

CHAPTER 5

Sibko Training Center 141

Jade Forrest, Ironhold

Kerensky Cluster, Clan Space

26 May 3046, 0720 hours

Spring had settled hard over Ironhold, pressing the scent of wet earth and new growth into the air. The Jade Forest was thick with leaves, birds cutting arcs over the tree line. It should have felt clean, even hopeful. But Sebastian had learned nothing here came without a cost. Cadets vanished, and the ground took their names without ceremony. Spring only meant the next trial was closer. Some would pass. Some would break.

Today was different. The anniversary of Operation Klondike meant a rare reprieve from drills. The Falconers had given them the morning, and the *sibko* had drifted to the Emerald Natural Conservatory—a quiet stretch of grass and water three kilometers from the training center.

Operation Klondike—Sebastian had heard the story a dozen times. The day the Pentagon Worlds were taken back from the so-called barbarians after the Great Father's death. The end of the Exodus Civil War. The founding of the Clans as they were now. To the Falconers, it was proof their way was inevitable. To Sebastian, it was just the reason they weren't running obstacle courses today.

Near the lake, Norah was showing Mikel how to handle her merlin. Her bird, Akane, twitched on her arm, eager for the sky. When the knot on the tether came loose, the merlin burst upward,

wings cutting against the sunlight. Sebastian watched from the grass, his eyes drawn again to the red band on Norah's wrist. She always had it somewhere—ankle, hair, even as Akane's tether. She'd once told him some cultures wore such things to ward off evil.

He skimmed two stones across the still water beside Mayra, his thoughts drifting to the last half-year. Six months since Nolan and Manny had died. Judite had lasted only days after that—panic in the isolation cell, bloody knuckles from pounding the steel, fingernails torn from clawing at the hatch. She'd been reassigned out. Months later, word reached them. She had taken her own life. The knowledge had lodged deep, surfacing at quiet moments like this, unbidden and unwelcome.

Lilian was gone too, redirected into another caste where her skills would be better used. He let another stone slip from his fingers and watched the ripples fade.

Cole's end had been different—public, and in Sebastian's mind, deserved. He hurled a rock harder than the rest, sending it arcing far out over the water. *Good riddance.*

Above, Akane swept across the rising sun before stooping to Mikel's gauntlet. The bird settled, and both Mikel and Norah smiled as if they'd won something rare. Watching them, Sebastian felt the faintest sense that the cracks in their *sibko* were knitting shut—slowly, imperfectly, but closing.

He let the rest of his stones fall from his palm, but kept four clenched in his fist, tipping his head back into the sun's warmth and letting it wash over his face.

Sibko Training Center 141

Jade Forrest, Ironhold

Kerensky Cluster, Clan Space

27 May 3046, 0800 hours

With Liberation Day's homage and remembrance over, the *sibko* returned to routine. Falconer Carla took her place at the front of the room, her slate balanced against one arm, and began recounting the history of the Clan's founders. Hanati Binetti and Samuel Helmer's stories came last—a deliberate choice for the Binetti-Helmer *sibko*, meant to spark pride in their genetic legacy. Seven seats now sat empty. Sebastian's gaze lingered on the gaps in the rows, the neat geometry of their absence. He could still picture who had filled them, their faces fixed in memory even if the rest of the *sibko* had learned not to look.

The air in the classroom felt stale, heavy with the weight of yet another retelling. Carla's voice carried the clipped precision of someone who could recite this speech in her sleep, pausing only to snap a correction at a cadet whose posture sagged.

Sebastian sat toward the back, his noteputer on the desk blocking the Falconer's view of him. The Falconer's words blurred into background noise, a rhythm he'd heard too many times. On the tower's repeater display, the schematics of a *Hellbringer's* Artemis IV fire control system took shape under his fingertips—clean lines and sharp angles, infinitely more interesting than tales of dead heroes. The heritage they wanted him to honor felt distant, embalmed in repetition.

What pulled him forward was the thought of that evening's exercise—a live gunnery run in stripped-down *Kit Fox* OmniMechs. He could almost feel the throttle in his palm, the recoil in his shoulders, the machine answering his every move. The ancestors might have won their glory centuries ago, but tonight, in the cockpit, he could make something of his own.

Fire Range Gamma 02

Jade Forrest, Ironhold

Kerensky Cluster, Clan Space

27 May 3046, 1300 hours

Sebastian leaned against the cold railing in the control tower, watching Lena climb into the *Kit Fox*. Mikel was already waiting in his own. At least Sebastian was done—he and Mayra, Norah, and Remi had already cleared the exercise with solid scores. Liam and Dina had scraped through. Paula and Daniel had been berated by Demyan for their slow reactions.

The wait dragged. Techs swarmed over the two OmniMechs, replacing panels while Demyan barked at them as if yelling would speed the process. Finally, the ready light went green.

Carla's voice came over the comms, flat but sharp enough to cut.

"Every mistake here could be your downfall in your Trial of Position. There will be no second chances. Train like your life depends on it—because it does."

