Supernova*. With its ability to provide overwhelming firepower, Connor had judged it the 'Mech likely to cripple one of his warriors early on in the fight. He wanted it destroyed.

He was granted his wish.

Dominic's assault-class autocannon tore through the already-damaged right arm, raking fire into two of the large lasers and cutting the *Supernova's* effectiveness down to sixty-odd percent. The *Thor's* large laser combined with one of Connor's to splash away armor from over the enemy 'Mech's chest, while his follow-up Gauss slug delivered a hard blow to its left leg stripping it of protection.

Allen's *Sunder* hammered home a Gauss slug right behind Connor's, the impact wrenching the leg away at the hip joint. The *Sunder's* PPC had aimed arrow-straight for the *Supernova's* head, but the loss of the leg twisted it about so that instead the energy cannon finished cutting away the damaged right arm instead.

Minus a leg, the *Supernova* had no hope of remaining on its feet after so savage an assault. It fell in a near-graceful pirouette, slamming into the rocky ground with enough force to shake the earth.

"First blood," Allen crowed over the same open frequency Corbett had used earlier.

The Galaxy commander's reply was soft and venomous. "You shall pay for that."

The Clan force reacted instantly to the Inner Sphere tactics of concentrated fire. All weapons shifted toward the center of the commando line, spearing Connor Sinclair's *Mad Cat*.

Sensor alarms rang the shrill warnings of multiple target locks. He tried to throttle into reverse, spoiling their aim, knowing all the while he would be too late. His muscles tensed into the impending assault.

Then a shadow passed over his cockpit canopy, turning solid as Dominic's *Thor* fell back to earth on jets of plasma to place itself between the Smoke Jaguars and the commando leader.

Thrusting the *Thor*'s left arm directly at the face of the onrushing *Daishi*, Dominic dared the Galaxy commander to meet his most impressive weapon at point-blank range. Corbett cut away on his attack run, twisting the top half of his Omni to track on the new threat. Their own commander at risk, Corbett's two remaining Starmates also abandoned their line on the *Mad Cat* and instead tracked on the *Thor*.

One long peal from his twelve-centimeter autocannon was all Dominic had time for. The slugs hammered into the *Daishi*, ripping a jagged furrow into the edge of the assault 'Mech's left arm.

Then a flurry of gem-colored lasers beams slammed into the *Thor*, followed quickly by a wave of missiles and two Gauss slugs.

The wreath of fire and debris which shrouded the *Thor* was so thick Connor almost missed the canopy blowing away and the quick glimpse of a command chair rocketing up into the air. He opened a channel on the commando's private frequency.

"That's it for Dominic. Sorenson, he'll be gliding back your way. Watch for him."

Still, the sacrifice would not be in vain. Besides protecting his commander, Dominic had forced the Smoke Jaguar's to split their line. Corbett had acted in his own best defense first, not thinking about his command. Again, the difference in fighting on the same side, and fighting *together*. Now the *Cauldron-Born* was isolated on the right side of the battlefield.

Rather than try to challenge Connor and cover his Starmate, the Galaxy commander pushed forward his own *Mad Cat* to threaten the commando's only assault 'Mech—Allen's *Sunder*. Allen was already fading back to draw Corbett further out of position, so Connor rounded on the smaller *Cauldron-Born* hoping to knock it out of the fight with Epona's help.

Not that she had much left to give.

In a brief but savage duel, the *Avatar* had already lost its right arm—and with it her best weapon. Now, at point-blank range, her LRM launchers were all but useless as well. She managed to cut away more of the armor protecting the *Cauldron-Born's* Gauss rifle, but failed to ruin it.

The squat *Cauldron-Born* pummeled the stricken commando 'Mech with light autocannon and a single laser, tearing at the left flank of the *Avatar*, and then punched through with the Gauss slug to tear open one whole side of the fusion reactor. Golden fire belched outward, gobbling everything into its expanding core.

Then the *Avatar* flew apart in a massive explosion the flash-blinded Connor.

