

HUNTER OR HUNTED

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Prologue

***Headquarters of the Lyons FTM
New Freedom, Lyons
Freedom Theater, Lyran Alliance
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Kevin's footfalls echoed hollowly down the corridor as he strode with purpose towards the command center. If the rumors were true, the next few days, would be interesting to say the least. So much better than the endless boredom of a posting to a world that had not seen real action in years. He managed to keep a grimace from his face.

"Hey Obstein, you may have gotten your wish." Kevin turned towards the voice he recognized with out lessening his stride. Lieutenant James Harrison, commander of his Recon Lance, as his subordinate fell into step with him. He always teased the two meter, one hundred and eighty-five kilogram James that he simply should not be in a Recon Lance; an Assault or Force Lance was much more suited to his particular size and disposition.

He nodded in greeting, fingers scratching through dark, bristling hair. "I don't believe I was the only one with that wish, J. I distinctly recall you bemoaning this...what did you call it? 'Posting on the edge of no where,' several weeks ago."

A big grin slipped onto James' face. "I'll categorically deny that to any one who asks."

Kevin laughed. "Yeah, you probably would."

Rounding a corner, they could see the doors to the command center at the end of the hallway. After almost half the distance had been traversed, James spoke, his soft, almost worried voice contrasting strangely with the large man. "Uh, commander. Do you think we'll really have a fight here? I mean, is this an actual raid? Who would raid us?"

His words caused Kevin to slow his pace slightly, as he mulled them over. Though he truly did look forward to the possibility of real combat, instead of the ceaseless war games they practiced, he also realized he was one of only a handful of soldiers in the entire Lyons Freedom Theater Militia with real combat experience. Depending on whom their alleged attackers might be, the green FTM might not fare well. Trying to paint a good face on the situation, he responded lightly. "Of course it's a fight J. But don't worry,

you can hide behind me if you like.” That brought out a booming laugh from James that bounced around the Spartan corridor, as Kevin’s slight frame didn’t even reach the larger man’s chin. However, for now at least, it had relieved the tension. Nevertheless, Kevin appreciated that such tension was going to be felt by most of the FTM.

And for the eleven MechWarriors of my company, I’m going to have to deal with it and soon.

Reaching the end of the corridor, both men pushed past the more-than-usually nervous guards with quick grins and solutes and through the doors into the command/control/communications center for the entire Lyons FTM. Almost before the room came into focus, the charged energy of the room seemed to spike his tongue as though a quick shot of too peppered steak.

A circular room of three subsequently lower tiers, each was filled with computer consoles and communications technicians hard at work. The smooth operation of the entire unit was controlled and sustained by its commanding officer, Colonel Kinglsey Gardner, through a veritable army of communications and warrant officers located at this nexus. Moving down the first tier’s stairs, they then threaded through several tight knots of technicians moving around the circumference before descending the second tier’s stairs and so on. Kevin shook his head at such an absurd design. Some general’s uncle got tossed this gig, no doubt about it.

As he neared the final steps descending to the bottom floor of the room, he could see several other officers from the FTM, those not assigned to various posts around the world already gathered around the holotable.

“Yes, we’ve been tracking the DropShip ever since its parent JumpShip arrived in system two days ago,” Colonel Kinglsey said. “We’ve only just given the alert now, because until this morning there was still the chance the DropShip was a civilian craft that had lost communications, or just had an incompetent captain at the helm.” A round of laughter, tinged with a slight nervousness, swept the circle. Arriving at the edge of the holotable, Kevin spoke right up.

“Colonel, what made you decide it wasn’t a civilian ship?”

Colonel Kinglsey, of a height with James if slimmer, turned steel-gray eyes on Kevin and acknowledged his presence and question. “Because they sent us a message letting us know they were coming and who they are.”

"What!" Kevin responded, while equally incredulous expletives exploded among the gathered MechWarriors. Why would an attacking force be stupid enough to announce themselves when they...suddenly Kevin had a sickening feeling in the pit of his stomach. There was only one type of attacking force that would do such a thing, though how they could possibly be attacking so far from their occupation zones, he had no idea. As the rest of the officers continued their commentary about the ludicrousness of such an action, Kevin met Colonel Kinglsey's eyes and nodded once to let him know he'd figured it now. The Colonels' return nod and slight smile answered his unspoken question. He also couldn't help the slight flush of approval that he was the only officer present to quickly deduce the nature of their assailants.

Colonel Kinglsey slapped his hand on the edge of the holotable to quite conversation and continued to speak. "If you all don't mind, I'll simply play the message for you." Reaching under the edge of the table, he found the play stud and activated the recorded sequence. Instantly an image formed, floating half a meter above the table. As the picture solidified, several harsh curses around the table let him know that most of the men present were equally unnerved. Though it was only the upper third of the man, it was not his striking features, or the MechWarrior garb he wore that incited such comments. Instead, it was the logo emblazoned on the upper right side of the coolant vest the man wore: the head of a roaring feline set across a lopsided star.

The holograph animated and the MechWarrior began to speak. "I am Star Colonel Sal of the Fourth Nova Cat Regulars, Omicron Provisional Galaxy of Clan Nova Cat. In the name of Khan West and for the glory of the Cat and the Dragon, we have come to this world. Though our traditional batchall has passed into the pages of history since our coming to the Inner Sphere, still will I announce my presence to honor my opponents. Seyla."

