TRIAL UNDER FIRE

Chapter 1
The Jaguar's Reach

by Loren L. Coleman

BATTLECORPS

<strtextlog>

 <330-1347> Field Commander Charles Antonescue reports. Southern pass held against Smoke Jaguar force. Coordinated resistance on Huntress has been smashed, but there is no indication of Khan Osis' presence. Surviving clan warriors available for interrogation.

 <408-1955> Prince Victor Steiner-Davion to all field commanders. Huntress is ours.

 <409-0942> Lieutenant Michael Tonai, DEST, on debrief of prisoners. All evidence indicates that Khan Lincoln Osis has escaped Huntress for Strana Mechty. However, of possible worse consequence are rumors that one Galaxy Commander Corbett is rallying Smoke Jaguar forces at a remote staging area. Flagged for immediate investigation.

 <409-2315> Jerrard Cranston reports to Prince Victor. Galaxy Commander Brendon Corbett, the Smoke Jaguar officer who led forces back to Huntress, bypassed the capital for the colony world of Tranquil. From this command post, he has sent out a call that all surviving Smoke Jaguar warriors should rally to his position rather than to Khan Osis on Strana Mechty. Reconstructed records prove that Corbett has received several responses. Our "friend" Trent believes that Tranquil may possess the command and production resources to resurrect Clan Smoke Jaguar.
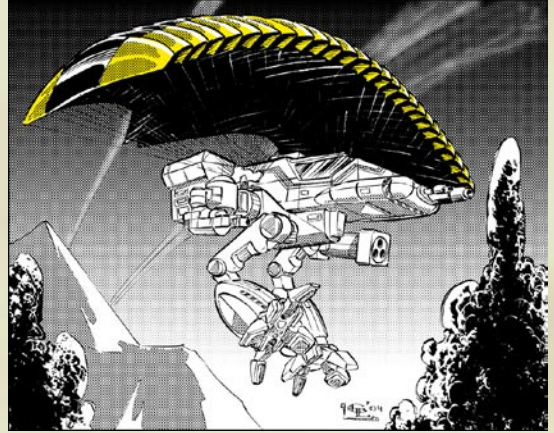
 <410-0601> Prince Victor Steiner-Davion, Commanding. Unacceptable.

BATTLECORPS

Low Planetary Orbit
Tranquil, Clan Homeworlds
28 April 3060

The smallest brief-ing room aboard the DropShip *Black Hammer*. Enough space between the gray-painted bulk-heads for a small table surrounded by half a dozen chairs, three of the seats currently occupied. A duct in the ceiling blew down tepid air tasting of the metallic tang left by atmosphere scrubbers. The Star League ensign hung over one wall—a silver eight-pointed "Cameron" star against a black field. The room's one concession to tactical briefings: a flat-D screen opposite the flag, connected via spiraling cable to the keyboard cradled over the left arm of Lieutenant Connor Sinclair.

Connor stood next to his own seat typing one-handed, his gray eyes studying the blank screen with a frown of concentration.

The young lance leader kept his dark brown hair cut at the edge of military regulation length. Though his uniform was cut along the original Star League Defense Force lines, he'd added a regi-mental patch from his old unit, the Davion Heavy Guards. All MechWarriors assigned to one of the Damocles Commando lances had done the same. In his lance he counted one from the Kestrel Grenadiers and two from the First Aragon Borderers. Warriors he had never served with before.

Finally the screen glowed to life, and against the backdrop of a star-studded spacescape a world grew to fill the frame. Dark blue oceans covered a majority of the planet's surface, with two large land masses standing out in brown-green relief.

"Tranquil," he named the world.

The planet rotated quickly, and froze when the smaller continent came under the camera's eye. One final flurry of keystrokes, and as the land zoomed in to fill the screen he set the keyboard into a special wall receptacle designed to hold it.

BATTLECORPS

"This is where Galaxy Commander Corbett has decided to reestablish the Smoke Jaguars, if he can." The young lieutenant swept his gaze over the assembled lance. "We're here to kick the supports from under him."

"Asking quite a bit aren't they?" Dominic Paine shifted uneasily in his chair. "I don't know about any of you, but personally I'd feel better about this with a full regiment backing us."

Connor shook his head. "Pacifying Huntress cost the task force too much, and Prince Victor has no idea what he'll face on Strana Mechty. Remember, they're trying to shut down the *entire* war." He shrugged. "The six Damocles Commando teams are all they can afford to spare."

"Nothing like feeling expendable," Dominic said, his light tone exaggerated to the point of sarcasm.

Tessa McCaughnell tugged at the thick braid of red-blonde hair laying over one shoulder, then leaned over to slap Dominic on the arm.

"We're no' here to take on the lot of them," she reminded her new lancemate. "Just to give Brendon Corbett some sleepless nights until the Prince shows up a-riding the black coach." She looked toward Keith Andrew and then back to her new lieutenant for support.

Nodding his appreciation for the back-up, Connor forestalled further outbursts with a raised hand. "Also the Clans are known for absorbing the weak, and the Smoke Jaguars share this world with Clan Wolf who control several cities on the larger continent. If we make Corbett appear ineffective, the Wolves are likely to finish the job for us." He offered a tentative smile. "Then we can all go home."