"I see her," Allen said. "She's out clean."

Blinking his vision clear, fighting away the explosion's afterimage, he did not bother searching for his warrior's parafoil against Tranquil's pale sky. Instead, dropping his reticle over the profile of the *Cauldron-Born*, he waited until it burned from red to the deep gold of a solid targeting lock before hitting the sixty-five ton Omni with everything at his disposal and damn the *Mad Cat's* stunted heat curve!

Lasers stabbed scarlet destruction into the side of the enemy machine, and missiles reached out at their maximum range to pepper small explosion all along the *Cauldron-Born's* profile.

It was the Gauss rifle which paid off, however, drawing a bead over the forward-thrust head and smashing a large slug through the left "cheek" of the cockpit and out the other side. The 'Mech toppled to the right, spinning about to slam head-first into the ground and bury its pilot beneath a mountain of metal and myomer.

A wave of heat slammed through the *Mad Cat's* cockpit, flash-drying sweat on his arms and legs. His shoulders ached from the strains of constant combat—his third battle this day—though he had no time to ease their discomfort.

"All right," Connor whispered into the confines of his neurohelmet, voice loud in his own ears, "this ends now."

Pivoting his *Mad Cat* back toward Brendon Corbett's *Daishi*, Connor found the last two Clan warriors pressing forward against Allen's *Sunder*. The commando's assault 'Mech soaked up a flurry of brightly-colored laser darts and the azure cascades of two particle projector cannon, trading wide swaths of armor for its continued survival.

Then extra-long bursts from Corbett's fifty-millimeter autocannon pounded in, ripping into the *Sunder*'s right hip joint and tearing it apart.

Stumbling backward, fighting the pull of gravity, Allen managed to scar a new molten weal across the *Daishi*'s chest with his PPC though his Gauss rifle missed wide. Then the frozen hip joint betrayed him and the *Sunder* crashed roughly to the ground.

Allen immediately rolled the assault Omni back to its front, trying at once to get his feet beneath him as the enemy 'Mechs closed.

Two on two. Teamwork meant a great deal less at such odds, and the Clan equipment and training would begin to tell as the fighting turned desperate. Throttling forward, Connor shrugged aside a few glancing blows from the other *Mad Cat*'s weapons. His intention was to bring down the Galaxy commander. Without Corbett, the remaining enemy *Mad Cat* could not hope to stand against the two commando MechWarriors.

He walked forward to clear the Jaguar *Mad Cat* from his line of sight, toggling for all long-range weaponry as the *Daishi*'s profile eased under his targeting crosshairs. The sluggish response of his heat-addled OmniMech cost him a few precious seconds, working his way into a prime firing solution. But finally the reticle burned the deep gold of a hard lock, and he eased into the salvo.

Only to have an urgent transmission from Thomas Sorenson stay his hand.

"We're in the shuttle," the corporal reported, "but it's wired with explosives! They're set to trigger off an engine startup as well as remote detonation—a dead-man's switch if I had to guess. We're working on defusing it, but you have to buy us time.

"And whatever you do, do not fire on Brendon Corbett!"



The *Dire Wolf*'s sensor alarms warned Galaxy Commander Corbett that another 'Mech had a strong targeting lock on him:

The Inner Sphere commander, turning away from the ruined *Cauldron-Born* to come at his right flank.

But the *Dire Wolf*'s right-side armor was still strong, so he ignored the customized *Mad Cat* long enough to put an end to the *Sunder*. Only a chance hit against his cockpit could stop him, and then it would be over so fast the Galaxy commander would hardly know it. A glorious death in the fires of battle.

Not that he believed it possible. His destiny was to lead Clan Smoke Jaguar back to dominance, and nothing would prevent that. Nothing, and no one. Let the *surat* try his best—it wouldn't save his warrior in the *Sunder* and in the end it would not save him.

The troublesome raiders would never leave Tranquil alive. He had seen to that when ordering his shuttle wired with explosives, tying a remote detonator into his own computer. Even with the destruction of his OmniMech—though certainly he would escape alive—his revenge would still be complete.

