

TRIAL UNDER FIRE

Chapter 7 Cityscape Challenge

by Loren L. Coleman

According to communication intercepts, Ratache Osis is leading a force somewhere to the south. But he apparently has our measure, and he's been handed an ultimatum. Keith Andrew intercepted this and passed it along:

...These freebirth may get to Durghan City, Galaxy Commander, but they will die there. I promise.

They will die there, Ratache Osis, or I will have you in a Circle of Equals. Contain them. Destroy them. Or I will see your Blood Heritage dishonored and your DNA removed from our breeding cycles. Is. That. Clear?

Aff, Galaxy Commander! Sir? Galaxy Commander Corbett?...

Count on Osis to dog our tracks all the way in, Lieutenant. If you want to avoid him, I recommend fast action.

Durghan City

Tranquil, Clan Homeworlds

5 May 3060

Durghan City was not large. Hardly more than a good-sized town, really. Certainly, Connor decided, no replacement for Lootera back on Huntress. But here on Tranquil it was what the Smoke Jaguars had to work with as a new capital. Hastily-erected prefab barracks, built to house the expected influx of warriors as the Clan continued to regroup on Tranquil, doubled the number of buildings. Warehouses had been converted to crude 'Mech bays. And everywhere the various Clan castes worked to improve what they could.

When the Damocles Commando struck, they noticed at once the strains on Durghan. Administrative and logistics functions demanded by the military had so overburdened local resources that clear lines of communication no longer existed. Having the top two commanders currently absent from the city only compounded the problem—the number of junior warriors looking for direction were matched only by ambitious seniors ready to claim the mantle of leadership. A cacophony of conflicting reports and orders bombarded the airwaves.

They quickly escalated to the point where Connor ordered Corporal Sorenson to filter out all but the most critical intercepted communications.

The commando escorted forward their trio of field bases, heading into the city's southwest edge. Behind them they left a pair of smashed *Vultures*, whose pilots had thought themselves up to the task of taking on two hundred eighty tons combined weight in BattleMechs. Further back an *Annihilator* and a *Puma* were little more than burning hulks. Dominic's *Thor* limped along with a ruined leg actuator, but so far his was the only major damage.

In the cockpit of his salvaged *Mad Cat*, Connor felt the tremors of light autocannon fire slamming into the shoulder of his OmniMech. His scanners screamed new warnings a split second later, then painted a set of threat icons over his heads-up display. A trio of Bulldog armored vehicles, patrolling the outskirts of Durghan.

He measured the delay in time against the necessity of clearing the field behind them.

“Allen, you and Dominic deal with the tanks. Then circle around to meet us on the north side of Durghan. Epona, with me.”

Splitting their forces was a calculated risk, but time was beginning to weigh against them. With Corbett and Osis away, the defense of Durghan was lighter than it should be. Patrols were being called in, however, and he had no intention of being here when they arrived.

The commando 'Mechs speared into the city proper. Epona's *Shadow Cat* paced along at Connor's best speed of eighty-five kph. They were after Galaxy Commander Corbett's command and control building, located in the southwest reaches of Durghan. Though the Smoke Jaguar's possessed a well-fortified base outside the city, the cramped conditions had forced several critical components to be relocated to an auxiliary site. It was a target they couldn't pass up, and in easy reach along their path to the spaceport.

At the second intersection, his HUD painted a *Puma* off to his right. Quickly lost as he passed by and was again shielded by buildings—but three hundred meters range was too close. At the next intersection he turned left, and then back to the right. Two more intersections straight through, and the *Mad Cat's* computer identified a building at the end of this block as his target. The *Puma* might have paced them to the north, but it wasn't about to catch the two MechWarriors before they hammered Corbett's command facility to rubble. He nodded his satisfaction.

A sense of contentment which quickly fled as an *Annihilator* stepped into the next intersection, its torso already twisted about to give it a line of sight down the street on which he approached. Behind it, just out of the intersection, his computers tagged an *Avatar* waiting to follow in the larger 'Mech's shadow.

It would have to wait its turn.

Four autocannon suddenly filled the street with fragmenting, eighty-millimeter rounds. The deadly storm sanded armor away from the *Mad Cat's* every surface. Several rounds rang off the cockpit, throwing a violent shake to the entire 'Mech and threatening to unbalance it. Past the intersection and too late to dodge away, Connor quickly thought to his lancemate's survival.

