

HUNTER OR HUNTED

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Chapter One

Staging Grounds of the Lyons FTM
New Freedom, Lyons
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"But this attack is below the Tukayyid line. Isn't this a violation of the Truce of Tukayyid?"

"J, you're forgetting a few important things. Think about it for a second, will you," Kevin said to his towering companion as they trotted out of the 'Mech hanger toward their waiting 'Mechs. The sun was just breaching the horizon, its orange glare splashing onto Lyons like the messy paintbrush of an amateur artist with delusions of grandeur. A faint, cool breeze prickled the skin on his bare legs, chest and arms and the morning felt fresh after the short pre-dawn shower, bringing out the smells of winter still struggling to keep a grip but already loosing to Spring more than a month still distant. Looking around, he could see a host of men and women moving towards the towering sentinels already moved out of their storage and prepped by technicians. It seemed as if almost everyone, despite any nervousness, was looking forward to this fight. A good day for battle.

"Didn't they get kicked out of the Clans or something?"

Kevin looked at his companion, slightly amused. "Ah, yeah J, they were Abjured. A lot worse then getting 'kicked out.' They were forcibly exiled from their previous existence at the end of a PPC. I hear they lost hundred of thousands of their civilians and thousands of their warriors when the other Clans attacked."

J gave him a slightly annoyed look. "I said they were kicked out didn't I?"

Kevin smiled even more. "Sorry, flaunting my Clan knowledge again. Kicked out will do. Any ways, since they're not really a Clan any more—though I bet they'd disagree to that statement—it doesn't involve the treaty any more. Of course, if this is under the direction of the snakes, which they are a vassal to or something like that now any ways, then it makes no difference either. Even if it did, J, we'd still have to kick their sorry butts off our world."

"Too true. See you in the seat Commander," he responded and peeled off towards his own 'Mech.

Moving towards his own machine, Kevin still could not believe he'd draw the lucky straw to pilot such a new design. With it's

back canted legs, jutting cockpit slung underneath an overlarge torso mounted missile rack and arms that ended not in articulated hands but in the barrels of particle protector cannons, the *Uziel* was a fine melding of firepower and speed for a fifty-ton 'Mech. Its only real draw back was its moderately light armor.

Kevin reached its foot and began to quickly climb the metal ladder dangling from the ingress/egress hatch located on the right side of the cockpit. Reaching the top, he sidled in through the hatch, which his technician left open, and touched the retract button for the ladder. To the sounds of metal clinking on metal as the ladder was quickly wound into its storage compartment, Kevin moved further into the cramped cockpit and turned to seal the hatch. As he spun the pressure bar, his ears popped with a quick jaw clench. Easing around, he settled himself into the command chair to the caress of synthleather and the pungent aroma of his own, stale sweat.

For a moment he was surprised his technician had shutdown the *Uziel's* fusion reactor after moving it only scant hours before. Shrugging, he reached forward and firmly grabbed the large yellow lever and moved it into a down position. The rumble of the reactor coming to life in the heart of his 'Mech brought a warm glow to life in his own core, even after all these years; a mad scientist's glee over seeing his Frankenstein come to life. Lights lit up across his console and the main view screen flickered and then steadied into its three hundred and sixty degree view shrunk into a single forward looking screen, enabling him to see everything around him at a glance.

Reaching into a small compartment in the right arm of his command chair, he withdrew four cables and monitors patches, which he attached to the insides of his thighs and arms, while attaching the wire ends to the monitors and threading the opposite ends through his vest; he left the ends dangling for a moment.

He then removed another cable from the same compartment and attached it to his cooling vest, which came alive with moving coolant that sent goose bumps skittering along his entire body and he repressed a shiver. However, during battle, when the demands of movement and weapons fire drew more and more energy from the fusion reactor he was sitting on, causing waste heat that could sear his lungs, his life would hang on the ability of the coolant vest to keep his core body temperature under control.

Reaching up behind him he pulled down the neurohelmet and settled it over his head, its heavy weight resting on the padded

shoulders of his cooling vest. Generations of young holovid watchers, through such shows as the *Immortal Warrior* series, were raised to believe that a MechWarrior became his machine, sloughing off his flesh to wear crystalline armor. However, the truth was a lot more mundane. Neural receptors in the helmet translated a MechWarrior's natural ability to balance himself, directly into the massive gyro housed in the center torso of every 'Mech, allowing it to walk upright with out falling over with every step. Firmly synching the helmet's chinstrap, he picked up the loose medical monitor wire ends and jack them into the sockets located at the throat of the helmet.

Leaning forward, he toggled a switch that began the initiation sequence and a computer generated voice filled his ears. "Uziel DIHES2 activated. Voice-authorization required."

"Commander Kevin Obstein."

"Voice identification underway...voice pattern match obtained, proceed."

"Today is a good day."

"Confirm authorization."

"Today is a good day."

"Authorization confirmed. Good Morning MechWarrior. Full-control is yours."

With that, the main computer accepted his authority to pilot the *Uziel* and the console lit up fully, as weapons, damage schematic and targeting came on line and the distant rumble under his feet grew into the low-key growl of a beast ready to pounce.

Yes, a good day for battle indeed.

DropShip Far Seeing Descent, Lyons

"Just glad we are not cocooning it this time," Jesika said, her voice filling his neurohelmet with its warm tone.