He silently dared the enemy commander to fire on the *Dire Wolf*, believing himself far more ready—far more *prepared*—to tempt the fates than his counterpart could ever be.

Then the alarms cut out as the enemy officer broke off his attack to run in at the back of Corbett's Starmate instead. Amanda Wimmer's *Mad Cat* stumbled into view, driven forward by a pair of scarlet laser beams coring into its back. Then the silver-gray blur of a Gauss slug slammed in behind them, crushing armor and titanium supports as it punched through the housing which protected the OmniMech's massive gyroscope. The *Mad Cat* stumbled to its knees then sprawled out over the ground, high-velocity metal still spitting out the near-mortal wound. A rain of missiles slammed into the stricken 'Mech, finishing the job.

His Starmate managed to bring down the emergency dampening fields, saving the corpse of her ruined machine, but it would not continue this battle.

"*Freebirth!*" he shouted, slamming a fist down on the auxiliary monitor he'd had watching Amanda's *Mad Cat*. The glass smashed inward, and a backlash of electrical fire burned his hand. He ignored the pain and the caustic scent of melting insulation which now burned in his lungs.

A large part of him wanted to turn on the enemy commander, punishing the *stravag* warrior for the loss of his Starmate. But the smoke jaguar, totem animal for his Clan, did not deter from the deathstrike once blood was scented and neither would he. Corbett centered his crosshairs over the struggling *Sunder*, bringing all weapons to bear and raining death upon the assault 'Mech.

All four lasers struck deeply into the *Sunder's* already-savaged armor, two of them combining to slice the Gauss rifle in half. Blue energy flared as the acceleration coils erupted in a wash of stored electricity, the small explosion gouging deeply into the left side as well. A hail of autocannon fire opened up angry wounds over the left leg, crushing actuators, and his missiles exploited further damage to the right hip.

A final burst of emerald darts from the *Dire Wolf's* medium pulse lasers cut through the *Sunder's* left side and into the main body where it melted the gyro.

The assault 'Mech collapsed back to the ground, its efforts to rise permanently thwarted.

Heat scoured his cockpit, fusion reactor spiking severely to meet the constant power draw for so many weapons. He backed off a step from the *Sunder*, allowing the heat to bleed away through the *Dire Wolf's* many heat sinks. Then a single laser scored into his right side, slashing away armor from that formerly-pristine location, shoving him roughly to the left.

Cursing, swiveling his 'Mech's upper torso around, he stabbed out again with all four lasers, forcing his heat curve higher into the red. The Inner Sphere commander, back for more punishment. Just the two of them now! Two lasers carved into the *Mad Cat's* left arm and side. The enemy 'Mech rocked under the blow but did not come close to faltering. Instead, it cut inward to circle around the *Dire Wolf's* left flank.

Why only a single laser?

The incongruous fact hit the Galaxy commander as he forced the sluggish *Dire Wolf* into a turn to keep his weapons centered on the *Mad Cat*. A feral grin split his lips, showing the teeth behind. Opening a common channel, he allowed a bit of that satisfaction to bleed into his voice.

"Having trouble with the shuttle?" he asked, certain now that the explosives had been discovered and that they were worried about

destroying his Omni. And with good reason. "You will never leave Tranquil alive. I told you that once before. It is still true."

And Brendon Corbett walked his *Dire Wolf* forward, certain now of his invulnerability as he triggered another full spread of weapons.



"We're still working on the explosives. We need a few more minutes."

Any reply to Sorenson's update was lost as Connor's full attention was demanded by Brendon Corbett's latest hard-hitting assault. The *Mad Cat* shook violently as two lasers and a pair of light autocannon stripped his 'Mech of more armor, denuding his right leg and side down to titanium skeleton and worrying his left arm within its last half-ton of protective plating.

A glance at the wireframe schematic showed the heavy losses to his protection, promising that the Galaxy commander's next hit would penetrate somewhere to the vital systems which kept the *Mad Cat* fighting.

