

HUNTER OR HUNTED

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Chapter Four

***Kell Hound Memorial
Near New Freedom, Lyons
Freedom Theater, Lyran Alliance
8 February, 3063***

The sun sat well above the horizon, just starting to burn off the morning fog that smothered the low-hills in wispy white. Through the thinning mist the clear, cobalt sky appeared an oasis of serenity if only it could be reached. The air carried mixed scents of wet loam, scorched metal and leaking heat sink coolant, causing Kevin's nose to twitch; the sneeze was inevitable.

"Bless you," J said as he came close enough to be seen through the swirling haze.

"Thanks J," he responded after wiping his palms onto the pant legs of his jump suit he'd dawned before venturing forth from his *Uziel's* cockpit.

"No problem. So, um, where are we?"

"Standing out in the middle of a field."

"Funny Kev, very funny."

"You asked." He took a moment to look around then moved off at a brisk pace towards a low-lying hill that appeared to be about a quarter kilometer off in the distance.

"Um, Kev, you going to answer me?"

He looked back over his shoulder and responded, "sure," and kept walking. J stood still for a moment more before spitting off to the side in disgust at his commander's antics and followed; his larger legs and pace quickly brought him even as they walked through the final wisps of mist.

As they continued, the frantic sound of activity began to increase behind them as Kevin's company attempted what makeshift repairs they could in the field. They desperately hoped the Battalion's Karnov would arrive with more ammunition stores before the Nova Cats found them; over three quarters of the company had expended fifty percent of their consumable ammunition and three 'Mechs were completely out.

“So, we don’t know where we are and we don’t know where the Nova Cats are and you feel just fine taking a stroll like its Sunday morning and were on the veranda?” J couldn’t hide the sarcasm.

Kevin laughed loud and long, as he squelched through a particularly muddy patch of ground. It felt good to laugh after the heated exchanges they’d been in the last several days. “First J, in case you’ve forgotten I did post sentries,” he responded, pointing to Jacob’s *Hollander* that could just be seen a kilometer or so off to the left now that the fog truly gave up the ghost to the warming sun, mostly obscured by an intervening hill. “Second they pushed us hard but we pushed back and I don’t believe they’ll be coming at us today. Finally and the most important reason, do you know the history of this place?”

Caught off guard, J simply looked at him in confusion and finally shook his head. “No. I believe that’s why I asked you where we were. Unlike you, I’ve only been on planet six month and I’ve never been here.”

Kevin shook his head in mock regret. “What do they teach you in school these days. This is history, right here. Kell Hound history.” He could see the light of understanding bloom in J’s eyes and almost smiled at the look on his face when he spoke.

“Ah, I see. Just because you have a fascination with those elite mercs, doesn’t mean the rest of us have to idolize them. I tend to stick with stuff that’s pure Lyran.”

“True, but this occurred during the Fourth Succession, early ’29, and it did impact the Lyran Commonwealth and eventually led to the death of Duke Aldo Lestrade.”

J’s face darkened for a moment. “Traitor. Good riddance”

“Yeah, traitor, but only because he lost. If not for the Kell Hounds, history might remember him in a different light.”

As they spoke, they’d drawn closer to a small, fenced off park that contained a rather large statue at its center. Though there were no roads leading to it, or buildings, the grounds looked well tended and manicured. Stepping through the gate, the two warriors slowly walked up to the metal sculpture.

It depicted numerous children riding on or holding on to a miniature cow, the children’s faces portraying complete trust in their unusual mount, while a wolfhound snarled in front, protecting them from some unseen enemy. A silence descended—even the

far off sounds of repairs were muffled to silence—as the two men gazed on the strange piece of art.

Finally J broke the silence once more. “Um, I take it the Wolfhound represents the Kell Hounds, but who are they protecting and what?”

Kevin gazed a moment longer on the Kell Hound Memorial before speaking. “During the Fourth War, the Kell Hounds managed to liberate a large group of civilians from the Styx mining colony in Combine space. They relocated the survivors to Lyons, and even helped in building a make-shift city they called New Freedom, which has become the New Freedom you know. However, Duke Lestrade was none too happy at the Kell Hounds having the audacity to simply plop down immigrants on one of *his* worlds without even a ‘by your leave’ and tried to rectify the situation. One of the leaders of the community, one Clovis Holstein, is said to have taken affront to this fact and murdered the man.”

Another few heartbeats passed before anyone spoke. “Do you believe that?”

“Not sure, but I do know he died under very mysterious circumstances and Clovis did in fact exist and was part of this community. In fact, when New Freedom was attacked and the damn snakes were destroying what the Hounds had built, Clovis was said to have protected the children in an underground bunker.”

“Ah, now the statue makes sense. Still, I guess that sounds pretty good, but I got to ask Kev, why’d you want to see it? Beyond your weird obsession with the Kell Hounds.”

He couldn’t help smiling. “Well, perhaps because I feel a little like the Kell Hounds right now. The Genyosha were hunting them—in fact the whole reason the Dracs created the unit was to destroy the Hounds—and yet they found the calm to do such an amazing thing. Makes me think that no matter how bad it gets, no matter how hard the Cats may be pressing us, we can deal with it. We’ll win in the end.”