“Break right, Epona!”

Still fighting for control, he noted with an instant's relief the *Shadow Cat's* icon splitting away from his own on the HUD. It

headed north, toward the rendezvous with Allen and Dominic, out of immediate danger.

The *Mad Cat* ran forward, directly into the *Annihilator's* embrace.

Having faced up such a monstrous BattleMech a few times already, the *Annihilator* no longer held any special terror for him except in what it could do to his *Mad Cat* if given a chance. The seventy-five ton Omni could not withstand such abuse for long. But with Epona safely away, he was determined to not give the assault 'Mech a second chance to finish him. Framed on both sides by tall buildings, cut off ahead and not about to slow down for a turn back to the rear, he braced himself as he continued forward in a race against the cycling time of the *Annihilator's* weapons.

The lethal autocannon thrust forward again in anticipation of a new barrage. Connor turned his *Mad Cat* into the large building on his right. Hands tight on control stick and throttle, he powered his way into the wall. The 'Mech bucked hard, shaking him violently against the restraining harness, and almost rebounded into the street where the *Annihilator* would certainly have destroyed it. Slowly, it seemed, the *Mad Cat* chewed its way inward, smashing through two stories of floors, walls, desks, computer consoles and communication stations. Crushed brick, plaster and tile rained a cloud of debris around the canopy, fogging his view. Once far enough inside he worked his way left again—guessing, but trusting his natural instincts.

In an avalanche of brick, and glass bursting out from shattered windows, the *Mad Cat* tore its way from the structure and regained the street around the corner from its original path. Behind him the building began a slow and ungainly collapse, unable to stand up under the damage to its foundation and lower floors. Wrenching his targeting crosshairs into the right side of his main screen, he twisted the *Mad Cat* at the waist to drop the reticle over the backside of the *Avatar*. The seventy-ton 'Mech was just now stepping into the intersection that the *Annihilator* had vacated.

As the building collapsed the assault 'Mech became mired in a pile of rubble and the *Avatar* pulled up short. Sensors no doubt screaming the danger of an enemy *Mad Cat* at his rear, the *Avatar* began to turn.

Not fast enough.

Connor cut loose with everything his *Mad Cat* had to give except for long-ranged missiles, not about to waste ammunition or run

up his heat on such a chancy close-up shot. His large lasers cut across the *Avatar's* back and the rear left leg. A trio of medium-ranged lasers scored out with gem-bright pulses, adding to the damage, and even his machine guns, generally used as anti-infantry weapons, scratched into the other 'Mech.

The *Avatar's* thermal image flared red and then white-hot as engine shielding was cut away, but the other warrior was faster than most on the reactor's emergency shutdown fields, preventing a catastrophic explosion. The *Avatar* stood where it had been, blocking the intersection and belching smoke out terrible rents in its back.

Connor's first thought was for his escape. The *Annihilator* fought to extract itself from the collapsed building, and after such a close call it seemed the perfect time.

His second thought was for the mission, and he turned to locate the command center for at least one good barrage before fleeing. Then with a short bark of relieved laughter he turned his *Mad Cat* northward and throttled up into a fast run.

Results were what counted, regardless if it hadn't been planned this way.

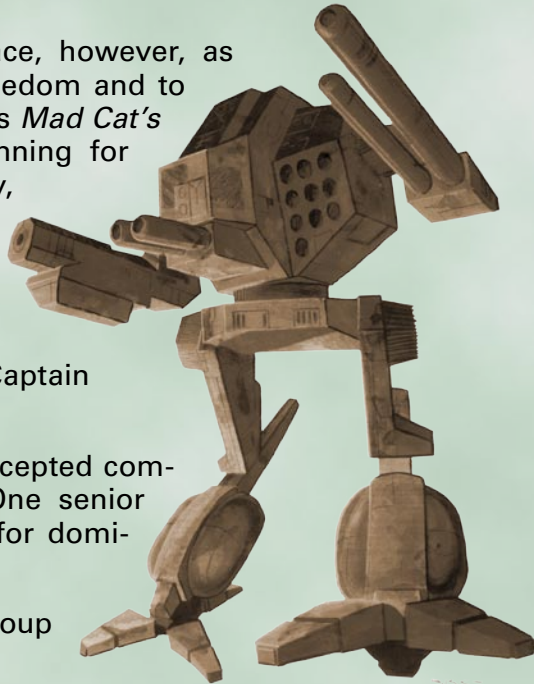
Truthfully he hadn't paid attention at the time to which building he was running through.

