

CHAPTER 2

Gymnasium, Sibko Training Center 141

Jade Forrest, Ironhold

Kerensky Cluster, Clan Space

12 October 3045, 1410 hours

Frost etched the gymnasium windows as Sebastian's breath fogged in front of his face despite being indoors. His fingers still burned from the morning's march through knee-deep snow—the campfires of autumn nothing but memory now. In the center of the training mat, Nolan's boot pressed against Cadet Liam's chest, pinning him like an insect. Nolan thrust both arms skyward, veins bulging, a victory roar echoing off the walls.

Sebastian noticed only Cole's voice rising in celebration. The rest of the *sibko* stood silent with the blank expressions of those who'd seen this scene too many times before.

Across the Circle of Equals, Falconer Demyan's lips curled upward as he locked eyes with Falconer Carla. His chin lifted slightly, one eyebrow raised in challenge. Sebastian shifted his weight from foot to foot, stomach tightening as Demyan's finger hovered, ready to select the next opponent. Sebastian averted his gaze, hoping to become invisible. Demyan's eyes never left Carla's face—a predator waiting for the mother to offer another fledgling from her eyrie for slaughter.

"Norah."

Falconer Carla's voice cut through the gymnasium. Sebastian's jaw dropped as his heads turned. Whispers rippled

through the *sibko*. Norah looked half Nolan's size, but she stepped forward without flinching.

The match began. Nolan lunged with a haymaker that would have shattered bone. Norah sidestepped, her ponytail barely disturbed. Again and again, Nolan's massive fists whistled through empty air while Norah pivoted just beyond reach, her breathing controlled, eyes calculating. Sweat darkened Nolan's shirt. His movements slowed, his chest heaved.

Sebastian recognized the pattern—like watching Norah's merlin Akane circling prey. When Nolan finally stumbled to one knee, gasping for air, Norah struck. Her sneakers squealed against the polished gymnasium floor as she gained traction and launched forward, driving her elbow into his sternum with surgical precision. Nolan's eyes bulged. He collapsed, tapping the mat frantically.

The *sibko* erupted. Sebastian caught Falconer Carla's eyes flicking toward Demyan, whose sneer had vanished completely. Falconer Carla addressed the group.

"This is how intelligence and strategy can overcome brute force."

Cafeteria, Sibko Training Center 141

Jade Forrest, Ironhold

Kerensky Cluster, Clan Space

12 October 3045, 2030 hours

After a long, exhausting day, the group gathered in the dimly lit cafeteria, the clatter of cutlery and low murmur of voices forming a backdrop to their meal. They picked at their supper, a bland assortment of reheated stew and stale bread, while leaning in close to discuss the latest buzz they had overheard on the *chatterweb*. The topic was the 132nd Sibling Company's Trial of Position, a spectacle set to unfold that night in the shadow of the Jade Forest's rugged mountains. The *sibkin* whispered excitedly among themselves, plotting a daring escape from camp to witness the trial firsthand. Sebastian noticed Judite lingered near the wall, jaw clenched, while two others whispered but didn't approach.

The final group, however, came together. There was Cole, whose antics Sebastian often found to be reckless. Beside Cole were Nolan, Manny, Judite, and Mayra, who seemed intrigued by the idea. Sebastian and Mikel exchanged glances, their curiosity getting the better of them, and joined in with the group, ignoring Norah's stern objections and watchful gaze.

Even though they had slipped away from camp many times before, observing Cole in action never ceased to amaze. He approached the perimeter fence with the confidence of someone who had rehearsed this very act countless times. With a deft hand, he cut a precise, silent opening in the mesh, slipping through with the grace of a shadow. The others followed, hearts pounding with a mix of fear and exhilaration, stepping into the inky darkness of

the Jade Forest. Their path was uncertain, lit only by the faint, silvery glow of one of the moons that hung low in the sky, casting an ethereal light on the unfamiliar trail stretching ahead. The trees towered above them like ancient guardians, their gnarled branches weaving together to form a dense canopy that swallowed most of the moonlight. The forest floor beneath their feet was a tapestry of shifting shadows, every rustle of leaves and snap of twigs echoing unnaturally loud in the oppressive silence. An owl hooted somewhere above, its call haunting and clear, while the occasional distant howl of a wild creature sent icy tremors through their bodies.

They'd been picking their way along the narrow dirt trail for what felt like an eternity, the forest pressing in around them with velvet-black shadows and a silence so thick it weighed on their chests. Then—somewhere ahead—a distant boom rolled across the trees, followed by the sharp crack and sizzling hiss of laser blasts. Mayra's hand flew to her throat, Mikel's jaw clenched, and Sebastian's pulse hammered in his ears. Without a word, they broke into a run towards the battle.

