

CHAPTER 3

Holding Cells, Sibko Training Center 141

Jade Forrest, Ironhold

Kerensky Cluster, Clan Space

13 October 3045, 0537 hours

Sebastian jolted awake. The air in the cell was cold, dry, metallic. For a moment he couldn't place where he was. Then the hum returned—a low static in his ears, dull and persistent. It reminded him of the explosion.

The walls were concrete. No windows. No hatch. A narrow bench and a hard floor. He was alone.

He sat up, back pressed against the cold wall, and tried to piece things together. His heartbeat was still elevated. Fragmented memories surged without order. Norah screaming, medics leaning over him with blinding flashlights, the scorched sky pulsing red. The back of a truck. Cold wind. Silence. Then nothing.

A jolt of panic hit him. He checked his limbs one by one. Arms. Legs. Hands. Fingers. Everything intact. He stripped off his shirt and ran both palms across his chest, his ribs, his jaw. The familiar terrain of his own body had never felt so strange. He touched his face to make sure it was still his.

Everything was there. Relief came—but not peace.

A voice broke the silence. Low. Urgent. Muffled through the cell wall.

"Sebastian! You are awake!"

He leaned toward the source. "Mikel?" Then, sharper? "What happened?—No, wait..."

Memory twisted. A flash of Norah on the ground, Mayra bent over her in tears.

"I saw Mayra crying over Norah," he said, his voice tight. "Please tell me it is not what I think."

"They are fine. Both of them. Stay calm—we do not want the guards to hear us."

Sebastian exhaled. Relief hit hard and fast. He pressed his forehead against the wall.

"Tell me what happened," he whispered.

Mikel spoke quickly, voice low and tense. The explosion, he said, had turned Nolan and Manny into a red mist. It hadn't been fire—just fluids and blood. One moment they were there. The next, the field was wet with them. Cole survived. Judite hadn't been touched physically, but mentally she was a mess. Sebastian and the others had taken minor injuries, but it was the shockwave that had thrown him to the ground violently and knocked him out cold.

"We were just far enough away," Mikel said. "Any closer..."

Sebastian said nothing. His stomach twisted. The cell felt smaller now. The air felt heavier. He pulled his knees to his chest, wrapped his arms around them, and stared at the opposite wall. His breathing slowed, but the tightness in his chest wouldn't ease. His world had changed in seconds, and now everything felt off-kilter—wrong.

The Red Merlin

The guards arrived not long after. Their boots echoed sharp against the concrete hallway, each step like a countdown. When they reached the cells, they pounded on the doors—metal on metal—jolting him upright.

The lock disengaged with a harsh mechanical click. Light from the corridor poured in, blinding and sterile. Sebastian squinted against it.

No words. No explanations. Just orders.

They were marched out into the morning air. Cold. Grey. Still too early for sunlight.

Sebastian saw the others now for the first time since the explosion. His *sibkin* looked like ghosts—ashen, disheveled, bruised. No one spoke. No one needed to. The silence said enough.

Outside the detention wing, two figures waited.

Falconer Carla. Falconer Demyan.

Both stood with arms behind their backs, unreadable.

The guards passed the cadets over without ceremony.

They were led toward a hangar across the compound. The route was familiar, but it felt foreign now. Smaller. Less safe.

The hangar was half-lit, the old fluorescents flickering overhead. The group filed in behind the Falconers, the concrete cold underfoot. They lined up as instructed. Sebastian noticed Judite, arms clenched at her sides, her eyes unfocused. She blinked often, as if struggling to stay in the present. She hadn't spoken a word.

Sebastian took his place in formation, heart steady but slow.

Raul L.

The light inside cast long shadows behind them.

They didn't speak.

They waited.

"Cadet Norah, follow me," ordered Falconer Carla, her voice slicing through the heavy silence like a lash.

Sebastian saw Norah flinch. Her whole body tensed. She didn't move at first—just stood there under the glare of the floodlights, eyes wide.

"As you say, Falconer," she finally replied, voice nearly swallowed by the still air.

"You will not address me directly!" Carla snapped, her tone electric with fury. "You will only reply when told—or not at all! *Quiaff!*"

Norah stood at attention, her body trembled slightly.

Carla reached into her coat and slowly pulled out studded gloves. The leather was black and heavy, and the steel studs along the knuckles gleamed like teeth under the streetlamp. She made a show of stretching it onto her right hand, flexing her fingers so that the metal caught the light.

