

HUNTER OR HUNTED

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Chapter Three

Karla Freeway
Near New Freedom, Lyons
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Bloody mosquitoes!

For the hundredth time, it seemed, Kevin attempted to bring his particle projector cannons to bear against the flying battle armor. After all the years of fighting in a renaissance of technology, with the Houses and Clans constantly fielding new technologies and engines of war, he thought his ability to be surprised would be blunted by now. It wasn't.

He'd never faced this type of battle armor before—as far as he was aware, no one in his command had even heard of it before—and it was proving to be just as deadly as its larger cousin, if in its own unique way. The battle armor was slightly smaller in the main body than the standard Clan battle armor and its legs were particularly thin. Nevertheless, the battle armor had twin giant, turbofan type structures mounted on each shoulder; at least he assumed it was turbo fans that actually allowed the power armored troops to hover and move like a VTOL. More, not only did they mount the standard laser of most battle armor, but they actually carried bomblets, which had already left a *Tarantula* a smoldering heap and several others in his company bore their marks as well. As he finally managed to get target lock and kilojoules of energy seared the trooper from existence, he thought again of the apt term—mosquitoes!

"That appears to be the last of them sir," his XO's voice broke across the commline.

"Yeah, but how did they get here so fast and where are their supporting 'Mechs?"

"Don't know that sir."

"Rhetorical question and you know it," he responded, a slight smile creasing his face tired face, as sweat streaked several tracks down his face.

"Yes sire, I do," The answering grin came through the electronic reproduction clear as day.

"So, what do you think happened? Could they have out flanked us? I just don't see how that's possible. After all, we left their last

sweep element in a broken mound and we know most of our machines have a speed advantage over theirs. If they keep throwing their forces at us piece meal, we'll just keep grinding them up. What do you think is going on?"

"Like I said sir, I'm not sure what's up. Of course I agree that in all likelihood they are headed for New Freedom and that this hear piece of straight, flat ferrocrete is the best way to reach it. However, could be they are baiting us? We know the Clans are more than willing to throw men and machines away to achieve an ultimate goal. So, what if they are tossing us some morsels to keep us interested in staying right here, while they make an end run? Sure it will take them a lot longer humping through those backwoods, but if they keep us occupied by thinking they're coming down this line, that would give them the time they need to sweep past us."

Kevin paused for a moment and reached up to adjust the chin-strap of his neurohelmet, feeling the callus that had formed over the years of such chaffing. "That's a good point, but do you think these Clansmen are that devious? Doesn't seem very Clan like."

"HA!" the laugh barked through the commline and echoed in the small confines of the cockpit. "Sir, you're the one always telling us that you can't trust the Clans to hold to their precious rules of warfare any more. Not to mention, these are Cats and from what I hear, they are quickly finding their home with the Dracs. We shouldn't make any bets about what they will and won't do."

"Just keeping you on your toes," Kevin smiled ruefully. The day had indeed been long if his troops were using his own words against him.

"Yes sir, I appreciate that." Kevin could still hear the smile.

"Be that as it may," he continued, "there's just something not right about what you're saying. I can't really say why since I fully believe my own rhetoric, but I think these Clanners do want a straight up fight. I still can't say why they keep throwing only elements of their force at us, but I think in the end they'll come charging straight down this freeway and we'll have to try and not choke on 'em.

"Your call sir. Course I'd liked it better if—"

"Charlie-Omega-Golf. Charlie-Omega-Golf," the harsh tone cut through their discussion. "This is Force Recon, do you copy?"

Kevin quickly keyed a new channel and responded. "Force Recon, this is Charlie-Omega-Golf, I'm receiving you. Respond."

"Ah, is that you Kevin?"

He was known for his informality, but he was not sure how he felt about this person not only calling him by his first name but omitting his rank. They were in the field for heaven sake! He was about to respond when a memory swam to the surface and a grin lit his face. "Jacob. Blake's Blood, is that you!"

"One and the same, 'o illustrious captain."

"Don't tell me you're the reinforcements I asked for hours ago. I thought the least I'd get was a real lance of MechWarriors."

"Well, with you holding this position, they felt confident in sending the worst of the worst." Both men burst out laughing.

"Um sir," his second timidly spoke on the line once more, reminding him of what they were about.

"It's okay. Looks like the brass have just sent us the sorriest MechWarrior it has ever been my pleasure to know. "

There was silence on the line as his XO digested that statement and then spoke once more. "Well, it's reinforcements and if you're gut feeling is correct, we'll need them."

The words washed away most of his mirth. Moving his 'Mech back towards the center of the thin ribbon of ferrocrete that stretched arrow straight through rolling hills and badlands, he peered into the distance and wondered when the Nova Cats would come.

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Emerald darts of energy stretched into the distance, briefly shattering the darkness into an ethereal pre-dawn that brought no real illumination to the struggle of metal titans on the ferrocrete. Muzzle flashes of hyper-velocity autocannon rounds strobed the gloom and the dazzling display of azure whips of man-made lighting continually cut through the velvety blackness.

