

CHAPTER 7

*Barracks, Sibko Training Center 141*

*Jade Forrest, Ironhold*

*Kerensky Cluster, Clan Space*

*24 November 3048, 1105 hours*

Sebastian was the first to reach the barracks, a little late by his own measure. The overhead strips cast a pale, even light that flattened the metal walls, their dull panels humming faintly with the ventilation system. Norah paced near the center of the room, boots whispering on the deck plates, glancing at her wristwatch like she meant to burn a hole through it.

“Sebastian!” she called, her voice sharp with energy. “Mayra and Mikel are right behind you, *quiaff?*”

“Neg. Probably running late.”

Norah scoffed and kept pacing. The faint curl of her lip said she wasn’t surprised. Sebastian noticed the red band on her wrist — she always wore something red. A trace here, a flourish there. Minor touch. Lavish detail. She had always worn it — sometimes in her hair, sometimes woven into laces, today tied neat around her wrist. Once, she’d traded it for a split lip.

His thoughts drifted, unbidden, to another time she had worn it. Two years ago, when Falconer Demyan still oversaw their *sibko*. Morning calisthenics, a dusty training field.

Demyan noticed it almost immediately, his expression souring before his voice lashed out.

“*Freebirth!* What is this on your wrist? Are you intentionally trying to provoke me?”

The insult alone could stiffen any Jade Falcon spine. Norah froze, but her neck muscles tightened.

He closed the distance, breath sour with the tang of coffee.

“Is this the latest fashion among you nestlings? Or is this how your master claims you? A brown-nosing puppet’s tether?” His eyes slid toward Falconer Carla, daring her to interject.

Carla stepped forward. “Enough, Demyan. Get on with the exercise.”

But Demyan ignored her. Sebastian thought he looked more irritated than usual — a simmering edge that wanted a target. He ripped the band from Norah’s wrist so hard she stumbled to her knees. Holding it up, he sneered.

“It resembles a *boncord*. Do you even know what you are wearing?”

Sebastian had noticed it then, too. The same cord she used to tether Akane during training — likely tied on her wrist by habit, without thought.

“You are not yet a Warrior, eyas! But should anyone ever claim you as their *bondsman*, it would be best for the honor of Clan Jade Falcon that you beg them for *bondsref* instead! On your feet, nestling!”

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Norah rose, the red band gone, her eyes locked on Demyan. She let out a sharp *tsss* — defiance made into sound.

It earned her a backhand that knocked her flat. The *sibko* looked away, their expressions tight with shared unease.

“Enough, Falconer Demyan,” Carla said, stepping forward.

Norah stood again, blood on her lip.

“I challenge you to a Circle of Equals.”

Demyan turned, laugh sharp and mocking. “You would dare?”

“Aff,” Norah said, voice flat, detached. She flicked her tongue over the copper taste of her lip. “Bare hands. Here. Now.”

“You surprise me, eyas.” He smirked. “Well bargained and done.”

“No. I forbid this,” Carla cut in.

“The challenge has been made and accepted,” Demyan shot back, his voice rising. “By the code that binds us It is my right.”

Around the circle, Sebastian read his *sibkin*’s faces. Most were pale. Mikel looked almost sick. They knew what Demyan could do in close combat.

But he never touched her. Norah flowed around him, slipping past every strike. His frustration built, his reach growing wild.

Then he charged full-force. Sebastian thought — *he should have remembered her fight with Nolan*, but part of Sebastian was glad he hadn't.

Norah pivoted aside. His own momentum carried him past. She was on him instantly, knees digging into his back, one arm snapping around his neck.

The circle went silent except for the scuffle of boots on dirt. Demyan clawed at her grip. When he nearly pried it loose, she bit — teeth sinking into his ear.

The tearing was sharp, ugly. His cry split the air. She spat the ear aside, blood streaking her face.

She cinched the choke tighter, cutting off his air. When his knees buckled, she rode him down, slamming his face into the ground. The crunch of his nose carried across the circle.

Norah rose, lifted a fist high, chest heaving, mouth curled in a grin edged with crimson. Always a little red.

Demyan lay sprawled, blood pooling under his face. Whether he chose synthskin later was none of their concern. Within the week, he was replaced by Falconer Bren.

Norah had been unpredictable that day, too — and unpredictability had saved her life.

It was the same quality Sebastian trusted now, even if it meant following her into a plan that might get them all killed.

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The barracks door clanged open, snapping him back to the present. Mikel and Mayra stepped in together, boots heavy on the deck plates.

The red band was still on Norah's wrist. She stood with arms crossed, watching the newcomers. Sebastian wondered if the others carried moments like that in their heads — or if it was only him.

"So — what did you want to see us about, Norah?" Mayra asked, tone edged with impatience.

"Get comfortable. We need to discuss the engagement."

Mikel frowned. "We do not even know where the trial will be. How can we prepare for what we do not know?" Sebastian was about to agree when Norah raised both hands.

"That is not important right now." She pointed to a map tacked to the wall, its edges curled from years of use.

"Look at where we are — most terrain around here is similar. We already know which areas are off-limits, too close to infrastructure. That narrows it to a few likely sites. The trial ground will almost certainly be gated, like the one we visited years ago."