Sebastian didn't miss the way Norah's eyes locked onto it. She understood what it meant. Everyone did. There would be no second warning.

"Follow me. No response!" barked Carla, turning on her heel, disappeared into the hangar with Norah.

The Red Merlin

Sebastian hesitated, glancing at the others. No one spoke. No one moved.

Falconer Demyan hesitated for a moment—then walked off in the opposite direction, heading toward the barracks without a word. He didn't leave a guard.

The cadets remained in formation, the cold settling in around them. No one moved. No one dared.

Except Sebastian.

He glanced left, then right. No Demyan. No guards. The hangar doors stood slightly ajar, warm yellow light spilling out into the morning gloom.

He shouldn't. He did.

One careful step. Then another. Then he slipped away from the line and crept toward the entrance—heart pounding, breath tight in his throat.

If he got caught, there would be punishment. But not knowing was worse.

Inside, the hangar was half-lit by flickering sodium lights. The scent of oil, metal, and sweat soaked the stale air. Tools lay abandoned. A few overheads buzzed weakly. Everything felt on edge.

Sebastian's mind raced with possibilities—would they be punished? Discarded? The uncertainty gnawed at him, each second stretching into an eternity.

He held his breath, feeling his pulse in his ears as he listened to the harsh exchange between Falconer Carla and Norah. The fear in Norah's voice, the cold authority in Carla's commands—made him have the feeling of impending doom.

Carla stood behind a metal desk, spine ramrod straight. Norah stood opposite her, shoulders hunched, fidgeting with the hem of her sleeve like a child waiting to be punished. The room was dimly lit, the furniture inside casting long shadows that heightened the tension in the air. Norah's face was pale, her eyes wide with a mix of fear and confusion. She fidgeted with the hem of her uniform, unable to meet Carla's piercing gaze.

"Cadet Norah," Carla began, her tone quiet but charged. "I must warn you ahead of time—do not try me right now. I have no stomach for *savashri* behavior, retorts, or remarks."

She leaned forward, her eyes boring into Norah. "Now. I need you to tell me exactly what happened last night. Respond."

Sebastian narrowed his eyes. He could see Norah swallow. She shifted her feet and spoke just above a whisper: "I—I don't know what you mean, Falconer."

Carla's head tilted slightly.

"I forgot to mention you have three strikes, Norah. And we both know that what you just said is a lie." Her voice was calm now. That was worse.

"This is not about punishment. We do not have time." She paused. "There's an investigator on the way. If your stories do not match—if you tell the truth, the wrong truth—it could get all of you branded as failures. Black marks on your codex. Do you understand? Respond."

The Red Merlin

Norah's eyes darted around the room, it looked like she was searching for an escape.

"Everything else is prepared. But if your group says the wrong thing, the story will not hold. We cannot have that."

Norah remained silent.

"My patience is wearing thin, Cadet," Carla said, her voice rising. Then she slammed her studded fist into the metal table. The *clang!* rang through the hangar like a warning shot. Norah jumped.

"Respond!"

Norah broke. Her breath hitched, and she started to talk.

Sebastian could tell she was lying—not to cover herself, but to shield the rest of them. She was fumbling through a version of the story, trying to deflect, shift blame, soften the truth. But she did not realize Carla wanted the same thing she did. Protection, not punishment.

Carla stood motionless, arms crossed, her expression unreadable. But Sebastian could sense her frustration building. Norah's version wasn't good enough. She was still holding back, not grasping that Carla was not hunting for guilt—she was hunting for control.

Sebastian kept watching as Norah stumbled through it, confused and clumsy. He could feel the moment tightening. They were talking past each other.

When Norah finished, Carla slowly leaned back, arms folding tighter.

Raul L.

“Norah,” she said, quieter now. “The truth can be dangerous. But a lie—if shaped carefully—can protect everyone. Do you understand? Respond.”

Norah hesitated. “Aff...” Her voice wavered.

Carla stepped closer, lowering her voice into something almost gentle.

“I am concerned that your version—and your *sibkin’s*—could get you into trouble. But a lie, the right lie, protects everyone.”

Norah looked lost. “I do not want any of us hurt. What do you want me to do?”