It still came down to a race, however, as the *Annihilator* fought for freedom and to take up the chase. Pushing his *Mad Cat's* throttle to its limit stop, running for the northern edge of the city, Connor checked up on the status of his commando and on the rallying Jaguar warriors.

"All forces. This is Star Captain Dana Wimmer."

Connor listened to the intercepted comms Sorenson routed him. One senior warrior had finally won out for dominance.

"Enemy is moving north. Regroup at the canyon. Stop them!"



A narrow bluff separated Durghan City from the plains area on which the spaceport was situated. A jumping BattleMech might have cleared the steep cliff face and walked down the far side, but not the mobile field bases. Even so close to escape, the commando was not about to abandon their critical vehicles. Too many things could still go wrong.

Too many things already had.

Recon probe data, originally meant for Commandos Four through Six and provided by the *Eclipse*, had located a short canyon splitting the bluff. It also showed a wall with fortified gates warding the far end of the narrow pass. Sorenson arranged with Keith Andrew to provide artillery support, his *Catapult* equipped with Arrow IV assault missile launchers. Epona's *Shadow Cat* was modified to carry a TAG spotting laser, which would direct the artillery strike against the wall and blow open the gates. A simple plan, as the best ones usually were.

He gripped his control sticks tighter. "Who was it that said 'no plan survives contact with the enemy.'"

Autocannon turrets protected the pass along its entire length, slowing the commando to a crawl. An *Avatar* had also been stationed in the way, but by the time Connor reached the site one field base had deployed a crane arm to raise the 'Mech's blasted hulk to a carrying trailer. The *Avatar's* leg looked to have been crushed by giant hammer blows, a testament to the Gauss rifle Allen Mattila's *Sunder* wielded. Allen was already several hundred meters into the canyon, his *Sunder's* armor protecting him while he methodically scrapped each turret along the way. Dominic's *Thor* and Epona's *Cat* protected the field base vehicles.

"Keith Andrew ran into trouble with an enemy patrol," Sorenson informed him at once. "He's trying to get in the clear to launch an Arrow IV strike, but it'll take time."

"I can launch soon as your ready," Keith interrupted on the commando's common channel. The transmission did not rob his voice of the tense determination. "Just say the word."

Connor shook his head. "Keith, you get clear of any Smoke Jaguars first. They'll see the missile launch and trace it back."

He stepped his *Mad Cat* up to the head of the pass, facing it back toward the city. The field base finished its work and began to roll forward, into the relative safety of the canyon.

“Dominic, back up Allen,” he ordered. Though the assault ‘Mech pilot had yet to say so, and wouldn’t until seriously injured, Connor knew the autocannon had to be exacting a toll against Allen’s *Sunder* by now. “Epona, with the MFBs.”

Then, his commando safely into the canyon, Connor backed up the *Mad Cat* to block the entrance.

Almost at once an enemy *Puma* raced up from behind, likely hoping to catch one of the field bases or a smaller commando ‘Mech by the backside. Instead it found his *Mad Cat* holding the defile entrance. Recovering quickly from any surprise, twin PPC strikes arced out and slammed into the *Mad Cat*’s side. Molten armor runneled to the ground as large sections sloughed away, baring the right arm to its titanium skeleton and leaving a red-tinged scar angling from shoulder down to hip.

The seventy-five ton ‘Mech rocked back, but righted itself under his touch. The *Puma* spun around in a tight turn, ready to race back the safety of the city.

He was not about to let it off so easily. His heavy missile launchers speared out a full flight of forty missiles, raining destruction over the *Puma*’s upper torso. The ‘Mech staggered, but did not go down.

