

HUNTER OR HUNTED

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Chapter Two

Clovis River
Near New Freedom, Lyons
Freedom Theater, Lyrans Alliance
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"Blake's Blood!" J said for the sixth time. Or was seventh? Kevin couldn't remember. Course J simply voiced what everyone else in the company was thinking.

Eager to defend their world, Kevin's company had deployed to one of a dozen sites that Intel said was a probable grounding site for the Nova Cats. Fate heard their prayers and a *Union-C*-class DropShip hove into view, streaking down through the sky like a fallen angel. He'd already radioed for reinforcements, but the nearest was Charlie's Striker company and it would take them a good two hours to arrive and that's if they came running and hell bent.

Two hours, Kevin knew, they didn't have when the Nova Cats executed a full hover-drop maneuver. Not only did a full Trinary of fifteen 'Mechs—two Stars carrying battle armor; a few of them designs he'd never seen or even heard of before—fell from the DropShip, meaning he was slightly outgunned and outnumbered, but the expertise required to move that many 'Mechs out of a moving DropShip and safely to the ground shook him. His troops were eager, but they were as green as spring grass compared to these Clanners and if he wasn't careful, the Nova Cats would mow them down.

At least he'd been able to knock his troops out of their malaise and they'd even managed to destroy two light Clan 'Mechs before they'd even touched soil. However, once on the ground, the lethal firepower of the Clan machines began to take their toll and he'd been forced into a tactical withdrawal. It was galling, but he wasn't stupid. Trade ground for time against a superior armed foe; nothing else he could do. As it was, he'd lost Christian's *Enforcer* to the azure whip of a PPC blast to the head and Angelica's *Cobra* had simply collapsed in on itself with the amount of damage it received. Two other 'Mech's were crippled, forcing him to leave them where they stood. In less than twenty minutes, the Clanners almost completely routed his command, forcing them from their entrenched position in covered terrain and corralling them some three kilometers already from the original site. It was enough to raise his bile.

Alarms sparked once more, warning of a target lock. Years of hard won reflexes had him side stepping his *Uziel* with out con-

scious thought when the twin extended range particle projector cannon beams rent the air; only one caught his machine. Of course one was enough as it tore into his right arm, the superheated beam vaporizing the armor on his left arm into a cloud of metallic vapor and over heating the Mech's right arm 'bone,' a honeycombed, foamed-aluminum core wrapped with stressed silicon-carbide monofilament and protected by a rigid, titanium-steel shell. Though one of the most damage resistant materials ever created by man, the PPC was one of the most destructive weapons ever created; red lights burned into existence on his damage schematic as the bone fractured. He continued to sidle side ways, putting more terrain in between his unseen attacker and himself as he pulled in a lungful of hot air and frustration, while he further surveyed the damage. It looked as though his left arm's upper actuator was history but he breathed a momentary sigh of relief his own PPC still functioned. It would be harder to aim with the faulty arm, but it preferable to having his firepower halved.

"Commander, I've got bogey's coming in at three-four-four. I mark it as two 'Mechs, unidentified." Checking his situational map, he realized Jak's report belatedly confirmed his own encounter with those same bogeys.

"I copy," he responded. "I've already encountered our uninvited guests and they left me with a nasty gift."

"You okay boss?"

"I'll live but another few gifts like that and my shiny, new ride will be history." He again looked at his situational map and toggled to the topographical as he kept his *Uziel* on the move. It looked like the two enemy 'Mechs—he prayed it was only two—had flanked his current position on the left. He knew his fast paced retreat left some of the slower Clan machines behind; he'd seen a *Supernova* and the thought of his green troops facing the ninety-ton monster almost made him break out into a sweat. However, if these were the only two Clanners that managed to catch up to his troops, then there just might be a chance to cut them down before their reinforcements could arrive. After another moment's look at the topographical, he made the call and in less than thirty seconds his remaining troops were on the move, the thumping gate and swaying motion of his own machine on the move confirmation of his commitment to the plan.

Almost a full fifteen minutes passed before contact occurred again. Kevin guessed the approximate line of march of the two Clan flankers and set up a net of moving 'Mechs that swept forward

in an enfolding motion. This left him dangerously over exposed should the main element find his flank completely exposed, but allowing the two flankers to continue their activities would doom his command even quicker.

Chatter erupted across the commline as the twin Clan 'Mechs were met first by one and then another of his company followed in quick succession. By the time he crested a rise to view the battle field, he could see a Clan *Nobori-nin* smoldering on the tundra and before he could even bring his PPCs on-line, the Nova Cat *Ferri* took a final, fatal blow to the center torso and the 'Mech's upper half literally slid off backwards as the legs crumpled to the side. Though he could see two more of his own 'Mechs on the ground, he was still pleased and he opened up a commline to his company.