That pulled answering nods from everyone. Living off WarShips in Clan space was no substitute for the worlds of the Inner Sphere. For home.

"Any chance the Wolves will involve themselves on the Jaguars' side?" Keith asked.

Connor gave them all an easy shrug. "No one came to the Jaguar's aide at Huntress. In fact, some intercepted comms indicate that the Wolves interfered with another Clan that wanted to get involved. The Smoke Jaguars are isolated and vulnerable. We need to take advantage of that as we can."

BATTLECORPS

He turned back to the flat-D screen.

"So here's our little part in the raiding." He brushed a hand over the snow-capped mountain range which locked away a hook-shaped peninsular region from the mainland. "This peninsula appears to be the only land really improved by the Smoke Jaguars. Our recon probes found a few minor towns and one small city. What little they have in production capacity and command assets will be concentrated here. Insertion of our BattleMechs will be made on our next turn around the planet, a low-orbit pass over the area, via drop-pods and stealth 'chutes." Surprised looks at the mention of parachutes. "It will be early morning, local time," he explained, "and we don't want landing flares to give us away.

"The *Black Hammer* and the *Eclipse* will deploy six lance-size commando teams. We're Commando One, but don't let that go to your head. It just means we hit the ground first."

Sober expressions greeted him. BattleMechs might be the pinnacle of military technology, walking the battlefields of the thirty-first century with titanic measure, but the Clans bred talented warriors and had made a few technological advances in their years of isolation away from the Inner Sphere. They owned too many advantages not to take them serious.

Dead serious.

"The good news is that we aren't supposed to see *any* heavy resistance. The bad news is that we aren't *supposed* to see any heavy resistance. We'll certainly try to keep it to a minimum, and three Mobile Field Base vehicles will drop with us giving the commando good on-site repair and refit capability. We recon this first operations area." He pointed to the inside edge of the peninsula's hook. "Taking targets of opportunity. And then hit a facility out at the tip of the peninsula which Intelligence believes is a 'Mech production factory. Once all six teams have completed their objectives, we rendezvous for DropShip pick-up."

Connor reached over to the keyboard and hit the power toggle. The image on the screen winked out of existence with a light hum cut off by a popping noise.

"Any questions?" No one—not even Dominic—raised a hand. "Then let's get buttoned up."

No one moved quickly, he noticed. These were good warriors, if a bit nervous for their first mission with each other. His job was to hold them together long enough to grow comfortable as a team,

BATTLECORPS

to complete the mission and make it home. He stepped in the direction of the door, stopped in front of the Star League ensign to stare into the hub of the silver Cameron star.

One tine ran off in a long spike to the right. The guiding light of the Star League.

"Let's all remember why we are here," he said. "And what we represent." Then he was through the door and heading for the *Black Hammer's* 'Mech bay.

He hoped that reminding them of their higher duty owed the Star League might assuage some of the doubts they must certainly still feel.

It certainly helped him.

Connor's *Bushwacker* was already secured into its drop-pod, ready for imminent deployment. The egg-shaped shell acted as heat shield and extra armor for the penetration of Tranquil's upper atmosphere. Explosive charges would separate the pod from BattleMech well after insertion, allowing the large 'chute to arrest the fall and settle the 'Mech easily to the ground.

Connor squirmed through an access opening and lowered himself on a short chain ladder to the shoulder of the squat titan. Standing just shy of eight meters in height the *Bushwacker* was shorter than the average 'Mech, and with its turret-style shoulder joints and far-spread arms was actually wider than it was tall. For a fifty-five ton machine it was well armed and armored, however. Capable of running up to eighty-five kilometers per hour—perhaps a touch more if he handled it right—the *Bushwacker* made a good raider.

A technician held a spotlight into the pod, outlining an open hatch set into the BattleMech's head. Connor dropped down into his cockpit, dogged the hatch behind him with a quick spin of the inside wheel. Off came the slacks and uniform shirt, leaving him in knee-length shorts, T-shirt and combat boots. A MechWarrior's *true* uniform. Pulling his cooling vest from a small locker, he then stored his officer's uniform in its place. The vest was made from ballistic cloth ribbed with small tubes of coolant, designed to offset the extreme heat of a BattleMech cockpit.

BATTLECORPS

Connor pulled it on and settled himself into the *Bushwacker's* pilot seat.

A power cord stretched from the right side of the control chair, and he plugged its end into the mating socket on his cooling vest. The chilling coolant immediately raised gooseflesh on his arms, though he knew he'd be thankful for its touch later.

From a pouch to one side of the seat he pulled self-adhesive monitoring pads which he stuck to upper arms and inner thighs. The trailing leads he gathered in his lap, then grabbed his neurohelmet off a nearby shelf and settled it over his head. Among other things, the neurohelmet helped translate his own sense of balance to the BattleMech's massive gyro. He plugged the leads into the sockets set into the left side of the helmet. A thicker cable, this one feeding from its housing on his control panel, fastened to the neurohelmet at a large socket set into the throat guard.