He allowed himself to return fire with both lasers this time but not the Gauss rifle, holding back the headhunting weapon for a slow peeling away of the *Daishi's* armor. It would take both lasers into the head of the assault Omni to manage a killing blow, and he deliberately held his fire low to prevent such an occurrence. The scarlet energy splashed over the *Daishi's* left side and leg, eating way the last of their armor but unable to penetrate deeper.

He turned in tighter, shifting his circling maneuver into a shrinking spiral.

Corbett matched him with a shuffling gait, though the heat build-up was obviously slowing the OmniMech's response. Connor's heat curve, however, had fallen back into the yellow with his restricted weapons fire and was now riding low in the band. Myomer musculature responded with greater efficiency, allowing him to approach the *Mad Cat's* top speed of eighty-five kph as he cut in again.

"Make something happen fast," he warned Sorenson. "I'm running out of room to maneuver."

The literal truth, as he ran within sixty meters of the large assault Omni.

He stabbed out with lasers again, bumping his heat upward but nowhere near a debilitating level. The energy weapons struck the *Daishi* midline and into the left leg, sloughing armor to the ground in half-melted plates.

Over his right side, Corbett could hope to take several more hard hits. If the *Daishi* reversed itself suddenly Connor would lose the angle and be pitted against fresh armor while his own damage profile looked like little more than a walking skeleton. But the *Daishi*'s left side stood open to almost any shot, now. A flurry of missiles from the SRM packs riding the *Mad Cat*'s shoulders could conceivably finish the Galaxy commander off, while

Except that Brendon Corbett had the dead-man's switch to his advantage, and was so obviously more concerned with tracking in on the *Mad Cat* than the risk at which he placed his own 'Mech.

"No hope!" the Jaguar commander taunted over the open channel. "You will all die here today. Your bodies will be left for the scavengers."

His next salvo did little to back up his boast. One laser only and a rapid-fire burst from the *Daishi*'s fifty-millimeter autocannon scored against Connor. The depleted-uranium slugs ripped into his left leg, smashing aside the last of his armor but failing to damage the critical actuators. The laser sliced into the *Mad Cat*'s left torso substructure, cutting away one of his shoulder-mounted launchers. The SRM system twisted free of the damaged mounts, smashing against the ground and spilling a load of missiles over the caldera floor. None of them detonated, though they remained a dangerous obstacle if a 'Mech decided to walk over that area again.

"We've almost got it," Sorenson promised, his voice on edge. The corporal had to realize the time pressure his lieutenant was under.

Sinclair almost hedged, delaying another exchange with Corbett. No. Time had slipped out from under them, and it was now or not at all. He would take Sorenson at his word, counting on the other man to come through just as he would any other member of the commando. Turning sharply, he raced almost directly at the *Daishi* and then cut around the Omni's left flank. Not quite at the assault 'Mech's back, but out of full line for most of Corbett's weapons.

Only two of the *Daishi's* large lasers flared out this time, one of them coring into the left leg to cripple the *Mad Cat's* upper leg actuator. He worked with the gyroscopic stabilizer to overcome the OmniMech's violent tremble, but he wouldn't be going anywhere else very fast. He dropped crosshairs over the *Daishi's* side, by eye scoping out the large rents already carved through its protective armor.

He toggled every weapon and squeezed into the trigger. "C'mon, Sorenson!"

"Got it! Drop that last Clanner!"

Connor would never be certain if he had waited for the corporal's assurance or had already committed to the barrage, and in the end it really did not matter. If he hadn't fired, the opportunity would have been wasted. The two of them had to succeed together, or not at all.

