

CHAPTER 8

*Sibko Training Center 141*

*Jade Forrest, Ironhold*

*Kerensky Cluster, Clan Space*

*25 November 3048, 1300 hours*

Sebastian lingered outside the cafeteria after midday mess, leaning against the cool wall, arms folded. The damp weight of Ironhold's air pressed close, mist curling low over the gravel. He tried to focus on the taste of the last bite of fruit, anything but the fact that the Trial was tomorrow. The quiet was thin enough that he could pick out individual noises from the compound — the faint metallic clank of tools in a distant bay, the echo of boots on wet concrete.

A low, synchronized rumble rolled in from beyond the tree line.

He straightened, scanning the road. Armored convoy vehicles came into view, black hulls beaded with moisture. They moved in formation, halting with practiced precision in front of headquarters. Hatches opened together. Warriors stepped out — tall, sharp-eyed, every motion controlled.

Andreas Helmer was among them. Sebastian's shoulders tightened at the sight, memory spiking of Helmer's unblinking stare in the aftermath of Nolan and Manny. Two younger warriors flanked him, the kind who carried themselves like they'd never lost a match in their lives.

Falconer Carla and Falconer Bren were already at the steps to meet them. Sebastian couldn't hear the words, but the body language was all business. Volunteers. Overseers. Tomorrow's Trial suddenly felt not just close, but immediate. The damp air still carried the tang of exhaust long after they disappeared inside.

The tension clung to him through the afternoon. Even in the mess hall, over the muted scrape of trays and clipped conversations, the convoy kept replaying in his head. Norah mentioned the sponsor boxes had arrived and were laid out in their quarters. Mikel cracked a line about how his cloak made him look like a holoivid villain.

\*\*\*

By lights-out, they'd agreed to take an early night. No pacing the barracks, no burning energy before it counted.

Sebastian lay in the dark, staring at the bunk frame above. Sleep never came easy before something that mattered. He fixed on the image of those boxes, working through the details to distract himself. Formal Jade Falcon green uniforms, each paired with a cloak or ornament from their bloodhouse sponsors — warriors of their genetic line who had been watching, judging, deciding they were worth the investment.

Norah's cloak trim carried a red rope woven in — the same style that had once earned her a reprimand from Falconer Demyan, now worn as defiance. Mikel's was cut for movement, Mayra's all sharp lines and striking falcon silhouettes. Sebastian's own cloak hid its best feature inside: a schematic of a *Thresher* printed in

## The Red Merlin

blueprint-blue ink, the kind of detail he could trace with his fingers for hours.

The memory dulled the edge of his restlessness. His last clear thought before the weight of sleep pressed in was Falconer Carla's voice, sharp and sure towards the end of the ritual.

"Hail the Jade Falcon as it swoops down on its prey!"

And the answering chorus: "*Seyla*."

\*\*\*

He'd had the dream again.

Fog choked the forest, moonlight bleeding through in silver shards. The *Summoner's* frame moved like it was part of him, but every motion felt too slow, too heavy.

Then it was there — the *Executioner*. Ninety-five tons of steel, its outline rippling through the mist like a predator breaking cover. The gleam of the Gauss rifle caught his eye an instant before it fired.

Trees exploded around him. Heat and static flooded the cockpit, alarms screaming over the low, predatory hum of the enemy's jump jets. He tried to run, jump, anything — but the thing was always there, closing, cutting off every escape.

The rifle fired again.

For a split second he saw the round coming straight for his cockpit.

\*\*\*

Sebastian jolted awake, skin clammy, breath sharp in his chest, one o'clock in the morning. The *Executioner's* silhouette still clung to his mind, the white flash of its Gauss rifle burning behind his eyes. He lay still, staring at the dim ceiling, until the silence of the barracks pressed too close. The others slept on, slow breathing in the dark. His mouth was dry, and his pulse had not yet slowed.

He got up quietly, pulling on his boots, and stepped outside. The night was cold, rain misting in the air, the compound's floodlights turning the wet concrete slick and pale.

A lone figure stood under the overhang of a hangar bay, sheltered from the drizzle. The light from a nearby bay spilled just far enough to outline her stance — weight set back on one heel, the easy stillness of someone who had been here a while. The glow of an electronic vaporizer pulsed at her lips before vanishing in a slow exhale. She noticed him and gave a small wave.

"You must be one of the hopefuls for the Trial, *quiaff?*"

"Aff. Cadet Sebastian."

She nodded once. "MechWarrior Himari, Jade Falcon Eyrie Cluster, Gamma Galaxy." She studied him for a moment. "Are you nervous?"

## The Red Merlin

He gave a faint laugh. "Is it that obvious?"

"Neg," she said, a hint of amusement in her voice. "But I know the look."