They skidded to a halt at the forest's edge, lungs burning, eyes wide. Before them lay a battlefield carved into the hillside. Tree trunks snapped and charred, splinters littering the ground alongside twisted chunks of metal that gleamed dully in the half-light. The air tasted of scorched wood and melting alloy, mingling with the damp, loamy scent of earth. Overhead, a jagged silhouette looped against the dim horizon—a *Summoner*, its jump jets carving hisses of flame into the sky. Sebastian squinted as the mech crested its arc and fired: a searing muzzle flash from its left arm, then the

The Red Merlin

thunderous bark of an LB-X Autocannon Cluster round making contact that rolled off the nearby peaks like distant artillery.

Mikel's shout cut through the roar.

"A hit!"

A heartbeat later, a brilliant flare bloomed beyond the *Summoner*, outlining its opponent in a harsh, white light. An ejection seat launched skyward with a shrieking whistle.

Another blast shook loose clumps of snow from the highest branches, and the armored *Hellbringer* pitched sideways, metal screaming as it met its shadow. A wild cheer tore from the group's throats—Sebastian imagined it could only be a cadet's first kill, trial by fire conquered, full warrior at last.

Mayra laughed, voice bright:

"They will celebrate with fusionnaires tonight!"

They surged forward again, scrambling uphill toward a rocky outcrop for a better view. Sebastian's legs felt light, his heart a drumroll of triumph. Every thump of artillery, every hiss of escaping gas drove hot electricity through his veins. He pictured himself in that cockpit, hands on the control yokes, jump jets burning under his command. A fierce grin split his face. The forest's silence was gone forever; in its place pulsed a single, unquenchable beat—Sebastian's own dream of glory.

Trial of Position Site Epsilon
Jade Forrest, Ironhold
Kerensky Cluster, Clan Space
12 October 3045, 2230 hours

Moonlight gleamed off of a chain-linked fence that encircling the trial grounds. Sebastian's nostrils flared at the acrid stench of scorched metal and cordite that hung in the air like a shroud. Far away, technicians hunched under portable floodlights, their shadows stretching grotesquely as they salvaged twisted wreckage. A plasma cutter hissed and spat blue-white sparks that momentarily illuminated a fallen 'Mech's shattered torso.

Sebastian watched Cole drop to a knee and pull wire-cutters from his coat, like he'd done it a hundred times before. Metal links parted with barely a sound. Sebastian watched Cole's fingers work, wondering how many nights those same hands had slipped away while the rest of them slept.

Their boots crunched over debris-strewn ground as they spread out across the battlefield. Sebastian's eyes darted between shell casings and metal fragments, searching for a trophy worth keeping. A nightbird shrieked somewhere in the darkness beyond. He stumbled over something soft and yielding, looked down, and froze.

Sebastian's hand shot up, palm trembling, as he beckoned the others closer. Gravel crunched beneath the boots of his fellow cadets as they closed in around him. His heart pounded so fiercely he feared they'd hear it. Moonlight glinted off a blade embedded in

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a girl's chest. Her jumpsuit—once a crisp shade of green—was smeared with mud and blood. The coppery stench rose in waves, mingling with the chill night air and making Sebastian's stomach churn. He'd seen battlefields littered with twisted metal and ruined 'Mechs, but this—this fragile human corpse—felt unbearably raw.

Her pale face was stretched into a final, frozen scream, and her wide eyes reflected nothing but the black sky above. Every detail felt wrong to Sebastian—he was trained to gauge damage on armor plates and twisted servos, not to see a human life extinguished so violently.

The *sibkin* stood in a hushed semicircle. The knowledge that war demanded death didn't lessen the shock of finding a fallen cadet face-down in the dust.

"*Freeborn sibko* training cadre," Mayra said softly, tilting her head toward the embroidered patch on the girl's shoulder—a phoenix in flight beneath a serrated ring.

"How can you tell?" Manny asked, stepping forward and squinting at the faded stitching.

Cole snorted, shoulders hunched in amusement. "*Surat*, look at the badge." He kicked a pebble toward the corpse, sending it skittering towards the cadaver.

Mikel leaned closer, voice low. "She must have been one of the hand-to-hand combatants of the trial."

A cold knot formed in Sebastian's gut. Jade Falcons demanded their initiates face Freeborn *sibko* fighters in bare-knuckle combat before even climbing into a 'Mech. He shivered. *Killing someone like this...* He swallowed hard.

Cole glared at her. "Let's see what she has."

Norah's voice shook with anger. "You have no right."

His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed, gaze flicking away from her fiery stare. Sebastian stepped forward.

Sebastian interjected. "She was a cadet just like us."

