

CHAPTER 9

Barracks, Sibko Training Center 141

Jade Forrest, Ironhold

Kerensky Cluster, Clan Space

26 November 3048, 0650 hours

The four had woken up at 0600 hours and had a quick, lean breakfast. After a brisk session of calisthenics, they gathered to receive their recon report. The storm was already upon them, the sky filled with ominous clouds, and flashes of lightning followed by the rumbling of thunder.

"Flash thunder, right on top of one another," observed Sebastian, peering at the storm through the window. "The storm is right over us."

"It is going to be ugly," commented Mayra.

"I do not understand why they do not allow us communication," complained Mikel. "In real combat, communication with your unit is crucial."

Mayra laughed. "This is real combat — and the reason is because we are not supposed to be a unit as you say — we are supposed to be going at this alone."

"You know what I mean," Mikel shrugged.

"Enough bickering. Let's focus," Norah said calmly, spreading the map out on the table, rainwater still beading on its edges from when she'd carried it in.

“We start here,” she said, tapping the bottom edge. “South side of the AO. Our ‘Mechs are staged along this line. Enemy will be coming from the north-east and north-west in separate groups.”

She drew her finger upward along both flanks until it stopped at two large green blocks printed on the paper.

“This is perfect,” she continued, tapping again. “Two heavy patches of forest, running south to north like columns. Each has a narrow clearing in the middle, a few kilometers north of us. That middle is where we make our stand, then fall back south again.”

The group leaned in closer, eyes following as she traced the route. “Mayra and Mikel, your ‘Mechs are south of the west forest. You will advance north along the west side, drawing your adversaries toward you. Slow enough to commit them to that approach, but before entering the clearing in the middle, cut east to the other side. The forest will screen you from those first contacts. They’ll push through the middle gap to catch you, and the rest should lag behind.”

Mayra and Mikel nodded in agreement.

“Sebastian and I will do the mirror opposite along the eastern forest. By the time we initiate the melee, the remaining adversaries should be poorly positioned and either need to cut through the forest to reach us, or take a longer route. This will delay them — giving us the time to finish off our first adversaries.”

Norah continued, emphasizing the importance of backing up while engaging their individual foes. “We need to maintain over a kilometer of distance between us and the remaining adversaries, so as you fight — back up. This will increase our range from the others — but do not make it obvious — you do not want to be

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named *dezgra*. Once you get a kill, support your wingman until they get theirs. This is not a moment to be selfish.”

Norah locked eyes with Mayra.

“Really? You look at me!” retorted Mayra, kicking a chair against the wall in anger.

“I did not mean anything by it, Mayra,” returned Norah.

“Just proceed — please,” answered Mayra, rolling her eyes and shaking her head.

Mikel broke the uncomfortable silence. “And after we have our first kill?”

Sebastian chimed in, “Then go for rank as best as you can.”

Norah gave a brief nod, scanning the map one last time before folding it closed. The battle plan for the 'Mech battle was set. But before they could even reach their cockpits, there was another fight to account for.

“Any changes to the on-foot engagement with the Freeborn training cadre before the augmented battle?” asked Mikel.

“Standard procedure — bounding overwatch. Advance by fire teams, one moving, one covering. Suppressive fire on any exposed targets. We stay low, short bursts only. With the SMGs and Mikel’s LMG with grenades, they will not close on us.”

Their 'Mechs were staged just beyond the south tree line, less than two hundred meters from where the hover transport would drop them. The infantry skirmish was only the first step—once they pushed the Freeborns back, they’d sprint straight for their cockpits.

The group shook their heads in unison.

“Then it is go time,” said Norah.

Mikel moved around the table, gripping each of them by the shoulder in turn, giving a firm shake meant to rouse their focus. Sebastian recognized it for what it was — Mikel’s way of sharpening them before a fight. The group answered with short laughs and a few sharp calls, the tension breaking for a moment before settling back into readiness.

Blooding Grounds

Jade Forest, Ironhold

Kerensky Cluster, Clan Space

26 November 3048, 0800 hours

The *Bandit* hover transport skimmed low over the sodden ground, its lift fans throwing sheets of rainwater into the air. Inside the troop bay, the four cadets sat on hard benches, gear strapped in tight. The roar of the fans mixed with the hammering of the storm on the thin hull. Sebastian felt every vibration through his boots, every sudden yaw as the driver cut around deep water or skirted a tree line. He kept his hands clamped to his SMG, the vibration from the lift fans rattling up his arms. Each jolt from the hovercraft reminded him that the next time he sat in a cockpit could be his last.

Through the narrow view slit, he caught flickers of the battlefield — twisted trunks bowing under the wind, lightning crawling across a bruise-colored sky. The smell of wet earth and machine oil clung to the air.

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The *Bandit* slowed, then lurched to a stop. Norah rose first, sliding the side door open into a wall of wind and rain.

They hit the ground in single file, moving toward the AO. The rain poured down, thunder cracking overhead, lightning flaring in harsh, white flashes. The high winds howled through the trees, making them sway and creak like old masts in a storm.

Norah led, eyes sharp, scanning the forest edges. Mikel followed close, heavy machine gun slung but ready, grenade launcher clipped at his side. Sebastian and Mayra fanned to either flank, SMGs held low.

“Hold up,” Norah whispered, raising her hand. The group froze. “Movement in the tree line, one o’clock.”

Sebastian slung his weapon, pulled the binoculars from his chest rig, and wiped the lenses with the back of his glove. Rain streaked the glass, wind shoving at his stance, but the shapes came into focus — shifting between the trunks. “Seven, maybe eight. They are trying to stay low, but they are there.”

Mayra’s jaw tightened. “They think they can set an ambush.”

Norah turned to Mikel. “Grenades into the trees. Make them rethink it.”

Mikel’s grin cut wide. He braced his stance, adjusted for the crosswind, and shouldered the grenade launcher. “Ready.”

“Do it.”

The launcher thumped, sending the first grenade in a high arc. A sharp crack and a pulse of orange fire lit the tree line. Trunks

shuddered. Figures broke from cover — dark shapes scrambling back.

“Fire!”

Sebastian and Mayra opened up, short bursts punching into the gaps between trees. Mikel dropped another grenade, the blast kicking a spray of mud and shredded leaves across the forest floor. The Freeborns staggered, then turned, running deeper into the woods. One slipped and crawled to his feet, another threw down his weapon as he disappeared into the downpour.

“Run, you cowards!” Mikel yelled, his voice triumphant as he fired another grenade for good measure.

Norah watched them retreat, a satisfied smile on her lips.

“That should keep them at bay. Move.”

It was enough. They didn’t need kills here—just the space to reach their ‘Mechs unharassed.”

They advanced at a jog, rain plastering their uniforms to their skin. Ahead, the silhouettes of their ‘Mechs loomed — towering figures in mottled forest camouflage, blending with the wet green of the Jade Forest. Sebastian’s pulse steadied at the sight. They had proven their resolve and teamwork in the face of adversity. The first test was done. The real fight waited.

Norah glanced back once. “Keep your guard up. This is only the beginning.”

Sebastian checked the weight of his SMG before climbing the ladder to his cockpit. “Then let us show them what we are made of.”