"I see the Cat can be de-clawed." The round of hearty laughter that followed lifted his spirit, as he knew the fight lifted theirs.

They'd not been beaten yet.



The metal giant stood over the smoldering corpses of two younger brethren, their twisted remains splattered with leaking coolant and ochre dirt, creating for a moment the look of blood, as the viscous liquid slowly sloughed off onto the ground.

The scene was suddenly shattered as a Point of Sylph battle armor flew into his field of vision; probably there to collect the fallen warrior's Giftakes. Even after months, the almost effete battle armor, with their thin limbs and over sized VTOL engines mounted high on their backs, seemed wrong to Caden. Then again, who was he to complain about looks when they'd proven so effective on the battlefield? For a moment he wondered what the Merchant Caste had traded to Clan Cloud Cobra for the new battle armor design.

"*Surats*," Caden swore after concentrating again on the fallen *Nobori-nin* and *Ice Ferret*, uncaring that such a comment was loud enough to be picked up by the mike and carried to his Star mates. Studying the information on his forward view screen and tactical displays, it was obvious the two warriors were caught in an ambush. Anger stirred with in, but did not crest where it once might have.

The Clan way of combat involved warriors declaring a one-on-one challenge to each other and then fighting to the finish, before moving onto to another warrior. The honor in such a battle was obvious. But when the Clans returned to invade the Inner Sphere, they had found a foe that did not shirk at using every underhanded, dishonorable tactic to defeat their foes. Though the warriors of the Draconis Combine held more honor than most Spheroids, even they had lines across which they left their honor. So now that the Nova Cats were intertwined with the Inner Sphere, every warrior found he could not always fight in the traditional way laid down across two centuries. There were times when such honor must be set aside for the greater good of the Clan.

Abruptly Caden realized something that should have been obvious for some time. Though it had been over two years since his Cluster fought in actual combat, it had participated in several joint training exercises with select Combine units; an effort by his Khan to further integrate the Clan with the Combine he surmised. However, during those exercises, his Cluster suffered numerous humiliating defeats at the hands of the Combine troops. At the time, he believed it a simple case of his warriors unaccustomed to the dishonorable tactics employed against them, as well as the fact that no live ammunition was used; Clan training always involved live ammunition.

Now, however, he believed it something much more insidious. Nova Cat warriors were losing their edge. They were Clan warriors, and yet Spheroid *surats* were out performing them. Yes, this had been an ambush, but they only eliminated two 'Mechs before they died. During the Clan invasion, a half dozen enemy 'Mechs would have littered the ground before these two MechWarriors fell.

With such understanding came anger, rearing until he clenched teeth to keep from slamming his fist into a secondary monitor. What are we becoming? Our Khans chose to cast the lot of the Nova Cats with the Inner Sphere to survive, but in doing so we are sapping away the strength of our warrior caste. We are losing the power of our vision!

This he could not accept and he spoke before he fully realized what words he might speak. "I will recommend that Tora Lossey's Giftake be disbarred from the breeding program." Silence filled the commline and even he was taken a back by his words.

The Clan's eugenics program worked to develop the ultimate warrior through selective genetic breeding and then harsh, martial training. Caden himself, along with over half of his Star were

Trueborns, gestated in iron-wombs. The other half were Freebirths, those of natural birth, and though the Nova Cats did not have such harsh views on the subject as some Clans, Freebirths were still generally looked down upon as a lesser individuals. For a Clan warrior, to have one's genetic material included in the eugenics program was their drive, the meaning of their very existence, their way to gain immortality. Usually, once a warrior won their Bloodname through numerous, severe Trials of combat, it was assured. However, in cases where a warrior died ignominiously, their Giftake could be denied.

"Ah Caden, Tora was Bloodnamed," Jesika spoke, her voice soft but filled with reason. "It appears even in ambush they fought valiantly, dispatching two 'Mechs."

Though he knew she was right, something in him could not let this pass. Deep inside he knew this might be wrong, but maybe, just maybe, he could use it as a lesson to turn Nova Catsmen back into the warriors they were bred to be. After all, wasn't their current Oathmaster constantly using the memory of the fallen hero Zane to show the Clan how they could still be Clansmen and live among the people of the Inner Sphere? Was this not the same?

"Only two," he continued, harsh words not even sounding convincing to him; this was the right thing to do...right? He forced himself to continue. "A *Commando* and an *Assassin*? A Star of Sylphs could have done the job. Tora disgraced herself and I will not have her tainted material mixed in the gene pool of future Nova Cats! Is that clear, quiaff?"

"Aff" came the subdued reply.

Unwilling to think a moment more about this action, he quickly began issuing orders to speed his warriors after the retreating ambushers. Better to keep his mind occupied with battle, than to think about Tora. After all, it was better sacrifice one person if it benefited the Clan, right.

That was the Clan way, after all...