

CHAPTER 1

Sibko Training Center 141 – Campsite

Jade Forest, Ironhold

Kerensky Cluster, Clan Space

2 May 3045, 1930 hours

Sebastian's body jerked upright, sweat cold on his forehead. A sudden light flashed in his face, blinding him momentarily. He blinked a few times, disoriented, before the familiar glow of the campfire came into focus. Falconer Carla's voice cut through the haze.

"Still with us, Sebastian?" she asked, her flashlight still aimed at his face.

He nodded, shaking off the remnants of his dream. Around the fire, his *sibkin* chuckled, breaking the tension.

The wood crackled softly, blending with the breeze that stirred the leaves. The air carried the damp bite of crushed leaves and moss, and the fire's warmth pressed gently against his skin. Night insects chirped in rhythm, and above, Ironhold's larger moon glowed in the dark sky, casting pale light across the treetops.

Sebastian tore his gaze from the horizon and refocused on Falconer Carla's voice. Tonight's story followed MechWarrior Byron Binetti and his *Thresher* during the Golden Century. *A fitting tale for their sibko, descended from Binetti-Helmer genes*, he thought, stretching his legs across the grass. *At least she isn't telling The Legend of Turkina again*, Sebastian let out his breath. Falconer Carla continued, explaining the *Thresher's* connection to the *Summoner*—the first OmniMech of Clan Jade Falcon.

He admired Falconer Carla. She was, by his guess, in her late thirties—too old for frontline duty, too valuable to be thrown into a *Solahma* unit. Instead, the Clan had assigned her to oversee *sibkos*. She was strict but fair, often allowing the cadets to speak freely without needing to ask for permission, though that quickly changed if her temper rose.

In stark contrast, Falconer Demyan—absent that evening—thrived on dominance, taking pleasure in belittling the *sibko* and relishing the fear he provoked. Just the thought of him sparked anger in Sebastian—*Demyan is a hateful, vengeful stragg. He feeds on bloodlust. He wants us to fail.*

Sebastian shifted uncomfortably, returning his thoughts to Carla. She seemed committed to the Clan, determined to forge warriors who could carry its legacy. She'd been with them since they left the *crèche* four years ago. In Sebastian's mind, she would one day oversee a sib-nursery—a surrogate mother for the next generation.

His gaze circled the fire, settling on his closest *sibkin*: Mikel, Norah, and Mayra. They had always gravitated toward one another.

Mikel, his best friend, sat with his usual relaxed sprawl. Jet-black hair, olive skin, and honey-brown eyes like Sebastian's—but wilder, more animated. Athletic. Lanky. Already taller. Sebastian figured he'd pass 185 centimeters easily. What drove Mikel was harder to pin down. Lately, he seemed more focused on impressing Norah than anything else.

Norah, beside him, leaned just enough that her leg touched his. She was the shortest in the *sibko*. Cheerful, unless under pressure—then focused, sharp. To Sebastian, she was the intuitive

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one. Strong without needing to prove it. In other castes she would be considered beautiful. He often felt silly around her, but her attention was always locked on Mikel, never him. The red band she always wore was a unique characteristic that set her apart from the rest.

Past her sat Mayra. If Norah was calm fire, Mayra was flame—bright, hot, and dangerous to touch. She looked like Norah but was a shade rougher. Hazel eyes, lighter brown hair, rarely smiling. Quick to anger, sharper with words. She could sound like a bully, but beneath that, Sebastian saw a stubborn ally.

Mayra was the *sibko's* strongest female cadet. She was built like a brawler, full of endurance and strength. A scar marked her brow, and her voice rasped as she spoke. She carried herself with confidence and a hint of danger. He found that hard to ignore.

Sebastian figured her attitude stemmed from always playing second to Norah. She wanted recognition, to be the best. That hunger drove her—and made her compelling.

Dorian sat beside Carla, as usual. Quiet and withdrawn, he rarely spoke unless asked. He'd been picked on for his stutter and shyness since the *crèche*. *Poor Dorian. Carla's little project. He only seemed to want to survive the training.* But Sebastian remembered a day in the hangar, months ago—Dorian had spotted a malfunction in a 'Mech's actuator that even the techs had missed. *He wasn't weak, just overlooked. One day, Carla would have to let him fend for himself.*

His gaze swept everyone else and then stopped on Cole. Trouble clung to him. Greasy charm, fast talk, always skating the line between clever and reckless. He reminded Sebastian of the sleazy Freeborns he'd seen on holovids, or the shady characters in

the Laborer Quarter of Katyusha city—always smiling, always scheming.

He's a shadow, Sebastian thought. Latching onto the strong, feeding off their drive. A blood-sucking tick.

We started with nearly one hundred canister-borns. Fourteen years later, only sixteen of us remain. Too small, too slow, too fragile—swept aside like debris in a storm.

Nolan followed. Physically, he was unmatched. The *sibko* had nicknamed him "Bulldozer." But his mind? What a *surat*. *He reminds me of Demyan. Maybe he's Demyan's bastard. He's certainly dumb enough.*

Still, Nolan dominated in strength-based trials and Demyan's combat drills. He let Mayra tease and manipulate him. He followed Cole's lead too often. Potential wasted.

Sebastian's eyes brushed over the rest without pause. They left no impression. Then his thoughts turned inward.

What about me?

He'd always loved machines. Not just as tools of war, but for what they were. Complex. Elegant. Powerful. While others dreamed of combat, Sebastian wanted to know how 'Mechs worked. How everything worked.

He used to spend hours in the hangars, watching techs at work. They came to tolerate his presence, even answered questions. He learned quickly—components, maintenance cycles, power systems. Every detail fascinated him. When he was in the hangar, tools in hand, time disappeared. That was clarity. *Is it chalcas to feel attracted to it? To want to pursue that?*

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That interest led him to tour manufacturing sites when given the chance. Alone, usually. Sometimes Mikel or the others tagged along, but only Dorian seemed genuinely interested like he was. For a while, they went together. But when Dorian became a target of mockery, Sebastian stopped asking him to come. That choice still bothered him.

But he was made to be a warrior. Carla stared at him during drills—steady, expectant. Demyan’s eyes narrowed whenever Sebastian hesitated. Each glance reminded him that he was made for this. But doubt still crept in. *What if that wasn’t enough?*

The fear sat heavy in his chest. He could picture their disappointment. He could picture Mikel and Norah’s disappointment.

His chest tightened.

“Sebastian. You off in orbit again?” Norah asked in a whisper, smiling playfully.

“No—just thinking,” he replied.

Falconer Carla’s voice returned to center stage. She glanced at each cadet in turn.

“Remember,” she said, “like MechWarrior Byron Binetti, each of you has the potential for greatness. You only need to discover what drives you.”

She paused, holding their attention.

“But also remember this—failure in the Trial of Position is not just a setback. It is a mark of dishonor. Those who fail are cast down, relegated to the lower castes to live out their days in menial

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labor, forever shamed. The Trial is not just a test of your abilities, but a test of your very worth. Success means glory and honor. Failure means disgrace—a warrior's life unfulfilled. The stakes have never been higher."

Sebastian narrowed his eyes. *Failure means disgrace—a life unfulfilled...* He wasn't so sure he agreed.