Following up with the large lasers carried in each arm, both ruby-red beams stabbed into the *Puma*’s left leg. The intensely-concentrated fire demanded more than the *Puma* had to give, slicing through just below the hip and amputating the leg. The thirty-five ton Omni plunged forward head-first from its ninety kilometers-per-hour sprint, tearing itself apart against the ground as it rolled into and through a nearby warehouse.

No time for congratulatory thoughts. On his HUD, the *Annihilator* and a second *Puma* maneuvered into the outskirts of the city directly facing the defile. The assault ‘Mech had finally cleared itself from the collapsed building and come looking for the commando, picking up some support along the way. Conner dropped cross-hairs over the assault machine, and squeezed off a pair of ruby lances.

“Things are heating up back here,” he transmitted.

The literal truth, actually, as his fusion reactor spiked from the power demands of his weapons. Waste heat bled into his cockpit and he gasped for breath.

"Tell me you're to the gates."

Allen Mattila answered him. "Working on it."

Working on it? A probing attack by the *Annihilator* walked auto-cannon fire across the canyon wall to his right. Stone chips and ricochets pinged off the OmniMech's chest. Connor throttled into a backward walk, moving his *Mad Cat* further into the canyon's protection.

"Work a little faster, will you?"

"We're trying," Sorenson cut in. "The wall has PPC turrets arranged for a savage crossfire, and they're backing up an *Annihilator*."

Another *Annihilator*, this one playing Horatio at the bridge. Time was slipping out from beneath the Damocles Commando like quicksand.

"Allen, can you handle it with Dominic?"

"If it has to be now, yes." Frustration was evident in the MechWarrior's voice. "But it will hurt. The *Annihilator* ripped a large hole into the leg of my *Sunder* that Sorenson wants to patch up before it costs me an actuator."

"We've pulled back and the *Annihilator* isn't pursuing," the corporal added.

Of course not. Its job was to hold the pass until city defenders could rally to the canyon. Selecting for his large lasers only, he chanced a long-range shot at the *Puma* which had run out to fire its PPCs. Both beams flew wide of their mark and low, scoring instead a parked groundcoach which exploded into an orange fireball. If nothing else it hurried the *Puma's* pilot, his own shots also missing though coming closer than Connor had. The manmade lightning scarred the ground ten meters in front of the *Mad Cat*.

"Do we have ten minutes?" Sorenson asked, able to pull Connor's sensor feed and no doubt aware of the enemy 'Mechs pressing from behind. To the corporal's credit, he didn't worry the rest of the lance with details. That decision was left to the commando leader.

Now an *Owens* had moved up into the *Annihilator's* shadow. The one hundred ton assault 'Mech waded through a single-story warehouse and was briefly lost from site behind a parking garage. "I don't think so," Connor admitted, the heat now drawing a river of

sweat which stung his eyes and left a salty taste on his lips. He arced another flight of missiles toward the *Annihilator's* position, just to give the Jaguar warrior something to think about before it broke cover, then wheeled around to pace deeper into the canyon.

"I'm moving up to rejoin. Sorenson, get the *Sunder* fixed. We'll need it the other side of those gates."

There would be room for two 'Mechs to fight abreast in the canyon. Between his *Mad Cat* and Dominic's *Thor*, they could hope to bring down the *Annihilator* and both PPC turrets without losing a 'Mech. Chances are, one of them would be risking an ejection. Such tight quarters favored the assault 'Mech too much.

"Launching," a voice whispered into his ear, soft but steadfast in its determination. "First missile away. Second missile away."

"No!"

Too late, he still tried to countermand Keith's missile launch. The MechWarrior had been monitoring communications, knowing the commando to be in trouble. He was trying to give them an edge, putting artillery-grade missiles into the air which Epona might call down in a massive strike.

Throttling into a run, coming upon and passing the spot where Sorenson's mobile field bases tended the wounded *Sunder*, Connor was just in time to see both Epona and Dominic move forward into the wider stretch of canyon held by the turrets and *Annihilator*. Already the blue-white glares flashed in the deeper shadows of the canyon as the turrets speared out their lethal energies. The *Mad Cat* moved around a final outcropping of rock to witness Dominic's *Thor* taking a full barrage of the assault 'Mech's autocannon.