“I want you to say that none of you were there. That it was only Cole, Nolan, and Manny. You and your group had nothing to do with it.”

She raised a finger. “Not just you. All of you. You must make sure the others match your words—word for word. It is simple, Norah. But you must all get it right.”

She sighed. “Let us go over it again. Start from the beginning. Respond.”

Norah repeated the lie—but this time, it came more smoothly. As if she was surrendering to it.

Carla nodded once. “Good.”

Then: “We are done here, Cadet Norah. You are dismissed.”

The Red Merlin

Norah didn't move. Her body shifted slightly, as though a question had pulled itself to the surface before she could stop it.

Carla noticed. "You may speak freely."

Norah stared down at her feet. Then she looked up, hesitant. "The *Summoner* we saw yesterday... in the Trial of Position—was that the cadet, *quiaff*? Did they succeed?"

Sebastian froze. He hadn't realized how badly he wanted to know, too.

Carla's eyes narrowed instantly. Her voice dropped half an octave.

"Why do you ask?"

Norah hesitated again. "To tell the group that... this mess was at least worth something."

Carla's face hardened. Her knuckles tensed around the edge of the desk.

Carla replied angrily, "It was not worth it!"

Her fist slammed the desk—clang!—louder than before.

"You could all be dead. Do you not get it?"

Her voice cracked, something behind it fraying. Norah said nothing. Her hands hung limp at her sides. Sebastian could only imagine what was running through her head.

Carla stepped away from the desk, pacing like a caged beast.

"I am counting on you to look after them," she growled. "Even that floozy Mayra!"

In the middle of the heated argument, Sebastian saw movement—far side of the hangar. Another figure in the dark. Tall. Watching. Silent.

Someone's eavesdropping too... an officer? Investigator?

Sebastian pressed further into shadow.

Inside, Norah lifted her chin slightly. "May I still know, Falconer Carla?" Her voice was barely audible.

Carla's body coiled like a whip.

"Savashri child!" she hissed—and then vaulted the table.

Sebastian's heart stopped.

Carla seized Norah and slammed her to the floor. The sound echoed—metal on metal.

She crouched low, face inches from Norah's. "Why must you test me?" she snarled. "I warned you at the beginning!"

She lifted Norah again and slammed her down once more.

"Maybe I will start summoning Mikel to my quarters," she spat. "Every. Single. Night. Until you learn some obedience."

Sebastian's breath caught. He couldn't move. Couldn't blink.

Norah twisted her face away—but Carla grabbed her by the neck and turned her head back.

"I assure you, eyas... I can teach him much more than you can. Much better than you can."

Norah froze, her body rigid.

The Red Merlin

Carla's hand lingered around her neck for a moment longer, then released. She stood.

Norah coughed, pushing herself upright.

Carla stepped forward again and shoved her back down.

Then her voice changed—cold, but tired.

"Do not fret, little Norah," she muttered. "I will not take away your toy. Unlike some of my *trothkin*, I do not meddle with nestlings in that manner."

She stared down at her, jaw tight.

"I will continue to summon Falconer Demyan. As I have done. For countless detestable nights."

Sebastian felt ice creep down his spine. He understood. She wasn't threatening—she was protecting. She'd been keeping Demyan busy to keep him off of them.

Norah's eyes widened. She understood too.

Carla took a long breath.

"The *Summoner* you saw last night," she said, voice hollow, "was piloted by a volunteer trainer. Not the Cadet. The cadet failed. There was no victory. Nothing for you to worship. Nothing to distract you. Anything else, cadet?"

Sebastian's gut sank.

Norah looked up, lips trembling. "*Neg*, Falconer Carla."

Carla extended a hand.

Norah took it, numbly.

Raul L.

She rose like a ghost and walked out slowly.

Sebastian scrambled back into formation, heart pounding.

He didn't speak.

Neither did she.

But something inside him felt like it had been broken.

Falconer Carla remained inside the hangar long after the cadet had left.

From the shadows near the rear wall, a man emerged. His Jade Falcon MechWarrior jumpsuit bore a Star Captain's insignia, the falcon's claw wrapped around the green diamond. The man was tall and wiry, fit in a way that suggested recent combat. Andreas Helmer. Newly *bloodnamed*. A *Ristar*.

He stepped into the dim light.

"She is the one you spoke of, *quiaff*?" he asked.

Carla turned. "Aff, Star Captain."