With those words the holograph ended, blinking out like a thrown light switch.

DropShip Far Seeing
Inbound, Lyons
3 February, 3063

"Watch it *surat!*" Caden yelled, throwing himself backwards to avoid the wildly contracting myomer bundle. Catching himself on the gantry at the last moment before plunging eight meters to the DropShip deck, chaos erupted around him as technician castemen scampered about in an attempt to power down the 'Mech, or at the very least separate power from the arm musculature. Breathing heavily, angry at seeing his 'Mech treated this way, Caden tried not to strike the men aside and wrestle his *Spirit Cat* under control. He knew if he could just touch her, let her know he was there, she would calm down. A part of him knew this for the ridiculous fantasy it was, but he'd come to know the 'Mech so well in the last three years, he couldn't help the thought. Which was, of course, why like so many Nova Cat Clansmen, he'd given his 'Mech a personal name; a private identity that he shared with no one.

He watched with some satisfaction as the un-anchored end of the bundle twitched and slammed a technician aside, dropping him unconscious to the ground with a bloody nose, hanging half off the repair gantry. Though slightly amused that *Spirit Cat* would punish those who did not respect her enough, he couldn't let the man fall. Regardless of his station, the man was a trained 'Mech technician and allowing him to fall and die would be an abhorrent waste. He quickly sidled forward and dragged the man back to safety.

"That does it," a voice echoed from the cockpit of the 'Mech as the arm suddenly went limp as a dead fish. Breathing hard through his nose, Caden stomped forwards, the metal grating of the DropShip's 'Mech bay berthing structure vibrating, carelessly shouldering aside the technicians in his way.

"What have you done to my *Mad Dog*," he said, never raising his voice, but filling it with enough venom to strip the flesh off the technician's face.

A slightly pudgy, rat-faced technician stood and leaned out far enough to look at who was speaking; he held a small metal tube in his hand, with wires trailing behind it. The man's pasty-white face reminded Caden of lab rats he'd seen in several scientist castemen facilities; the man had probably never seen natural light in his life. The look of fear that crossed his face did not even register;

of course the technician feared his betters. The man swallowed reflexively several times and then attempted to answer. "I'm sorry warrior. It would appear that the right arm myomer power coplink was transverse when installed. I can only surmise that it fused when I powered the 'Mech up, sending current directly to the arm before I'd released the limb. Since we'd not finished anchoring the new myomer bundle in that arm, you can see the results."

No wonder she'd reacted the way she did. He spoke through clenched teeth. "I suggest technician that you be more careful when repairing my *Mad Dog*, or you will find yourself escorted to the nearest airlock, waste or no waste. We drop in less than twelve hours and my *Mad Dog* had better be in perfect condition, *quiaff!*"

The technician looked as though he'd just seen his entire life flash before his eyes and he averted his gaze before answering. "*Aff.*"

"And watch your language," Caden finished, already turning away. The insignificant man already forgotten, he moved towards the edge of the gantry and with the ease of long years of practice, dropped quickly to the DropShip main bay deck. Though he'd been genetically engineered to become a MechWarrior, though he'd seen the sight a thousand times, the vision of metal titans always gave him pause, evoking something deep within. Bristling with enough weaponry to level a city block, armored to take the damage of such firepower and generally fashioned along humanoid lines, imbuing them with a sense of giant metal gods, Caden still marveled he was blessed with the chance to pilot such awesome machinery.

Letting his gaze travel around the 'Mech ready area, he saw a veritable army of technician ants, swarming over the forty-five 'Mech's that made up the Fourth Nova Cat Regulars. From the thirty-ton *Incubus*, to his own sixty-ton *Mad Dog*, to the awesome ninety-ton *Supernova*, almost every size and type of 'Mech was present. He couldn't help the pride that filled him at such a sight. Pride that he was a part of this unit. Pride that he was a MechWarrior. Pride that his Cluster was participating in this raid on an Alliance world.

Some of the warriors in the Cluster muttered that this raid did nothing for the Nova Cats and only furthered the ambitions of the Draconis Combine. However, Caden ignored such senseless babble. How could such a magnificent fight not further the glory and standing of their Clan? If the Combine benefited, then so be it. Like it or not, the futures of Clan Nova Cat and the Combine were intrinsically linked for now. If one rose, it would pull the other up

as well. Why dwell on the past, when it could not be changed and the future was at hand. A future he intended to grasp with both hands.

“Caden,” a voice interrupted his musing. Turning, he saw his star mate, Jesika, moving towards him. Her lithe frame and fine, dark features mirrored his own; not surprising since they’d both come from the same sibko.

He nodded his head. “Jesika.”

“Less then twelve hours until drop.” She looked around, her eyes flicking quickly from place to place like a bird unable to decide where best to rest. If he didn’t know her better, he might have thought she was actually nervous.

“How long has it been since we have had such a fight before us Jesika?”

“Too long Caden, too long *quiaff*.”

“*Aff*. Too long.”

A sudden blaring noise filled the DropShip, arresting movement as though a frozen holovid. Two heartbeats latter, the captain’s voice washed through the ship.

“Attention all hands, attention all hands. Incoming aerospace fighters. Battle stations.”