The Red Merlin

Sebastian's eyes tracked Mikel's *Kit Fox* as it weaved through Lena's opening shots. He was smooth, deliberate, never where her crosshairs wanted him to be. Each miss made her aim jerkier, her movements tighter.

"Watch your heat, Lena," Carla warned.

Sebastian could see the heat curve climbing in her HUD feed. She ignored it, throwing out shot after shot like hitting him would fix everything.

Then the shutdown alarm blared. Her *Kit Fox* locked up mid-stride, venting steam, the torso slumping forward in surrender.

Mikel didn't hesitate. A clean pivot, a burst from his autocannon—straight into her left leg actuator. The joint buckled, and Lena's 'Mech pitched over hard enough to make Sebastian wince. The crash echoed even up in the tower.

Carla's reprimand came instantly, sharp with the weight of years behind it.

"Lena, you waste resources. You waste oxygen. Your lack of discipline is a stain on this *sibko*."

Sebastian felt the air go heavy. No one spoke. This wasn't just bad—this was final.

Third time in these units, he thought. Or fourth. Doesn't matter. She's finished.

Demyan took his turn, his voice a snarl.

“Your lack of basic motor skills is beyond anything I have witnessed. Cadet Mikel made you look like a *stravag* fool.”

Lena stared at his boots, flinching when flecks of spit hit her cheek.

Carla’s tone shifted from icy to volcanic.

“Why were you not checking your heat scale? I have warned you ad nauseam. Countless times. Years of training—for what? Respond!”

Nothing.

Carla’s jaw worked like she was biting back something worse. She looked at Demyan.

“We are done here—yes?”

Demyan gave a curt nod.

“Cadets! Quarters. Now. Double-time!”

Sebastian fell into step with the rest. Lena trailed, her gaze flicking from face to face, searching for some crack of sympathy. No one gave it. Not even him. Better to keep his eyes forward than risk seeing himself in her place.

Sibko Training Center 141

Jade Forrest, Ironhold

Kerensky Cluster, Clan Space

28 May 3046, 0800 hours

Lena was gone—another name stripped from the roster, another bunk left cold.

Sebastian had watched her leave that morning, two escorts flanking her to the gate, a duffel slung over one shoulder. She hadn't looked back. He doubted she could ever survive in a BattleMech, but numbers and formulas—those she understood.

The Falconers had granted her request to transfer to the scientist caste. There, she'd get the schooling to serve in a lab, turning her skills toward work that would help the Clan in other ways. Useful work. Just not warrior work.

Life didn't slow for the rest. Nine *sibkin* remained, and the Falconers filled every hour. That morning's schedule held one of the few sanctioned diversions—the annual indoor-soccer tournament. For the local *sibkos*, it was part of an ongoing league, a tradition that served as another kind of trial. Sharpening teamwork, building endurance, and forcing bonds to hold under pressure. Falconer Carla had pressed this one harder than usual, determined to drive their focus back since the incident.

The match was brutal. Every kick and shout slammed off the walls. Playing defense, Sebastian kept his eyes on Mikel as he tore down the sideline. A corner kick arced in. Mikel launched up,

met it clean with his forehead, and sent it screaming into the net. For a moment, Sebastian thought they might turn it around.

But the Mattlov–Pryde *sibko* they faced didn't ease off. Their passes cut through gaps before his team could close them, their pace never flagging. By the final whistle, the score sat at three-to-one against them. Sebastian's chest heaved; sweat slicked his back. No one spoke.

Demyan's expression was carved from stone.

"Line up!"

His voice cracked like a rifle shot.

The losing team—Sebastian among them—was marched out for a long run up Mount Chistu. Punishment in the shape of a lesson. The climb started slow, but the slope punished every step. Their legs were already wrecked from the match. Breath came in short bursts, the tang of iron creeping into Sebastian's mouth. Boots scraped on loose stone; the air was thick with sweat and dust.

Mikel, normally unstoppable, slowed to match Sebastian's pace. Norah kept her eyes forward, stride steady, jaw locked. Mayra pushed through with the same clipped determination she brought to the firing range. Paula and Daniel lagged again, both flushed and glassy-eyed. Demyan's gaze found them more than once, lingering in a way that told Sebastian exactly who might be next to vanish.

The Red Merlin

The valley opened below as they neared the summit, green forests spilling to the horizon. To Sebastian, it was just more ground he'd have to cover to be done. Demyan stalked alongside, his shadow sliding over whoever faltered.

At the top, Sebastian bent forward, hands on his knees, lungs clawing for air. His legs trembled. The rest of the *sibkin* stood in various states of collapse.

Demyan looked them over, his voice level but carrying an edge sharp enough to cut.

"Pain keeps you alive. Forget this lesson, and you will not last."

The *sibko* stumbled back into camp at dusk, every step stiff with the day's punishment.

They headed straight for the showers. The room echoed with the hiss of water and the slap of bare feet on tile. Sebastian stepped under one of the streams and let the heat pour over him. The first rush made him exhale hard, muscles loosening under the steady pressure. He leaned forward until his forehead rested against the cool wall, eyes closed, steam curling around his face. For a while, he let the sound of water and the dull ache in his body push away thought.