On the new moon of Lyons, the Nova Cats had struck with all the predatory viciousness of their namesake and already two vehicles and a 'Mech burned like lonely funeral pyres, patiently awaiting the arrival of their kin. The thought brought a small smile of satisfaction to Caden's face.

"Star commander," Jesika's voice filled his neurohelmet.

"I copy Jesika. You have a report, *quiaff?*"

"*Aff*, commander. As you surmised, it appears they did indeed receive reinforcements. However, as far as I can ascertain, it is only four 'Mechs, all under fifty tons. I do not believe it will have a significant effect on the outcome of this conflict."

"I agree Jesika. Do they think so little of us, or do they simply not have as many units on this planet as we were led to believe?"

"I have no assured answer for you Star commander. However, they do have a very large area to defend and with our multiple thrusts, perhaps we have simply stretched them to the breaking point."

He couldn't help the full grin that flushed his face. "Well, if they are stretched to the breaking point, then we should be about breaking them, *quiaff?*"

"*Aff* commander," she replied with a laugh, "*Aff.*"

Movement caught his eye as around the burning wreck of a *Scarabus* a *Hatchetman* stalked forward. The firelight lit the edge of the wickedly lethal hatchet in its right hand cocked and ready for action. Caden felt a sneer pull at his face. Physical weapons. How brutish. No Clansmen would lower himself to such a lack of finesse.

As the enemy 'Mech quickly attempted to close the distance, Caden began backpedaling while bringing his weapons to bear.

The reticule on his forward screen suddenly glowed the gold of a target lock and he clenched his right forefinger, sending out another mega joules torrent of jade. Yet through some preternatural instinct, the enemy MechWarrior ignited the *Hatcheman's* jump jets microsecond before his *Vulture's* paired large pulse lasers fired, sending the 'Mech soaring into the air on streams of superheated plasma; the energy spent itself uselessly.

Continuing to move backwards, he attempted once again to bring his weapons to bear on the rapidly descending 'Mech, but only one laser managed to scour off a half ton of armor along the *Hatcheman's* left leg. The 'Mech touched down in a perfect, knee-crouch form and autocannon shells vomited forth from its right torso at a horrific rate. The rounds initially fell short, chopping into the ground at his 'Mech's feet but with superb marksmanship, the enemy MechWarrior marched the stream of shells up onto the *Mad Dog's* left leg and managed to keep it on target even as Caden reversed directions in an effort to throw him off. Well over a ton of shattered armor plating littered the ground before the shells finished their devastating work, causing him to pause momentarily. He was unaware of any autocannon possessed by the Inner Sphere that could deliver such damage at the range it had been delivered. Was this 'Mech mounting captured Clan equipment? Or was this some new technology only recently fielded by the Inner Sphere?

Already drenched in sweat by the heat of several paired discharges of his lasers, and head swimming by this new development, Caden suddenly felt less sure of himself. Instead of firing another laser salvo, he answered the barrage with one of his own that sent forty long-range missiles spiraling through the air, only to explode harmlessly on the now empty ferrocrete.

With instincts of his own learned across untold battles, he quickly pushed the throttle full forward and prayed he was correct as his 'Mech's clawed feet scabbled for purchase on the ferrocrete and quickly shot forward. Torso twisting as far to the right as possible and bringing up his right arm's twin barrels of a large and medium pulse laser, he counted the seconds and firing exactly as the *Hatchetman* hurtled out of the sky, overshooting its intended target.

The lasers sliced through the weaker back armor of the *Hatchetman* like a hot-knife through butter and blasted into the delicate internal structure. The 'Mech froze as a huge gout of flame shot out the rent in the back of the machine and the entire head

assembly shot into the air as the MechWarrior took escape from the ammo explosion that was tearing his machine apart.

Caden's *Vulture* was too close to the resulting explosion. The force of the blast, combined with the speed of his 'Mech on the ferrocrete and the angle of his upper body, overcame the whining gyro and gravity took hold carrying his 'Mech into the ground; it slid for several dozen meters before coming to a stop.

Conscious, he cursed as he hung stunned for a moment in the restraining harness, the blood of his bitten tongue tasting of copper. Shaking the worst of the effects off, he slowly maneuvered his 'Mech back to its feet and cursed again as he noticed how much armor his tumble stripped away.

"Star Commander," Jesika's voice startled him. "It appears they are retreating. We pursue, *quiaff?*"

He slowly shook his head, attempting to remove the worst of the effects of his fall and answered. "*Neg* Jesika." He could not stop thinking about the weapon the superb MechWarrior employed with such precision. Were there more such surprises awaiting them? Suddenly a headlong rush into darkness no longer seemed the best way to assure victory."

"*Neg* commander?"

"*Aff* Jesika, *neg*. We need to regroup. Do not worry. By now they must have a good idea of where we are going and there is really only one place they can be as well. Victory will yet be ours."

An un-Clan like thought abruptly struck: he hoped his words were true.