Caden Rosse smiled in spite of the gravity of the situation. "Well, considering how many times you have participated in an orbital insertion, who would have thought you would still have claustrophobic problems with it," he responded. He'd long ago gotten over the shock of one of his sibkin, one of *his* warriors, susceptibility to such a weakness; her success despite it ample proof of her battle acumen.

"It is the not seeing. Even with this *stravag* neurohelmet on, I can still see and a hover-drop is a no brainer. But those *stravag* ceramic cocoons! I do my duty, but I'd just as soon sit down at a table filled with those *surat* Shin Legioners as choose a cocoon."

That made him wince. During the Nova Cats transmutation from an invading Clan to a Clan of the Star League back in '61, they had had a vicious encounter with the First Shin Legion after they were already members of the new Star League Defense Force, resulting in the Fourth's transfer to the world of Tarazed. Not wanting to stay on such a touchy topic, he changed the subject. "Please, your language Jesika. I swear if we are around these Kuritans any longer, we will all be using contractions. If you still have such claustrophobic problems what do you do when your sensors are destroyed?"

"I do not know, since I have never had them destroyed. What have you done Star Commander?"

He laughed at her verbal barb. "At least I never actually had my 'Mech blown out from under me."

"It was not," she responded with mock indignity. "I lost my leg. That was all."

He was about to respond when his Star Captain's voice cut across the general frequency. "Lancers, we are green for go in thirty seconds. I repeat, we are green for go in thirty seconds."

With that, two huge DropShip 'Mech bay doors began to open, letting in a blast of light and shrieking, frigid wind that buffeted those 'Mechs closest to the openings. The noise rose even above

the howl of the DropShip engines as the pilots brought the ship to a hovering position approximately one hundred meters above the ground and began to move in a straight line maintaining that distance. Twenty-five seconds later, the twin bay doors finished retracting and the 'Mechs of the Fourth Nova Cat Regulars sprang into action.

Moving forward single file, each warrior brought his 'Mech to the edge of the precipice and then leapt out into the empty air and dropped from site; each 'Mech followed suit with strict precision, flinging themselves into the airy abyss. As Caden brought his own *Mad Dog* to the edge, he did not hesitate for a moment, or try to gain a visual bearing before mimicking the nine 'Mechs before him and used the powerful myomers in his legs to propel him out of the safety of the *Union-C* class DropShip.

A slight weightlessness always accompanied this part, as he felt he would float out of his seat if he'd not been strapped it. However, several Gs of weight slammed into him as he stomped down fully on both foot pedals, igniting the temporary jump jet packs strapped to the legs and back of his 'Mech. Attempting to arrest his downward fall, he feathered the jump jets as the ground rushed up towards him.

Additional sounds and jewels of energy burst all around him and a massive fireball erupted in front and slightly below him, the exploding *Incubus* almost knocking his *Spirit Cat* into a yaw he might not have recovered from; it appeared the defenders had guessed where they would touch down and had come out to play.

Miraculously, not a single weapon's discharge touched him and with the ease of long practice—the entire Omicron Provisional Galaxy excelled at the hover-drop maneuver—Caden flared the jump jets a final time to bleed off the remaining velocity and brought his 'Mech down with a tight flexing of its legs. He immediately reached forward and tapped a control, setting off explosive bolts that went off with a dull bang that reverberated through his 'Mech and the now spent jump jet packs fell away.

It was time for battle.

Pushing his throttle forward—the hard-plastic grips as familiar as his own face against his palms—he toggled his HUD active and began cycling through enemy targets. Closest to him was an enemy *Commando*, about three hundred meters away. A light 'Mech, it would soon be a dead 'Mech, as Caden brought the cross hairs of his dual large pulse lasers and matching medium pulse lasers

to bear. A solid tone in his ears meant a lock and his right hand index finger pulled the TIC—target integrated circuit—that fired all four energy weapons. Emerald darts tore at the sky sending heat eddies swimming in the cockpit, leaving a trail of burnt ozone as they splashed across the enemy 'Mech's torso. Never designed to take a quarter of such punishment, burning holes appeared all across the machine as though a hyperactive, metal eating virus were unleashed. Jerking, as the gyro and engine were systematically destroyed, the *Commando* dropped to the ground like a passed out drunk.

Before he could even smile at his success, a cloud of LRMs, like an angry swarm of bees, dropped out of the sky to explode across his 'Mech. The force of the detonations rocked the 'Mech back, and Kevin used foot pedals and reverse throttle to take a voluntary step back to rebalance his *Spirit Cat* and looked to find the enemy. To his far right field of vision, just with in a copse of trees, he spotted a *Cobra*. A new Lyran design, the forty-five ton 'Mech had good speed and duel fifteen long-range missile packs in tubular mounts for arms. Grinning with anticipation, Caden angled toward the *Cobra*, carefully stepping through a small bed of boulders so as to not damage a foot actuator, while he lined up a second shot and returned fire with a salvo of forty missiles.

Most exploded harmlessly among the trees surrounding the 'Mech and throwing up geysers of dirt in front of the machine, but it kept the enemy MechWarrior busy long enough for him to get a good lock with his lasers. Already sweating profusely and knowing he did not need to overheat his 'Mech for such a machine, he quickly reconfigured his weapon TICs and fired twin large pulse lasers. Both found their target in the center and right torso, melting furrows in the armor but to Caden's pleasure, the MechWarrior stood his ground and launched another missile salvo.

Ah, this would be a good fight indeed.