Cole's fist froze over the open pack. "She's just a Freeborn." The words spat out like contempt.

Sebastian said nothing, forcing his jaw to unclench. the rest of the group backed away, disgust in their eyes. Sebastian watched Cole's fingers pluck out trinkets from the fallen girl's life, and he felt a bitter twist in his gut. He didn't protest further; he wouldn't give Cole any hope that he sympathized with Freeborn sorrow.

As they stalked off through the moonlit clearing, their voices clipped and tense over plans and second-guesses, Judite's sharp cry sliced through the argument. The others spun toward her silhouette—she stood ten paces ahead, arm trembling, finger pointing at Cole, who loomed like a dark statue beneath the skeletal oak. In Cole's hands, a tan canvas pack spun above his head, a satchel charge.

The Red Merlin

Nolan and Manny exchanged stunned glances, then sprinted the forty meters in two lunging strides.

Manny skidded to a stop with a grunt, chest heaving. He jabbed toward a gnarled tree trunk at the clearing's edge. "Let's set it off against that tree!" His voice trembled on the verge of a roar.

Cole's grin curled into a sneer. He jabbed a finger into Manny's chest, snapping a twig underfoot. Cole's grin curled at one corner. He leaned in, the fuse's canvas hushed in his grip. "You will set it off, *quiaff?*" he taunted, thumb pressed into Manny's chest like a dagger. His eyes glittered with something cruel. Manny froze, uncertain, his bravado slithering away.

Cole shifted, spotlighting Nolan next. The pale moonlight caught every drop of sweat beading on Nolan's brow. "And you, Demyan's little pet?" Cole hissed, voice rich with scorn.

From the edge of the group, Mikel's boots crunched on damp grass as he strode forward, eager to join them. Norah's hand shot out.

"Mikel! Get back here!" Her voice rang stern and sharp.

Mikel froze, then slunk back as she glowered. At the same time, Mayra scoffed, lips curling. She slithered toward Cole and his cronies, ignoring Norah's warning glare. Her boots pressed into the damp grass, mud squelching beneath the soles.

She tossed her hair, lips twisting in a mock sneer as she advanced on Nolan. Norah's eyes went cold.

“He will not do it,” Mayra taunted loudly, voice dripping disdain. “He is too scared.” A ripple of laughter jangled through Cole and Manny.

“Are you not the toughest, Nolan? Or has it always been an act?” Her words stung like stones. Nolan’s shoulders hunched, his gaze dropped to the grass.

Norah lunged, hands clasping Mayra’s shoulders. “Knock it off!”

“I’m sick of you, Norah!” Mayra shoved Norah hard enough to make her fall, then returned to Nolan, voice rising as she crowed,

“Come on, Nolan! We’re waiting!” She clapped her hands like a child urging a pet *surat*.

Nolan looked like his pulse was hammering him, Likely because of being mocked by the one he felt lust for, Sebastian thought. Nolan pressed a hand to the rough canvas satchel and let out a brittle laugh.

“Fine,” he said, voice cracking. “I’ll do it.”

Norah’s eyes narrowed. She hooked her fingers into Mayra’s jacket and yanked, twisting her around until Mayra’s boots lost traction in the soggy earth. They tumbled together, a flurry of limbs and curses, landing in a clump of crushed grass and broken

The Red Merlin

twigs. Norah managed to pin Mayra's shoulder to the ground, knee pressing into her back, arms locked around Mayra's flailing elbows.

"Get off me!" Mayra spit, her voice muffled against the cold dirt.

At that moment, Cole bolted toward the scene of the commotion between Mayra and Norah. "Nolan and Manny are going to light it!" he shouted, voice raw with triumph.

A blast slammed into Sebastian's chest, throwing him to his knees and wrenching the breath from his lungs. His teeth ground together as a metallic taste flooded his mouth—coppery, warm. The world flared in a white-hot pulse, then collapsed into shards of fire and smoke.

He crashed to his knees, ears ringing with a constant roar. Every inhalation burned his throat; acrid smoke and the stench of singed canvas choked the air. Through the haze he saw Mayra kneeling beside Norah's still form, her hands pressing against Norah's chest in frantic presses. Mayra's face was a mask of blood, soot, and tears, her screams strangled by shock.

Sebastian lifted his hands to his face. Crimson streaks ran from his fingertips, droplets falling onto the wet grass. Each heartbeat pounded in his skull like a funeral drum.

His vision tunneled, darkness crept from the edges of his sight. He tried to speak, to call out, but only a raspy whisper

Raul L.

emerged, ripped away by the ringing in his ears. The last image he registered before oblivion claimed him was Mayra's tear-stricken face, stretched in silent agony, lips trembling Norah's name—then the world went black.