

CHAPTER 4

Training Center 141

Jade Forrest, Ironhold

Kerensky Cluster, Clan Space

2 November 3045, 0930 hours

Sebastian sat alone in the observation alcove above the firing range, knees drawn to his chest, helmet resting beside him. The hum of the servo motors moving the targets reached him before the voices did—too sharp, too close to the ringing that still haunted his ears. Down below, his *sibkin* moved through targeting drills in near silence.

So long ago, there had been one hundred of them. Canister-born. Screaming. Crawling. Now they were twelve, for now. And today, it did not even feel like that.

Judite had vanished quietly, her bunk stripped bare one morning—no note, no farewell. No one said a word, but Sebastian remembered the blood beneath her fingernails.

Cole was gone too. Not reassigned. Not demoted. Gone. He was publicly flogged, directly blamed for the deaths of Nolan and Manny. Falconer Demyan had taken his turn with him as well—every blow landing like a verdict. No one ever heard Cole's side of the story, he could not speak with a shattered jaw. Sebastian had thought Cole might die then and there. Instead, Carla had him loaded onto a VTOL and flown toward the dead zones—where bandits scavenged flesh as readily as scrap.

Let the scavengers smell his rot. Let them take him apart, piece by piece.

And then there were the ones who left nothing behind. Nolan and Manny. No punishment. No disappearance. Just a single instant. Vaporized. Red mist, and then nothing.

The range stank of scorched capacitors and old lubricant—burnt smells clinging to the walls like failure. Mayra’s voice snapped through the haze. Sharp. Hollow.

“Reset your angle, *Stravag*! You are dragging your elbow!”

Paula flinched. Adjusted. Fired again. Tighter grouping. Still not enough to matter.

Mayra paced the line, her braid coiled like a whip, her expression fixed and unreadable. She had not laughed in weeks—not even the derisive snort she used to give when someone botched a drill. She did not speak to Norah. Barely acknowledged anyone. Whatever had cracked inside her had not softened. It had set. Since the blast, she had only pushed harder—driven, some whispered, by the memory of the cadet who had failed their Trial. Mayra would not end that way

Norah crouched under the awning at the edge of the range, fingers toying again with that red band. Her movements were crisp, her shots clean. But she barely spoke. She was not angry—just emptied. Wrapped in silence like armor.

Mikel moved in his own orbit. Trained alone. Spoke only when pressed. He never smiled in front of the Falconers. Sometimes, when Carla was not watching, he still made faces during lecture. A flicker of the old spark—but it never caught.

The Red Merlin

The rest were scattered across the firing line like debris from a blast, each keeping space between themselves and the next.

Sebastian leaned forward, resting his arms on the rail. Mayra's shot shredded a target in half. Mikel's cluster landed square between the silhouette's eyes. Norah's burst drifted right. Paula's missed entirely. The servo motor whined as it dragged the silhouette away—chest cavity smoking faintly from the damage.

He flinched. Not a choice. Just a reaction. His shoulders tensed, heat blooming in his neck. He dropped his gaze quickly, hoping no one had noticed.

Far below, Carla stood at the far end of the range, arms folded behind her back, her stance precise, her uniform immaculate. She watched them all with that same practiced stillness. But even at this distance, Sebastian could see the hollowness in her eyes—like she was watching ghosts, not cadets.

He wondered whether she saw how far they had drifted—or if she was pretending not to.

That night, the barracks were silent. As they had been since the explosion.

Lights dimmed. Fans hummed. No whispered jokes. No laughter about someone's snoring. Just the rustle of sheets and the press of silence, heavy as a loaded Gauss.

Sebastian lay flat on his bunk, arms folded beneath his head, eyes fixed on the ceiling.

Raul L.

He remembered the shriek of warped metal. Mayra's scream. Norah shaking. Cole's laugh—high and broken—until Demyan's fist crushed it from his face.

He wondered whether they would ever look at each other the same again.

Three weeks had passed. The silence lingered. The silence had become a kind of fracture itself.

*Sibko Training Center 141 Campsite
Jade Forrest, Ironhold
Kerensky Cluster, Clan Space
12 December 3045, 0615 hours*

Carla sat with her back against a tree, one knee drawn up, the coals beside her long since gone cold. Her joints ached. She had not slept—not truly—in four nights. The frost bit through her uniform. She ignored it.

She opened the old journal across her leg, flipped to a page she knew by memory.

*Today was difficult. I do not know if I can keep up. But I must.
For my comrades. For myself.*

The handwriting was disciplined. Centered. That much, at least, had endured.

She had copied those lines into too many cadet journals to count. Dawn filtered through the treetops. Soon the cadets would wake. Twelve remained. Holding formation. Barely.

She closed the journal.

The Red Merlin

They will recover, she thought.

But the certainty was no longer there.

She remembered a sparring drill—one of the last before the explosion. Sebastian and Mikel against Paula and Nolan. No instructor oversight. Full contact.

“Sebastian, you are holding back,” Paula said.

He blocked her strike. “Then stop giving me reasons.”

Nolan lunged at Mikel. “Freebirth coward.”

Mikel dipped his shoulder and sent Nolan sprawling with a twist and a shove. “Footwork, brute.”

From the edge of the mat, Cole barked laughter. “You let him drop you? Pathetic!”

Mayra crossed her arms, speaking more to the air than to Paula. “You swing like a merchant, you should fix that if you are to remain here.”

Paula flushed, advanced again. “You will see how I swing.”

Carla stood at the perimeter, arms behind her back. The movements were still within bounds. Barely. No one was holding back.

