

HUNTER OR HUNTED

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Chapter Five

Archon Katrina Steiner Memorial Park
New Freedom, Lyons
Freedom Theater, Lyran Alliance
11 February, 3063

J's voice filled with the weariness he knew the entire company felt—probably his entire battalion if not the whole of the Lyons Freedom Theater Militia at this point. “Kev, I’m not sure we can hold again.”

Kevin took a long swig from his canteen, then dumped the rest over his head; the tepid liquid felt like the coolest glacier water after the days spent in a burning-hot cockpit. Using his right hand to squeeze the excess off his face, he took a deep breath and answered. “Do we have a choice? I hate that we’ve been harried all the way to the city as much as you, but here we have to stand.”

“Why here? Why do you think they’ll push through this area?”

“Because we’re here. The Cats may be changing but they’re still Clan enough to dislike the fact we managed to pull our hides out every time they almost pinned us down. That’s got to burn.”

“So you’re basing our plan of defense off of what you think they’ll do? I was hoping for something a little more there, Kev.”

“Hey, know your enemy and all that, right?”

“Sure, but you said yourself the Cats are changing. Can we really trust them?”

“Of course not, but I’ve trusted my gut for a long time and it’s usually right. Not to mention I’ve not been wrong about them yet, right?”

“Yeah, I guess so. I’m just glad the rest of the battalion is covering our flanks.”

“Yeah, me too. There are other Cats out there and if they come at us at once, this could hurt. Bad.”

“Well, we’d better mount up again. Last report had them a lot closer than I feel comfortable about outside my ‘Mech.” Kevin couldn’t help the laughter.

As they retraced their steps to their current staging area, the abrupt sound of thunder cascaded over them, bouncing and echoing off the walls of the buildings surrounding the park, stunning them both into motionlessness before they sprinted the final half-hundred meters.

“What’s going on,” Kevin yelled as he skidded through the gravel to a stop next to his XO.

Shaking his head for a moment, he continued to monitor the comline he was listening to. After several more moments he pulled one earpiece away and yelled over the continual thunder. “Looks like Second Company’s sentries spotted some advance Cat elements. Called in an artillery barrage.”

Kevin and J exchanged sheepish glances at not recognizing their own artillery. Must be more tired than we thought.

Held well back in the center of the city, the Militia’s artillery battery was made up mostly of centuries’ old Snipers, which meant the enemy, or at the least its leading elements, was less than six kilometers away. Suddenly J’s comments about being vulnerable seemed very real.

The screaming turbines and soft thumping of multiple blades announced the fly over of a lance of four Sprint Scout Helicopters, racing off in the direction of the target of the artillery barrage. Though only a moment before he’d felt vulnerable, that feeling vanished watching the pilots of the FTM’s Armor Brigade heading out boldly to face the enemy. Even the smallest weapon mounted by a BattleMech could strike a helicopter from the sky like a human swatting a bothersome mosquito. More, the Sprints did not carry a single weapon. Instead, it mounted Targeting Acquisition Gear, which it used to paint the lead elements for further artillery strikes. At least in combat he had the culmination of millennia of warfare wrapping him in offensive and defensive protection. He paused for a moment to give his fellow soldiers a solute and noticed several others tossing off solutes as well.

Good luck.

“Mount up people,” he yelled as he moved towards his *Uziel*. “Looks like they’re about ready to fall on us.” As he drew near his ‘Mech, he couldn’t help the almost painful sensation that clenched his gut upon seeing the patchwork of armor that crisscrossed his ‘Mech, not to mention the pock marked and burnt armor not yet fully repaired or replaced in other sections. It may not have been

in his family for decades or centuries like some, but it was still his 'Mech. More, being assigned to a Theater Militia did not exactly guarantee you the latest tech or 'Mechs walking off the assembly line. That made his *Uziel* all the more special to him, since it was still new enough to have armor plating that had been installed on the factory floor. To see it so damaged pulled at him. Any MechWarrior—even the meanest pirate with no regard for human life—always held a special affinity for the mount he rode into battle and to see it abused never sat right. Now, with combat only minutes away, he would wade in and his *Uziel* would have fresh scars across its pristine hide before the sun set. Shacking the morbid thoughts aside, he reached the 'Mech's legs and prepared to do his duty.

