

CHAPTER 6

Northeast Mechbay, Sibko Training Center 141

Jade Forrest, Ironhold

Kerensky Cluster, Clan Space

24 November 3048, 0930 hours

Two and a half years had burned away in drills, Trials, and the slow narrowing of their ranks. One by one, faces vanished—transfers, washouts, failures—until only those too stubborn, too skilled, or too fortunate to fall remained. The Falconers had grown harder in that time, their praise rare, their punishments sharp.

Sebastian stood in the shadow of his *Summoner*, the bay lights throwing hard angles across its green armor. At eighteen, taller and stronger than the boy who had once stumbled through obstacle courses, he still felt the same quiet awe each time he looked up at the machine. In two days, it would decide his fate.

He had always found machinery more compelling than stories of warriors past. WarShips might be the pinnacle of war, but this—this was power made personal. Every plate and joint spoke of purpose, shaped by minds and hands that understood the demands of battle.

Techs swarmed the chassis, fitting the loadout for his Trial of Position. The deck plates thrummed faintly under his boots as a test cycle sent vibration through the frame. The sweet smell of coolant hung in the air, sharp against the heavier scent of grease, and the acrid scent of ozone from a nearby technician's welding filled the air. Somewhere, a hoist groaned under the weight of a

weapons pod, and static from a nearby arc welder prickled along his forearms. Sebastian tracked every motion, every tool, every hiss of hydraulics.

His focus drifted inward, to the gyroscope. Without it, a 'Mech was nothing but a collapsing tower of metal. The *Summoner's* casing was forged from high-grade titanium alloy—grain-structured under immense pressure to survive impacts that would crumple lesser metals. Inside, a tungsten-alloy rotor spun at brutal RPMs, its bearings of heat-treated ceramic composite built to take the torque.

He pictured the chain from design to installation—blueprints refined until every curve and tolerance was locked, forging dies shaping titanium under a press that could crush ferrocrete, CNC machines cutting the seats for the rotor and sensors to micron precision. Every piece inspected, stress-tested, and balanced before shipment to the assembly line.

He knew that, if he chose, he could learn every step—heat curves, press cycles, final fitment. Was it *chalcas* to think that way? To picture himself in a design bay or a foundry instead of a cockpit? In the warrior caste, such thoughts bordered on heresy. But the idea lingered, stubborn as the scent of oil on his hands.

Mikel's voice broke into Sebastian's thoughts. He stepped up beside him, both of them watching the techs work on the *Summoner*.

"How's your machine coming along?"

The Red Merlin

“Slowly,” Sebastian said, keeping his eyes on the ‘Mech. “They’re just about ready to swap the LB-X Autocannon for an Ultra Autocannon. I also tried to get the ER PPC replaced with a Large Pulse Laser, but the Falconers refused.”

He let out a short breath.

“What about yours?”

“Nothing to change—it’s already perfect,” Mikel said, dry humor in his voice.

Sebastian shook his head. He had never understood how Mikel could be content with Alternative Configuration B and its lack of real burst power.

“Reliable, balanced, and nothing I haven’t mastered,” he added with a shrug. “You can keep chasing shiny toys — I’ll keep what wins.” His tone wasn’t smug, exactly, but Sebastian caught the quiet certainty there. For Mikel, predictability wasn’t a weakness — it was the edge.

“What about Norah? Did the techs give her everything she wanted?”

“Aff, though not without grumbling. Look.”

Mikel pointed toward MechBay B3, where a ring of scowling technicians worked on Norah’s *Summoner*—Alternative Configuration A. A welding torch flared, throwing sharp shadows as another tech bent over the open access panel. Across the torso,

fresh paint glistened where they were laying in the silhouette of a merlin in bold red.

Sebastian barked a laugh. “They agreed to help her with that? Unbelievable. She does like red.”

Mikel gave him a sideways look, biting his lower lip. “If you only knew. You should see what she wears under her cooling vest.”

Sebastian returned the look with a faint smile, though his thoughts wandered. If those two ever took a break from one another, he might try. But risking the balance of the *sibko* for it was a line he would not cross.

He remembered a night at the campfire when she had spoken about the color with the same certainty she brought to combat planning.

“Red is a powerful color,” she had said. “It shows dominance and confidence. On ancient Terra, bullfighters used it to control the focus of the bull, to draw it in. And the Red Baron—he painted his fighter crimson so his enemies would see him coming and fear him.”