She rolled the vaporizer between two fingers before drawing again, the faint blue glow briefly painting her cheek. The scent was sharp — not smoke, but synthetic. Sebastian had seen warriors using them to calm their nerves.

"I passed my Trial in that same forest three years ago. I too piloted a *Summoner*." Her gaze shifted toward the tree line beyond the compound. "The weather will be ugly. Rain, lightning, heavy fog. Star Colonel Andreas Helmer is eager for the results. It is not often this many take the field together. In mine, I was the only one."

Sebastian raised his brows. "Only one? I cannot imagine."

Sebastian shifted his weight against the wall. "How did your Trial of Position go?"

Himari's eyes stayed on the rain as she answered. "I drew a *Hellbringer*. We traded fire for some time — lasers, autocannon, missiles. I stripped most of the armor from his right torso before I took to the air. At the peak of my jump, I fired a cluster spread from my autocannon. The rounds punched through the exposed section and set off the ammunition."

She mimed the angle with one gloved hand, a fighter's shorthand, as if the move was still fresh in her muscle memory.

Raul L.

“Luckily, he ejected before it consumed him.”

Sebastian’s brow furrowed. “I saw that once, almost exactly. Same weapon, same arc, same ejection. But it cannot have been you.”

Himari looked at him, her expression unreadable. “Is that so? And what makes you certain it was not me?”

“Because we were told it was not a cadet at all — that it was a warrior who made the kill you just described.” His tone sharpened.

“Was it the same night as the satchel charge incident with a *sibko*?” She asked.

Sebastian’s mouth curved faintly.

“It was.”

She drew on the vaporizer and exhaled a thin plume into the fog.

“I knew it,” Sebastian said. “We were told something else entirely. What happened with the Freeborn and the satchel charge?”

Her expression darkened, though her voice stayed even. “The *Freeborn*’s name was Blanca. She hated me for years. Our paths had crossed before, and never well.”

## The Red Merlin

“She despised *trueborns* — perhaps out of jealousy. She saw us as privileged and wanted to bring us down,” Himari said.

Sebastian leaned slightly closer. “And that night?”

“I was inspecting my *Summoner* before mounting up,” Himari said. “She had been hiding in the nearby brush. She came at me without warning, drove me to the ground. I lost my sidearm in the struggle. She had a knife. Stabbed me twice before I could turn the fight. The pain was sharp, but I did not yield. I broke her grip, turned her own blade on her. She died in the mud before she could strike again.”

Sebastian stared at her, the image forming unbidden in his mind. “And you still finished the Trial?”

“I did.”

She hooked a thumb under the hem of her tunic, lifting it just enough for the overhead light to catch two pale, jagged lines, one along her ribs, and another on her stomach. Sebastian caught himself staring before he looked back to her face.

“Adrenaline kept me upright. I secured one kill. After that... the blood loss was too great. I shut down before I lost consciousness entirely. They had to haul me from the cockpit.”

“Impressive,” Sebastian said quietly. Her story settled in Sebastian’s mind like a weight. He measured himself against it without meaning to — against her resolve, her scars, the way she’d

kept fighting through blood loss. Tomorrow, there would be no such margin for error.

“In our world, adversity is constant. You meet it or you fall. Blanca tried to deny me my place. Instead, she strengthened my resolve.”

He nodded slowly. “I will remember that.”

“Good.” She took another pull from the vaporizer. “Helmer will not take the field tomorrow — he will only observe. But he is here to fill open slots in the Eyrie Clusters. A trinary of warriors and equipment has been brought here for you and your *sibkin*. Four candidates in one trial is rare... rarer still that all four would pass. If you do though, you will probably not remain together.”

Sebastian felt the weight of it settle in. “So tomorrow could be the last day my *sibkin* and I stand together.”

“Aff,” she said simply. “That is the way of it. Each of you will go where you are needed, based on rank and availability.”

They stood a moment in silence, listening to the rain. The rain seemed louder then, drumming on the metal roof. Sebastian felt each drop as if it were time slipping past them. The thought pressed cold against him. Not fear of losing — but of winning, and still losing everything that mattered. He thought of Norah’s defiant trim, Mikel’s easy grin, Mayra’s sharp focus — pieces of his world that might be scattered by tomorrow afternoon.



## The Red Merlin

“You should get rest, Cadet. You will receive your recon report in four hours, and your trial will begin in six.”

He blinked. “Have we been talking that long?”

“Yes. We can speak more tomorrow — after you and I share the same rank.”

She gave him a single, deliberate nod. “Good luck, Cadet.”

Her gaze lingered on him for a moment longer, weighing something unspoken, before she thumbed the vaporizer’s switch and turned slightly back toward the bay.

Sebastian returned it before turning back toward the barracks, the rain cool against his face.