Before he'd sidled half way up the chain latter, through the continued cacophony of the artillery barrage, a new sound intruded—multiple missile launches. Glancing up, he could see the contrails of eight Arrow IV artillery missiles arcing overhead from the direction of the artillery battery's four Demolisher (Arrow IV Variant) vehicles. He was not the only one to notice and a chorus of cheers went up as the men and women of his command hung suspended from their 'Mech's ladders and pumped arms in the air. If the Arrow IV's had been launched, at least one of the helicopters had survived initial contact and successfully painted targets. Even from this distance, the look on their faces showed this was the exact boost to morale his people needed.

Nevertheless, as they began to shimmy the final lengths up to their respective cockpits, Kevin also knew that for those artillery to launch, the Cats had to be less than three kilometers away. The final battle was at hand.

12 February, 3063

The cerulean beam of twisting energy slammed into the ground at Caden's feet, paving a steaming trench in the ferrocrete between his *Mad Dog's* legs. Instinctively, his hand clenched convulsively on his right-hand joystick, sending forty long-range missiles on tails of fire towards his elusive target. He then immediately side stepped to the right and slipped into an alley. As it was not designed for BattleMech traffic, each step of the *Mad Dog's* clawed feet tore huge furrows into the ferroconcrete; his fifth step punched through to a water main, shattering the piping and spewing water in every direction.

Quickly checking his secondary screen, he found that either he'd eluded the 'Mech, or it elected not to follow; knowing these MechWarriors, he was confident it was the later. Finishing his treacherous run through the enclosed confines of the buildings, he exploded out onto a new avenue, right into the middle of a hellish brawl.

Streams of depleted uranium rounds; mega-kilojoules of coherent beams; nickel-ferrous basket-ball sized super-sonic gauss rounds; showers of short and long range missiles; writhing tendrils of particle projector cannon beams—the air was covered like a giant spider's web of deadly energy and ordinance that almost blocked the sun from reaching the ground: he was truck from several sides at once.

The shocks of the impact slammed him in several directions. The whine of the 'Mech's gyro began to crescendo and spiked into the inaudible range, meaning he'd already lost his battle with gravity; the *Mad Dog* splayed onto the ground, the momentum of its advance sliding it across the street, smashing through a civilian hovercar, taking out a fire hydrant and coming to a final rest with all by the bottom of the 'Mech's feet slid into the conjoining alley on the other side.

He glanced towards his damage schematic screen, immediately noticing how much damage the shots, along with the fall, accomplished. Though furious for falling—no MechWarrior of any ability can easily stomach the disgrace of losing his feet—the damage schematic was plain to read; if he'd stayed on his feet in the street, enemy and friendly fire would likely have penetrated armor in multiple locations. After the brutal fighting of the last hours, his armor was paper-thin in areas and his ammunition reserves were almost depleted. Standing in such a maelstrom would've meant death.

Shaking his head to clear the worst of the effects of the fall away, he swallowed back his own anger and slowly brought the machine back to its feet. Perhaps it was time to finally pull back. After all, though he'd relished pushing these inferior warriors before him—he grudgingly admitted that some of them showed above average skill—they were not here to take the world. They were only here to test these warriors and their defenses. Well, he'd tested them and found them wanting.

Continuing on towards the end of the next alley, he brought up his right arm to sever through multiple cables from which what appeared to be clothing hung; he shook his head at such uncleanness. A bit more cautious this time, Caden slowly maneuvered (hated that his sensors were damaged almost beyond repair at this point) into the street. Finding no enemies, he quickly turned right and pushed the throttle forward, gaining speed as he sped towards the last known location of his star mates.

After passing three crossroads, he turned right again, picked up additional speed and opened a commlink. "Jesika, where are you located?"

A few tense seconds passed before a response came through. "Star Commander, I believe I can see you advancing towards our position even now. We have managed to pin down several 'Mech's and are in the process of bringing them down. Your assistance would be most appreciated."

"Neg Jesika," he said, regret lacing his words. He slowed his machine as he came upon the road so recently almost his burial ground, slid up to the corner, swung around and launched another brace of missiles.

"It is time to admit we have long ago accomplished our mission and at this point are simply playing cat to the mouse. I know our ammunition reserves are low and if my armor is thin, then most of your armor is non-existent." He stopped speaking for a moment as an enemy *Dervish* popped up from behind its cover to launch its own missile racks. Caden calmly lined up a shot from both his large pulse lasers and let fly, cleanly decapitating the enemy machine.

With the satisfaction of a job more than well done, he opened up a general combat frequency. "All units, we are pulling back to sector 27B. Pull back and rendezvous at sector 27B in preparation for rendezvous with our DropShips. Our job here is done and I doubt these whipped MechWarriors will give us much of a chase."