Her voice was steady, but her eyes cut briefly to Mayra — testing.

She had their attention now. "We prepare a basic plan on shared terrain features. Once we get the recon report, we adapt and execute."

The plan had taken shape over weeks between her and Sebastian, built from records of past Trials and after-action notes. She handed the floor to him.

Sebastian stepped forward. “When melees happened by accident, or without every warrior committed, the pass rates were poor — worse than trials fought under strict *zellbrigen*. But when a melee was deliberate, with all warriors aware, coordinated, and striking together, the results were statistically better.”

Mayra’s eyes narrowed. “That is *chalcas*, and it will draw censure. Are you prepared for that?”

Sebastian could tell she wasn’t just quoting doctrine — she meant it. For her, breaking form wasn’t just risky, it was dangerous in ways beyond the battlefield.

Her voice was cold, each word deliberate. Mayra continued.

“If you cannot pass on your own merit, then you are nothing more than a pretender in a warrior’s cockpit — and perhaps you were never meant to stand among us.”

Sebastian thought he saw more than just contempt in her eyes — a flicker of something sharper, like fear. Not fear of losing, but of what losing would mean for her. Regardless, her comment was an open-handed slap, meant to bruise pride, not skin. And it worked.

The air in the room tightened. Norah’s head turned just enough to pin Mayra with a look — not full anger, but a challenge of her own. Sebastian caught the way Mayra’s chin lifted, daring

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anyone to dispute her. Mikel's eyes hardened, his jaw worked, holding back his first reply.

Mikel spoke first. "And what if the best warrior falls to bad luck? Does that prove they lacked skill? Neg. It means circumstances favored someone else. What matters is winning the war, not a single engagement."

Sebastian nodded once. "Exactly. We fight to win — and we fight to pass. All of us."

Mayra's arms crossed tighter. "Continue," she said — more command than agreement.

Norah tapped a spot on the map. The map's edges curled from having just been unfolded.

Sebastian knew the ridge she pointed at — they had run live-fire drills there.

"The core is to crush the first opponents before the second opponents can bring weight of fire to bear. Keep the rest at least a klick away, more if possible. That distance buys us time to destroy the first group before the others close."

Mayra made a quiet, skeptical noise under her breath, the kind she used when she thought a plan was built on wishful thinking.

Mikel's mouth twitched. "Fine by me," Mikel said, the corners of his mouth curling, "so long as my target stays mine." He smirked, but there was an edge under it — *Mayra did take credit from him once during an exercise, and he hasn't forgotten about it.*

Norah's eyes flicked — just for a heartbeat — toward Mayra. The look was enough. It landed like a small stone in still water — not much on the surface, but the ripples would reach everyone in the Circle.

Mayra's chin lifted a fraction. "You think I would need to?"

she asked, voice edged with frost. The heel of her boot slammed into the leg of a nearby chair, sending it skidding a hand's breadth across the deck with a metallic scrape.

Norah's hands came up slightly. "No offense meant — only that we cannot afford any doubt in the Circle."

Sebastian's gaze flicked between them, the air still tight. "Then we keep it clean. No mistakes. No opportunities for anyone to... take what's not theirs."

He leaned over the map, tapping a point. "If they close too soon, we get boxed in. In a Trial, that's the difference between a warrior's rank and disgrace."

For them, there would be no second chance — failure meant the end of years of training and a future spent in a lower caste, laboring under the eyes of those who had passed.

"From a klick to six-fifty meters is about ten seconds at their best running speed," Sebastian continued.

"That would take a fast 'Mech," Mikel said.

"The first pair will be lighter and quick," Norah replied. "The next two will match our pace or be slower."



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“Worst case, eighty-six KPH through forest and hills,” Sebastian said. “Slower if the ground works for us. That’s twelve to fifteen seconds, maybe more.”

Norah traced a ridge line with one finger. “Force them to take the long way — bait them around obstacles or into bad ground — and we buy another ten.”

“And if we back away from reinforcements while finishing the first fight, we stretch it further,” Sebastian added.

Mayra made a skeptical sound. “So thirty, maybe forty seconds of uninterrupted fire on the first four — all lighter than us.”

“If we can hold the others at a click or more before the melee is declared, yes,” Sebastian confirmed.

Norah moved pieces across the map with deliberate precision. “Angles of attack here. Fallback here. We dictate the trial’s tempo, not them.”

As they moved markers across the map, Sebastian could still feel the earlier words hanging over them like a weight. Plans could be perfect on paper — it was the people executing them that broke.

At one pause, Norah asked without looking up, “You good with this, Mayra?”

“Aff,” Mayra said — flat, more to end the question than from conviction.

She didn't look up from the map. Sebastian saw it for what it was, consent given so no one could accuse her of holding them back, not because she believed in the plan.

Sebastian caught the way she avoided eye contact. She'd go along with it — if only so no one could accuse her of holding them back.

They walked the plan across each likely trial site. Norah's confidence filled the space, but Sebastian felt the edge beneath it — that it would only work if every one of them committed. And in a Trial, that was never guaranteed.

This was crazy enough to work, or crazy enough to see them stripped of their place and sent to live as castoffs among the laborers.