"I like her," Andreas said. He didn't mean it as a compliment—just an observation. "Strong. Smart. Loyal. But not just that."

"She is all of those," Carla said, allowing herself a slight smile. "But she can be too—protective."

Andreas snorted. "And you are different how?"

The Red Merlin

He stepped closer, arms folded. "You are protecting them too, *quiaff*? Why?"

"Permission to speak freely?" Carla asked.

He nodded once.

"Because she will become a *ristar*. Like you, Star Captain Helmer." Carla met his gaze without hesitation. "She has the instincts of a leader. The kind the Clan needs. Her judgment saved lives tonight—I would wager her entire group is alive because of her choices."

Carla met his gaze. He did not blink. He gave no sign of flattery—just quiet agreement. She could see he believed her.

He looked at her thoughtfully, saying nothing. That was enough—Carla knew he saw the same thing in Norah that she did. The eugenics program produced warriors by the thousand, but leaders were rarer. Even with the best genes, true command was unpredictable. Carla had once helped shape him from a defiant cadet into something more. He knew what her belief could forge—if she was willing to go to war with the system to protect it.

He pressed the point. "But the satchel charge. What is the story?"

Carla's lips pressed thin. "Still unclear. The lead Falconer of the 132nd believes the Freeborn trainee was targeting the Cadet's 'Mech—sabotage to ruin her chances at the Trial. It fits. But we will never know for sure. And I see no value in digging deeper."

Andreas gave a slow nod, his expression unreadable. If he had doubts, he did not show them.

Still, something else nagged him.

Raul L.

He tilted his head. "Why did you lie to Norah about yesterday's Trial of Position?"

Carla didn't answer right away. She paced the hangar, her boots clicking against the floor panels.

"The *Summoner's* pilot was a Cadet. I have her on my assignment list," Andreas added. "She passed."

Carla stopped, looking toward the open hangar doors. Then:

"I lied to keep them focused. To remind them that surviving is not success. That failure comes from distraction—and dreaming."

Her eyes met his. "I do not need them fantasizing about glory. They need to fear failure. You need warriors ready to fight, not cadets chasing ghosts."

Andreas crossed his arms. "You don't think she deserved to know someone made it?"

"She will earn that knowledge when she has earned the right to join them," Carla said. "Not before."

He folded his arms and let out a slow breath. Carla could not tell if he approved—but he did not object. She hoped he had seen as many cadets die chasing illusions of glory as she had—if so, he would understand.

He stayed quiet for a moment longer, then tilted his head slightly.

"You are not done with the interviews, *quineg*?"

The Red Merlin

“Indeed, I am,” said Carla. “Cadet Cole will bear the full weight. The deaths of Cadets Nolan and Manny are pinned to him. The rest—their involvement ends here.”

Andreas nodded slowly. “Will that satisfy the investigator?”

“It will,” Carla said flatly. “I have spoken with everyone who knows. The 132nd’s lead Falconer agrees. His officers will follow his direction. The rest of this facility reports to me. All that remains—” she looked at him, calm “—is you.”

Andreas exhaled through his nose. “And the investigator?”

“He will hear what we tell him.”

There was silence for a long moment.

Andreas shook his head. A small smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. Carla could tell it was a smile of approval.

“Just like old times.”

He rubbed his jaw, then added, “You have my *rede*. The official report stands.”

He started to turn away—then paused.

“But you really don’t want to hear the full story from Cadet Norah?”

Carla’s jaw tensed. “They are nestlings. Still wet from the shell. I already know they were involved. They are not innocent, especially Mayra. But I will not listen to them damn themselves. I would rather leave that truth buried than see it etched into their codex.”

Raul L.

Andreas nodded, slowly.

"Is it not a bit hypocritical of you," he said, "to accuse Norah of being too protective of her group—while you orchestrate this entire conspiracy for the same reason?"

Carla's face flushed, and for the first time in hours, she looked momentarily caught off guard. She stood straight, snapped a sharp salute.

"For Clan Jade Falcon."

Andreas returned the salute with a grin.

He glanced once more toward the doors where Norah had exited.

"I will keep my eye on her," he said, voice quiet now. "When the time comes—I want to sponsor her. For the Trial. And when that is done... for her *Bloodname*."

Carla blinked, and then nodded once—wordless.

Andreas turned and strode into the dark.