At some point, his knees softened under him, and he jerked back upright, realizing he'd drifted. He blinked away the haze, breathing deep. Across the row, Mayra's shower mist blurred her outline, but her eyes found his. She held his gaze for a beat—just

long enough to give him a faint, knowing smile—before turning away, fingers combing soap from her hair.

Clean and exhausted, they made their way to the cafeteria. The room was quiet—just the clink of utensils against plates, the slow scrape of trays being shifted. They ate more out of obligation than hunger, chewing without tasting, each bite settling like a weight in Sebastian's stomach.

Sebastian sank into his pillow, letting the day's strain drain away. The steady patter of rain on the barracks roof lulled him under.

He opened his eyes, the air was cold and damp. He was standing in a cave high on Mount Chistu, stone slick at his back. Beyond the tree line, Ironhold City shimmered under the planet's twin moons, its lights scattered like stars on the horizon—until a shadow passed over them.

A shape moved through the mist. Vast wings beat the air, sending a rush of wind into the cave. As it drew closer, the wings eclipsed the skyline, swallowing the light.

It landed beside him. A merlin—Akane—but impossibly large. She stood more than five meters tall, her wingspan stretching wider than any DropShip's cargo bay. Her feathers burned in shades of molten red, the glow casting flickers across the wet cave walls. For a heartbeat, he swore he saw a strip of red cloth tied at her leg.

The Red Merlin

Her voice filled his head, melodic and resonant. There is no time to waste, Sebastian. He has sensed your fear—hurry. I will take you to the others.

He climbed onto her back, gripping a red rope that felt warm and alive, pulsing faintly under his fingers. The air bit cold against his face as they dove into the night, the forest below twisting into warped, unnatural shapes.

“He has found us,” Akane whispered into the wind.

Sebastian looked back. A dark gyr followed, its green eyes cutting through the rain. Its feathers sliced the air like blades, its shape breaking and reforming in the shadows. Lightning split the sky, and for an instant its full size filled his vision—before the thunder cracked across his ears.

Akane dropped into a stoop, the dive pressing him hard into her back. The forest warped beneath them—hills bending, trees stretching upward like skeletal hands. Still, the gyr gained. Then came Demyan’s voice, warped and heavy.

“You cannot escape me!”

They landed in a meadow glowing from no source Sebastian could name. His *sibkin* waited. Mikel stepped forward, handing him a spear.

“I hope you’re ready.”

Even Mikel's voice echoed unnaturally. Remi, Paula, and Liam worked the tips of rough wooden spears against the ground until they were as sharp as they could make them. Daniel, Mayra, and Dina gathered heavy stones—good for throwing or smashing when the beast came close.

Akane's voice rose above the wind.

I feel the end of the road is near.
The thought of losing you cuts deeper than death.
Let my courage be your pride,
your desire, your fire—
your swift and terrible vengeance on the dark gyr.

She launched skyward as the gyr's shadow fell over the meadow. Lightning flashed, and the beast dove. Spears flew but clattered harmlessly away. The gyr struck, crushing Paula in its talons before carrying her off. Her body dropped from a cliff moments later, the impact echoing like a distant drum beat.

It rose again, dove, and swallowed Daniel whole. His scream cut short. Dina froze as the beast lunged—but this time the spears struck deep into its chest. The *sibkin* swarmed, smashing its skull with stones until Akane tore down from the clouds, her talons sinking into its back, her beak closing over its neck. One violent twist, and the creature went still.

The others cheered. Mayra stepped close, her words at his ear soft enough to steady the hammering in his chest.

The Red Merlin

A crack of thunder jolted him awake. The barracks ceiling swam into focus.

“Sebastian, are you awake?” Mayra’s voice again—this time from his bedside. He wiped his eyes, unsure if the dream had truly ended.

She slid under his blanket without waiting for an answer, curling against him, her legs hooking around his waist and her head lay on his chest. It wasn’t affection. In the Clans, it never needed to be. *Sibkin* took what they wanted when the chance came, and everyone understood why. Elsewhere in humanity’s scattered worlds, it might be whispered about as taboo. In the warrior caste, it was just another way to burn off pressure, though neither of them had the energy for more cardio that day. The shared warmth was enough.

Cafeteria, Sibko Training Center 141

Jade Forrest, Ironhold

Kerensky Cluster, Clan Space

29 May 3046, 0715 hours

Two more gone—just as in that dream months ago.

Paula’s dismissal came after another round of poor scores in critical skills. Demyan didn’t shout, didn’t even sneer—just a curt gesture to the guards, and she was gone.

Daniel didn’t wait for the same. One night he was there; the next, his bed was stripped, sheets folded, locker empty. Sebastian

couldn't decide if it was courage or cowardice—walking out before the Falconers made the choice for him.

Seven of them remained. The number hung over the barracks like a weight, pressing down in the silent spaces between words. There was no pause, no reprieve—training pressed on as if nothing had changed.

The remnants of the *sibko* moved toward morning calisthenics at a clipped pace. Don't be late. Don't stand out. Don't give Demyan a reason to notice.