The sudden whine of the approaching Karnov and the resulting cheer, which they could hear even from this distance, washed over them. “Well Kev, I bet the Kell Hounds caught a break to survive and we just did to.”

With a last look over his shoulder and silent thanks for the inspiration, Kevin smiled broadly and began the hike back to their

impromptu camp. A lot of work to be done before the Cats struck again.



The *Chaeronea* swept through the inky darkness; only the thinnest sliver shown as Lyons' moon began its long waxing cycle. A small aerospace fighter—the Clan craft only massed twenty-five tons—it held grace and speed surpassed by very few other aircraft. Along with the extended range particle projector cannon mounted in the nose—a large weapon for such a small craft—and the almost dagger-like, forward sweeping wings, the *Chaeronea* could swoop down like an avenging angel before an enemy was aware of its presence.

Pilot Johaan sighed in exasperation. That was not her mission tonight and she knew it. Find the retreating Lyrans with out giving away your presence and report back at once. "*Savashri,*" she swore out loud. How could Caden demand this of her? She was every bit as much the warrior as he. How dare he use her to find the enemy and then order her to stand aside so he could lunge for the kill and glory?

With the effortlessness of one bred and trained since birth, she eased the fighter into several barrel rolls just to burn off her own frustration. She might challenge him to a Trial of Grievance once ground bound again, but she would not dishonor herself by refusing his commands.

"Point Commander Johaan, what has occurred?" The voice of her wing mate echoed in the confines of the cockpit. "You are okay, *quiaff?*"

"*Aff Jek,*" she responded calmly. "Just enjoying this fine night for flying."

"*Stravag.* You know I feel as you do, *quiaff?*"

"*Aff Jek.* Then we both can challenge him to a Trial of Grievance when this is over."

Strong laughter over the commline was response enough. "*Aff Point commander. I will enjoy that very much.*"

With a smile on her face from the firm support of her wing mate, she slowly began moving her overly large head side-to-side, her enormous eyes scanning the darkness for any tail-tell sign of the

enemy. She knew it was extremely unlikely she could spot anything from this altitude, but it continued to occupy her thoughts. A sudden chirping sound brought her attention back to her radar screen; there as bright as day was an encampment of 'Mechs.

"It would appear our prey has been spotted."

"Aff Jek. Time to let our illustrious Star Commander know." Once again laughter warmed her from cold anger.

Clenching her jaw, Johaan opened up a commline to Caden. "Star Commander, do you copy?" Static filled the line for long seconds.

"I copy. Who is this? Over."

"Star Commander Caden, this is Point Commander Johaan. We have found the prey. I am sending you the coordinates as we speak." As they banked their fighters to stay roughly on target, Caden responded.

"I copy Point commander. I have the coordinates. Excellent job Point commander. Over."

Despite herself, she was pleased with the praise. "Strike swift Star commander."

"With claws and teeth, Point Commander."



The nickel-ferrous Gauss round skipped several times across the wet prairie grass, bleeding off velocity before clipping Caden's *Mad Dog* in the lower leg. The impact shattered armor and shivered up through the 'Mech until his teeth rattled for a moment. Lucky for him, the low shot lost enough velocity to only cause half the damage a clean shot might inflict.

He pulled the targeting reticule onto the swiftly moving shape in the darkness and swore after several seconds with no target lock—out of range. The retreating *Hollander* must have fired at its maximum range before pulling back. Once again he was forced to admire these warriors. In the dark, at this distance and he still managed to clip me. Very impressive indeed.

"Star Commander Caden, do you copy."

"I copy Star commander Jesup."

"Star Commander, they have once more pulled back. My Star is attempting to forestall their retreat on their right flank...sector 23C. Are you still located in sector 19A? If so, I request you drive directly towards sector 22B, which will allow us to pincer them. Over."

Caden quickly punched up his tactical maps of the area and queued through several screens until he'd located the designated sectors. From the input they received from Point Commander Johaan's flyovers, they had a fair idea of the terrain involved. Though the Lyran units were generally faster than his own machines, Star Commander Jesup could pin them in place long enough for them to close in as well.

Only two days ago he might have hesitated, still unsure after his close brush with the new Inner Sphere technology. However, he had quickly realized it was only a weapon and that he was superior to any weapon they might field. More importantly, their current strike in the early morning hours had pushed the Spheroids hard, causing them to retreat once more, leaving another burning hulk of a 'Mech. A very good omen.

"I copy Star commander. We will proceed to sector 22B with all haste."

"I copy Star commander. Run swift."

"Strike hard, over."

Caden reached forward to open another general line to his Star. "Nova Cats, we move to sector 22B now. We have them on the run, so there is no need for stealth. We make best speed." A chorus of affirmatives answered.

As he began to move the *Vulture* forward he suddenly saw a dark mass, larger than the surrounding area, loom out of the darkness and he just managed to avoid stepping on it. A passing glance showed some type of statuary. With dawn still an hour away it was too difficult to make out clearly, but it appeared to be the statue of some four-legged animal with strange growths. Why was it out in the middle of nowhere? Did they worship animals here? He shook his head. He would never understand these Spheroids.

Pushing the throttle full forward, the speed mounted until the *Mad Dog's* legs ate up the distance at 86 kph. The day was still very young for the hunt.