She stepped forward. “Discipline guides the body. Mind before motion.”

No one responded. But their pacing shifted. Harder. Sharper.

Paula struck Sebastian's shoulder harder, but he was unmoved. Mikel shoved Nolan down again and did not offer a hand. This time Nolan didn't rise. He just sat there, breathing hard.

Later, as helmets came off and heat steamed from backs and brows, Mikel clapped Nolan's shoulder. Too hard.

"You did not lose as badly as usual."

Nolan shoved him. "Try me now that I do not have Paula as a dead weight."

Sebastian stepped between them and redirected Mikel, eyes cold. "Enough."

Paula wiped blood from her lip, glanced sideways at Mayra. "Your advice was unnecessary."

Cole spat. "Well she was right, you do fight like a merchant."

Mayra said nothing. They were not friends. But for a moment, they were aligned. And that had been enough.

The sun crept higher. She had not moved.

Another memory surfaced. The day Sebastian had lingered after a punishing course. She had been reviewing demerits when he approached, hesitant.

"Falconer Carla," he said. "A moment?"

She looked up. "Speak."

He stood stiffly. "You train us for more than fighting. Why?"

She set the slate aside. "Walk."

The Red Merlin

They moved past the barracks, boots crunching frost. She kept her tone neutral.

“When I was a cadet, I believed skill would be enough. My Falconer disagreed.”

She remembered the shame of falling in full view of her *sibko*. The ache in her ribs. The heat in her face.

Her Falconer had not mocked her. He had simply said:

“You have spirit, Carla. But spirit alone is not strength. It must be forged.”

Years later, her cockpit had ruptured during a fight. The result was that her optic nerves were damaged. No implant could replace what she had lost.

Her depth perception was gone. The neurohelmet compensated, but not enough. She could still pilot, still fight—but not on the front line. Not for long. In simulations, she managed. In training, she kept pace. But real combat demanded more. In a real engagement, vision like hers would make her a liability.

“I considered ending my life,” she said.

Sebastian said nothing. He did not flinch.

“I remembered my Falconer’s words. Strength is not body alone. It is choice. Endurance. Direction. I chose to become something else. Something that would benefit the clan.”

He nodded.

“You push us,” he said, “because you want more than soldiers.”

Raul L.

"I want survivors."

She stopped walking.

"You have potential. But sometimes I wonder if you even want this. I see you drifting—like your mind is elsewhere."

Her voice stayed level.

"The Clan will not keep you here. That must come from you. You need a reason to stay. Not for the Clan. For yourself."

"Understood, Falconer."

"See that you do."

She blinked. The memory faded.

Birds called beyond the camp. No other sound.

She opened the journal. Then closed it.

The words inside were old.

The cadets outside were breaking.

She would hold them together. The alternative was failure.

Carla flipped past the last written page in her journal and stopped at a folded corner—one she avoided more often than not.

The entry was dated five weeks after Nolan and Manny had died.

The Red Merlin

She had thought a live-fire drill would shake the cadets out of their paralysis. Rebuild cohesion. It had nearly done the opposite.

The morning had smelled of lubricant and cordite. Sunlight sliced long across the field. She remembered watching them set up—Paula, Dorian, Liam, Lena—quiet, methodical, too focused. The others followed Demyan off toward the tree line for a maneuvering drill.

The exercise began cleanly. Movements tight. Grenade launchers handled with care. Carla had just begun to believe it might work when a yell cut across the clearing.

“Watch out!”

Boots thrashed through brush. Demyan’s cadets, disoriented and off-course, stumbled into the impact zone. He’d led them too wide around the perimeter. Carla shouted to cease fire—but Paula had already launched.

The grenade arced above them.

Dorian yanked Lena down. Liam tackled another cadet. The blast ripped through the clearing.

Silence followed. Then coughing. Moaning.

Carla strode into the smoke, her voice cold.

“What in Kerensky’s name was that?”

She didn’t need to shout. Her tone did the work.

Demyan didn’t flinch, but something flickered in his eyes—resentment, maybe.

“No excuse, Falconer.”

His stare followed the cadets like a blade. Carla saw the weight land on him, whether he admitted it or not.

Cadets stood in staggered formation, dirt-streaked and wide-eyed. No one met her gaze.

"This was not a simulation. You violated containment. You violated discipline. You would be dead."

"Aff, Falconer," they mumbled, barely audible.

"Learn from it. Dismissed."

She turned to Demyan. "Remain."

As the cadets dispersed, Carla stayed behind. Her shoulders ached. She had not unclenched since the blast. It had been close. Far too close.

She closed the journal.

Dorian had left not long after that drill. No outburst. No ceremony. Just another bunk stripped bare. She hadn't asked why. She already knew.

The frost was gone now. The grass still damp from last night's cold. She shifted her position against the tree trunk. A sliver of sun cut across the camp.

Later, she sat near the remains of the fire pit. No flames now. Just ash and char.

Norah approached. Quiet footsteps, like she didn't want to intrude.

"Falconer Carla."

Carla didn't look up. "Speak."

The Red Merlin

“You look—troubled.”

“I am always troubled,” she said. Then, after a moment, “But not always for myself.”

Norah paused. “Why do you push us so hard?”

Carla finally turned. “Because readiness is the only mercy I can give you.”

Norah’s posture straightened, her voice quieter. “We will be ready.”

Carla gave a slight nod. “See that you are. Go get some food.”

Norah turned and left.

Carla stood at last. Her knees complained. The camp was waking—faint rustling from canvas, the low thud of boots hitting dirt.

She would hold them together. Until something stronger came along—or they broke completely.