She leaned closer to the fire. “It grabs attention like nothing else. Blood, fire—life and danger. Passion, urgency, even fear. But it also puts a target on your back. The Red Baron’s enemies feared him, and some fled. Others marked him instantly, making him a prize to bring down. Wearing red is a challenge. It says—I am here. Come get me.”

The Red Merlin

Sebastian had wondered then, and wondered now, if she wore it deliberately—as a statement as much as a habit. She was daring the world to try her.

Mikel's hand on his shoulder pulled him back. "Ten-hundred hours. Barracks. Norah wants everyone there—we have planning to go over." He started walking away.

Sebastian shook his head, a quiet laugh escaping him—but it faded almost immediately. Two days from now, the Trial would decide everything.

He drank from his canteen, wetting his lips, but the water did nothing to ease the dryness in his throat. The mechbay's noise carried on around him—the scrape of tools, the clank of a weapons pod being locked into place—but his mind was already on the fight ahead.

A clatter from across the bay drew his eyes toward MechBay C, where a tech straightened from under a 'Mech's knee joint.

Sebastian noticed a familiar face, recognizable even after three years and under the layers of dirt and dried grease that covered the hard-working tech's features. It was Dorian, a washout from their *sibko* who had been deemed too weak to be a warrior. Sebastian felt a quiet satisfaction seeing he had found his place. The man looked leaner now, his movements deliberate, as if every task was a test he meant to pass. The grime couldn't hide the precision in his work — torquing a coupling with a steady wrist, catching a slipping tool without looking. Whatever the warrior caste had denied him, he had carved out skill here.

The sight pulled him back to when they were about ten, freshly out of the *crèche*, to one of the many tormenting onslaughts Mayra had inflicted on him.

“What is wrong, duh-duh-duh-Dorian?” Mayra mocked, her shadow falling over his small frame on the dirt playground.

“Get up and defend yourself, *surat!*”

Dorian’s speech impediment and insecurity had been constant targets throughout his time with the *sibko*, and Mayra had been one of the worst offenders. Sebastian remembered Norah blitzing over, shoving Mayra back and jabbing her chest with two fingers.

“Do you not have better things to do than pick on him, Mayra?”

Mayra slapped Norah’s hand away, scowling. “Why respect something I could just as easily crush?”

She spat, hitting Dorian square in the eye, then stormed off.

Sebastian had imagined the humiliation Dorian must have felt as her spit drizzled down his face under the gaze of the *sibko*. But there would be no Circle of Equals—not that day. Dorian would not dare.

Mayra and Norah had always clashed, but things had eased between them over the past couple of years. Sebastian realized their rift had mostly closed around the time Mayra and he had become

The Red Merlin

personal. Perhaps she had simply found another outlet for her temper—one that left her calmer after leaving his bunk.

The clatter of a large socket wrench hitting the concrete pulled him back. He turned to see Mayra overseeing work on her *Summoner*, an Alternative Configuration C. The techs were replacing her ER Large Laser and ER Small Laser with a Large Pulse Laser, and swapping the Streak SRM-6 for a standard SRM-6.

Sebastian noticed Dorian and Mayra briefly lock eyes, sharing a brief nod before returning to their work. A nod of respect from Dorian — and from Mayra, the barest flicker of something else. Her jaw tightened like she was holding back words, and her eyes slipped away as if she'd walked into a memory she didn't want. It was gone in a heartbeat, the mask back in place.

Sebastian was glad she had outgrown most of her petulance—but regret would not bring back past victims. As much esteem as he had for her, he knew she could still be too vicious.

His group had dwindled to Mikel, Norah, Mayra, and himself. Liam, Remi, and Dina were gone, having failed crucial exercises or quit over the previous year. Time had rebuilt what the explosion had shattered. The four of them trained, sparred, and argued like before—not as if nothing had happened, but with the years wearing the edges down. They were whole again, or close enough for the Trials ahead.

Sebastian turned back to the techs working on his *Summoner*. *I cannot fail — I will not fail — I refuse to fail.*

Raul L.

But if he did fail, at least there would be this to come back to, as dishonorable as it might be to fall to a lower caste. In his mind, he saw himself among the techs, sleeves rolled, hands black with grease — building instead of destroying. The image came unbidden, as stubborn as the scent of oil in the air.

He pushed the thought aside, though it was oddly comforting, and the dryness in his throat vanished.