Large lasers cut into the *Daishi's* arm and left flank, both splashing through the last of the armor and pumping destructive energy into the vital equipment beneath. The shoulder joint melted beneath the focused energy, locking the arm in its awkward position. The second laser blew threw two of the three heat sinks stored in the left torso, carving a path for the Gauss slug which punched in afterward to slam full force into the ammunition bin for Corbett's LRM system. Missiles compacted and then detonated, warheads and propellant touching off in one grand explosion. Gouts of flame shot out the back as the cellular construction channeled most of the energy out special vents. The explosion eviscerated the entire left side of the Omni which staggered violently to the right, teetering on one leg. Heat blossomed in white-hot fury on the thermal imager, the combination of destroyed shielding and the loss of heat sinks.

"This is not happening."

Brendon Corbett had not closed the channel earlier, and his shock and pain were clear.

"By Kerensky's Blood, it cannot be happening!"

Then Connor's remaining short-ranged missile system rocketed out a flight of a half dozen stubby warheads.

Three of them speared through the ruin which was now the *Daishi's* left side, blasting away the last of the armor over the Omni's midline and gouging into the shielding protecting the core

of the fusion reactor. No dampening field was going to override the destruction visited on the engine, and golden fire spilled out to eat away what remained of the *Daishi's* chest. Flames licked up and around the forward-thrust head, the intense heat melting armor and bursting the cockpit canopy into shards of ferroglass. Not the usual catastrophic failure, but a death drawn out over several long seconds.

"No! No! Nooooo...." The denial trailed off into a scream and then static as the *Daishi* and Galaxy commander Brendon Corbett finally died.

The Smoke Jaguar commander fully aware of his failure.



Connor clambered down from the *Mad Cat*, leaving the Omni as it belonged—as the last 'Mech standing over the caldera's battlefield.

He approached the *Daishi's* burned-out corpse with care, wary of the intense heat it radiated. Sooty black smoke rolled into Tranquil's pale sky, pushed around by the chill breeze blowing through the caldera. A beacon proclaiming the battlefield and also reminding him of the incoming Jaguar forces which would be dropping down from space soon. Still he wanted to be—*had* to be—certain.

Allen Mattila walked over from his abandoned *Sunder*. The shuttle had powered up under thrust, and now rolled up nearby so that the rest of the Damocles Commando could join Conner as he hopped back from the scorching metal which framed what was left of the cockpit. Sorenson hung back behind the MechWarriors, carrying a square of folded black cloth. Dominic and Epona looked a bit rough from their combat ejections, but well enough to walk unassisted. Epona Rhi managed a brief smile and a nod. Not any form of celebration, not after the cost Tranquil had demanded of the Inner Sphere operation, but simple recognition for a job finished and done.

"Well?" Dominic asked, frowning at the ruined *Daishi*. "Is he?"

No need to elaborate more than that. Everyone knew the question. He nodded once. "Corbett is dead. His move to resurrect the Smoke Jaguars is finished."

"It was finished when we tore the heart out of Durghan City," Sorenson said. "Knocking out the Core Tap Facility below only clinched it. According to Captain Taylor, Clan Wolf is already issuing batchalls against incoming Jaguar forces." It was news received with great relief around the small circle of tired warriors. "Corbett's dream had died. But he refused to admit it." Sorenson glanced over at the smoking wreckage. "You just planted the final stake in his heart is all."

He shook his head. "Not a stake. A sword." He glanced to his lancemates and then back to the analyst. "The Sword of Damocles. We all helped wield it. Not that the Smoke Jaguars likely understand the reference. Their own leaders lived under the blade for so long, it was bound to fall eventually."

Sorenson smiled thinly and offered Conner the cloth he carried. "Maybe this will be enough for them, then."

The commando leader accepted the package with both hands, feeling the weight behind it. Allen nodded, scrounged a metal rod from some nearby wreckage and drove it down into the caldera's ground while Connor shook the flag open. He tied two corners around the makeshift pole, then stepped back as the breeze tugged at the ensign—the silver Cameron star against the black field. The Star League colors, left flying over the caldera battlefield.

A funeral shroud, for Clan Smoke Jaguar.

Connor Sinclair gathered his commando in by eye, leading them back toward the waiting shuttle. "The *Eclipse* is waiting," he reminded them.

"Let's go home."

The End