With Dominic in his line of fire and Epona crowding his right as she turned her lasers against the PPC turrets crowning the wall, there was little he could do but watch the *Annihilator's* four autocannon tear into the *Thor*. The depleted uranium rounds hammered into an already-savaged right side, smashing Dominic's large laser and leaving the right arm hanging from the shoulder by a ruined tangle of myomer musculature. Fragmenting rounds sanded away armor, scoured deep into the *Thor's* torso. Thick, dark smoke roiled out of the ruined right side chest.

And Connor winced, anticipating the explosion that would render the seventy-ton *Thor* down into scrap metal and ruined equipment.

The explosion threw a cloud of gray dust over all four BattleMechs. Not from the destruction of Dominic's *Thor*, however. The huge gates barring the pass fell under a gout of fire which ate into the ferrocrete walls, raining out shards of poured stone and then a blanket of debris which blinded natural vision. The thunderclap explosion almost drowned out Epona's, "First missiles down."

The Arrow IV missile which Keith Andrew launched had demolished the gate and part of the wall with it.

Heavy particles fell to earth quickly, leaving only a light haze to cover the area. By some miracle, Dominic's *Thor* was still standing. The right side was cored, showing several holes penetrating front to back when the smoke cleared. Reactor shielding had obviously been damaged, but not to the point where the power plant was in danger of immediate explosion.

And though his right arm was all but severed, Dominic still retained possession of his most lethal weapon, the same twelve-centimeter autocannon Connor had put to such good use.

The rapid-fire weapon spat out a blizzard of hard-hitting slugs, raking intense fire over the *Annihilator's* chest and left leg. To add insult to such grievous injury, the *Thor's* SRM system hammered in with five of six missiles, scattering more damage over chest and arms and even slamming one into the head near the cockpit.

The assault 'Mech stumbled up against one of the canyon walls. Catching itself from falling, but clearing the *Thor* by just enough for Connor to bring his own weapons into play. Ruby-bright lasers cut into the other 'Mech's side and down into a leg already torn apart by Dominic's furious assault. One beam stabbed in past shreds of armor, worrying the titanium skeleton and cutting free an actuators.

The *Annihilator* toppled this time, gyro and pilot's efforts not enough to stand up under the combined assault of commando 'Mechs. Ponderously slow it seemed. The twelve-meter tall machine crashed down to the ground where it immediately struggled to right itself.

Then Epona stepped in and focused her *Shadow Cat's* spotting laser onto the *Annihilator's* broad back. Like a divine strike of retribution, Keith's second Arrow IV missile hammered down into the assault 'Mech.

And it was simply no more.

The force of the exploding *Annihilator* drove everyone back several paces. The *Thor's* arm finally gave way, some razor-sharp shrapnel slicing through the last of its myomer arm muscles. The limb crashed to the ground to lay among the litter of the ravaged assault 'Mech.

Allen's *Sunder*, still walking on a partially-ruined right leg, walked in just as the three commando 'Mechs were starting to pull back from the ruin which had been the *Annihilator*.

"Man, talk about your big guns."

Epona echoed his sentiment, though in more direct appreciation. "Thanks for the assist, Keith. It made the difference." Pause. "Keith? Keith Andrew?"

Her only answer came from an intercepted Clan transmission, riding in on a burst of static. "They are through the gates. Striker Star, defend the north pass. Gamma Auxiliaries, hold your line at the spaceport. Any warrior who falls without taking a *stravag* enemy with you will never pilot a 'Mech again."

Connor ignored Star Captain Wimmer. "Keith Andrew, respond please."

"He's gone silent, lieutenant." Sorenson, pulling forward the trio of MFBs. "The sideband Clan channels I'm monitoring report that he broke past one picket line, but they're after him, chasing north. Let's hope he can make rendezvous with *Eclipse's* company, because for helping us he's now out of reach of the spaceport."

"Yeah, well we might as well be, too," Allen said, sullen and shocked at the same time. He pivoted his *Sunder* to stare north-east. "All this way for nothing."

Three other 'Mechs swung around to stare after the *Sunder's* gaze. Seen above the lip of the canyon, what looked like a large spheroid-shaped skyscraper rocketed skyward on a tongue of argent-white flame. It rose slowly at first, quickly gaining speed even as it gained more altitude, until it looked like an early star in the pale blue sky.

The sight of a DropShip, rocketing for orbit.