

PROLOGUE

*Sibko Training Center 141*

*Jade Forest, Ironhold*

*Kerensky Cluster, Clan Space*

*2 May 3045, 1925 hours*

The distant echo of explosions shattered the night's stillness. Cadet Sebastian felt his heart thundering in his chest, each beat a reminder of his inescapable Trial of Position. Crouched behind a fallen tree, the cold bite of fear gnawed at his resolve. The massive silhouette of a nearby 'Mech loomed over the moonlit landscape, its imposing form commanded both respect and dread. There was no turning back—his future as a warrior hung in the balance.

With a steadying breath, he gripped the rungs of the ladder and climbed to the cockpit of his *Summoner*. The *Summoner's* reactor thrummed beneath him, sending familiar vibrations up through the command couch and into his bones. Strapping himself in, he felt the cool seat beneath him, grounding him amid the storm of anxiety swirling inside. The controls flickered to life, bathing him in a soft glow as he initiated the startup sequence.

Surging with anticipation, he flexed them against the cool control sticks. His heads-up display illuminated the battlefield, and a blip on his radar caught his attention. An *Executioner Prime* materialized, a hulking monster ready to test his mettle. No hesitation. This was a fight to the death.

With a swift motion, he activated his jump jets, feeling the rush of adrenaline as the *Summoner* lifted off, soaring above the treetops to claim the high ground. He couldn't afford to falter. The

*Executioner's* pilot reacted with deadly precision, a Gauss rifle shot tearing through the air. The slug whistled past at supersonic speeds, a near miss that sent splinters flying from the impact to nearby trees. Gritting his teeth against the impact, Sebastian focused, narrowing his world down to the target ahead.

As he landed, he unleashed a torrent of PPC fire, the brilliant Azure energy beam sliced through the darkness. The *Executioner* dodged—but not fast enough. The shot grazed its armor, leaving a glowing scar that pulsed ominously. In retaliation, the enemy fired back, energy weapons crackling as heat surged in Sebastian's cockpit. Warning lights flashed, panic rising within him, but he pushed it aside. There was no room for fear. He had to press on.

He closed the distance, launching a volley of missiles that struck the *Executioner* with bone-jarring force. The enemy staggered, but its pilot quickly recovered, countering with a Gauss rifle shot that rocked the *Summoner*. The impact sent Sebastian reeling, alarms blaring as armor integrity warnings blazed red. He steeled himself, every instinct screaming for him to act.

Just as he prepared for his next move, a blinding light enveloped him, and the world dissolved into darkness.