Prepared, all that remained was to bring the *Bushwacker* to life.

A series of toggles released the dampening field which banked the fusion fires of the BattleMech's reactor. A rumble more felt than heard rose from below and in back of Connor's seat, and his cockpit control panel lit up as power flooded the circuits. Heat scale registered in the cool-blue tones of a BattleMech at rest, and all threat indicators remained silent. His head's-up display glowed a ghostly, transparent green against the inside of his helmet's faceshield. He turned off the HUD, not needing its distraction until ready for combat.

"Security check, Lieutenant Connor Sinclair." He waited while the computer tore apart his voice and matched it against the secure print buried within its memory.

"Voiceprint match confirmed."

The computer's voice was soft, almost feminine, but still mechanical in delivery. Connor was not one of those who preferred to alter it for more human characteristics. Some MechWarriors even used recordings of their wives or girlfriends. A bad habit, in his opinion. BattleMechs were machines of warfare—better to not get too attached.

"Proceed with security sequence," the computer prompted him.

Because voiceprints could be faked, MechWarriors often installed a second layer of security—a code phrase, which only they

BATTLECORPS

would know. "We are united and committed to a bright new future," Connor said, having chosen a line from Prince Victor's first Star League address.

"Verified. All functions now at your command."

An easy switch opened up the secure channel of his lance. "Connor Sinclair on-line and ready for drop. Commando One, report."

Tessa, Keith, Dominic; one by one they all checked in ready for drop. Connor switched over to the *Black Hammer's* command frequency. "Commando One ready for drop," he reported.

A crackle of static, and then the voice of the DropShip's communicaitons officer. "All commandos report ready to drop. The *Eclipse* has matched our insertion path. Fifteen minutes to drop window. Prepare for gravity changes."

Fifteen minutes. Connor ate away at the time checking all systems twice, and weapons once again for good measure. Both long-range missile systems, one launcher riding over his left shoulder and the other replacing his left arm, checked out fine—fully loaded and missiles armed. Diagnostics on the centerline large laser and both machine guns read in the green.

The Mydron eighty millimeter autocannon on his right arm showed an intermittent fault, so he cleared the ammunition feed which pulled the depleted uranium slugs up from his right torso and refed the weapon. The fault indication disappeared. It would do for now.

A minor fluctuation of gravity warned Connor that the DropShip was maneuvering for insertion. The main thrusters wavered in strength for a moment and then were dampened, losing the artificial gravity brought on by constant thrust. Lateral thrusters rolled the *Black Hammer* and created pockets of micro-gravity constantly shifting in direction. Used to solid ground beneath his feet, the lance leader rode it out with teeth clenched so tight as to hurt his jaw.

"Commando One, prepare for deployment. Good hunting, Damocles. Counting down from twenty… nineteen…"

The *Bushwacker's* computer was fed a signal from the DropShip, and the computer voice overlaid the final few counts with its own pre-drop checklist. Connor listened in to the last few seconds, tensing for the drop.

BATTLECORPS

"Shield integrity confirmed.

"Power curve, optimal.

"Drop check complete, all systems nominal. Landing coordinates confirmed."

Then a solid weight slammed into his back as the pod was rudely ejected from the *Black Hammer*. He couldn't breathe, and felt certain in that second that his heart had stopped beating as well. The pressure squeezed at his stomach.

Then as abruptly as it had begun it was over. The pod, *Bushwacker*, and pilot were in freefall. Only a light bucking indicated that the drop-pod was beginning to hit upper atmosphere.

One of the cockpit auxiliary screens flickered to life as the computer patched it in to sensors mounted on the outside of the shield. It showed dark space interrupted by the harsh pinpricks of stars as they are seen only from space. The pod rolled on its attitude jets, bringing the *Black Hammer* into the camera's eye. The *Union*-class DropShip was an immense white-gray sphere hanging against that black backdrop, growing smaller by the second. He saw a blur against one arc of the hull which might have been another drop-pod launching outward.

Everything seemed to be proceeding according to plan....

When it all fell apart.

No warning. If Connor had blinked, he might have missed it. Even so, he would never be certain if the azure flare was a true memory or supplied by his mind to explain the sudden explosion that burst from the side of the DropShip.

A flash of—possible—coherent light.

A silvery spray of melted armor raining out into space, chased by the catastrophic evacuation of atmosphere, equipment and personnel through the rent in the *Black Hammer's* side. The DropShip tumbled toward the edge of his screen even as the emergency comm frequency overrode his receiving equipment to chatter a flurry of mixed transmissions into his ear.

"What the hell was that?"

"Can't get a reading on…"

"…you confirm 'Mech pod deployment?"

BATTLECORPS

"...day, mayday, we are going… down…"

On screen the DropShip rocked again as if a fragile globe struck by an invisible fist.

More debris spilled out as the vessel slid away from Connor's camera angle. Silence reigned for all of three seconds, the lieutenant gripping the arms of his control chair with near-panic strength.

Then his comm gear changed over automatically to a new channel, flashing an emergency frequency for the *Eclipse*. A new voice whispered in his ear.

"My God. We've lost the *Black Hammer*."