

CHAPTER 10

Blooding Grounds

Jade Forest, Ironhold

Kerensky Cluster, Clan Space

26 November 3048, 0820 hours

The four *Summoners* advanced north, their movements synchronized and deliberate. Sensor pings marked hostile contacts over two and a half kilometers away, beyond the northern tree line. Time to set phase one in motion. They eased their pace, letting the lead elements drift ahead of their trailing *trothkin*.

On Sebastian's HUD, the two forest columns stretched northward on either flank, with his own Summoner moving up the eastern line beside Norah's. Mikel and Mayra's icons mirrored them on the western side, separated by nearly a kilometer of rain and trees.

Sebastian's channel crackled with a challenge as a *Hellbringer* raised its left arm.

"I am MechWarrior Lars in the *Hellbringer* A. MechWarrior Clyde in the *Summoner* Prime, and MechWarrior Roland in the *Executioner* Prime accompany me. I hereby invoke the ritual of *zellbrigen* and challenge you to a duel of warriors. In this solemn matter let no one interfere!"

Sebastian's pulse jumped, hands steady on the controls. A glance across his HUD showed the other groups north of his *sibkin* lighting with identifiers. Norah's adversaries were a *Mad Dog* Prime, a *Timber Wolf* Prime, and a *Gargoyle* D — all dangerous

at close and medium range. *The Timber Wolf must be Himari*, Sebastian noted.

Sebastian continued his assessment. Mayra would be facing a *Hellbringer B*, a *Summoner D*, and a *Warhawk Prime*. The *Warhawk* had enough firepower to gut anything in a straight duel. He wondered how the pairings could be called fair.

Mikel would have it worse — a *Hellbringer Prime* would be his first. Savage firepower, but a tin-can. A *Summoner Prime* and a *Warhawk C* would round it out. Sebastian knew Falconer Carla favored the *Summoner Prime* and wondered if she is what Mikel had against him.

They pressed north until the forest loomed close. Sebastian noted on radar that Mayra and Mikel veered east toward the southern center, just as planned. On his tactical plot, their opposite numbers shifted erratically, unsure of the cadets' intentions. Just as planned, the enemy pushed for the central gap to cut them off.

He kept pace with Norah on the eastern approach, drawing their expected pursuers — the *Mad Dog Prime* in her lane and the *Hellbringer A* in his. But the gap between them and a third contact was shrinking fast. Himari's *Timber Wolf*. It was almost keeping pace with the lead pair, its heavier frame closing in far sooner than planned. That meant when the fight turned into a melee, it would not be two lighter, less-armored 'Mechs against their Summoners — the *Mad Dog* and *Timber Wolf* together could hit like a hammer, and neither was an opponent to take lightly.

"Five seconds to weapons range," he muttered under his breath, more to steady himself than for anyone else. "Show time."

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Norah and Sebastian forced their adversaries into position. Sebastian hoped Mayra and Mikel were doing the same in their end.

Norah disappeared from Sebastian's peripheral for a moment, to then break cover as her Gauss rifle boomed, slug slamming into Bren's *Mad Dog* torso, followed by a white flare from her large pulse laser scarring its left torso. Bren's reply came in a swarm of LRMs that rattled her left side and tore craters in the mud around her.

Sebastian's crosshairs locked on Lars's *Hellbringer* A. He squeezed the triggers — his Ultra autocannon bellowed, ripping the LRM rack from its shoulder. Return fire stitched his left torso with heat warnings. The *Summoner* shuddered, heat sinks groaning as the cockpit air thickened with the tang of hot metal.

"LRM is down! You are mine!" he growled, forcing his *Summoner* forward into the exchange.

Through the rain, Norah's *Summoner* vaulted upward in a high, shearing jump — the signal they were waiting for — they were initiating the melee.

Sebastian swung with her, both switching focus to the *Mad Dog*. His PPC, LRMs, and autocannon hammered its ravaged center torso — Norah's follow-up Gauss shot punched clean through. The ejection seat rocketed skyward, vanishing into the storm clouds.

Sebastian's own armor was peeling from his left side, and Norah's right leg showed deep scoring, but Bren was down. "One adversary each — the plan was holding. For now."

Falconer Carla's voice crackled over the storm and comms. "You knew the risks. By the rules of the Trial, you have started a melee. All your opponents are now free to engage you. I hope you knew what you were doing."

Sebastian's jaw tightened. If the trainers wanted to pile on now, nothing would stop them. The words gnawed at him — confirmation that their carefully drawn lines could dissolve in seconds.

By this point, the fight had drawn all four cadets toward the central gap between the forest columns. The range and angles had shifted, and Sebastian could better keep track of everyone's battle. The sight steadied him and rattled him at the same time. Every friendly radar blip mattered now, and any one of them blinking out would shatter the plan.

Off to his left, Mikel and Mayra had locked onto Clint's *Hellbringer* B. Even at a distance, Sebastian saw the panicked bursts of fire as Clint's 'Mech jerked from target to target, spraying wild in a frantic arc — chewing into trees and empty ground as much as armor. Mikel's LRMs hammered its torsos.

Mayra's massive Ultra Autocannon tore through the *Hellbringer's* paper-thin side armor, the follow-up SRM spread punching deep into the exposed internals. A final pulse laser shot cored the center torso. The canopy blew clear, the ejection seat vanishing skyward in a gout of smoke.

Sebastian noted Mikel's *Summoner* still intact, while Mayra's left torso armor was gone, shredded by return fire.

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Explosions rocked the landscape. Trees splintered and toppled, the ground churning into a mess of shattered trunks, smoking craters, and jagged debris. The cadets pressed their advantage — their strategy unfolding as planned, but only just.

Sebastian's HUD flagged enemy icons shifting — the rest were double-timing it toward them. His remaining two were still over a click out, but Norah's were almost on top of them. Mikel and Mayra's pursuers — except for Carla's *Summoner Prime* and a *Summoner D* — were still far enough to buy a few moments. Then another red icon surged forward faster than its profile suggested.

Norah's third opponent, the *Gargoyle D*, with its raw speed, cut through the clearing far sooner than expected. Timing ruined. "*Savashri...*" The curse slipped out before he realized it.

Sebastian and Norah swung back toward Lars's *Hellbringer A*. Norah's pulse laser burned deep into its left and center torso. Sebastian's ER PPC and LRMs followed, his Ultra Autocannon smashing through the already-breached armor for the kill.

"Splash three!" Sebastian shouted, heat gauges flaring but satisfaction flooding him — a kill on the board, securing his rank.

There was no time to savor it. Himari's *Timber Wolf* was already closing in on them, her two ER large lasers flaring blue through the storm. The beams punched into Norah's left arm, slagging away her large pulse laser and leaving the limb hanging on a twisted brace of armor.

The sight jolted Sebastian — "one more solid hit and Norah could be crippled."

His reticle swung back to the *Timber Wolf*, fingers tightening on the triggers. The PPC bolt went wide, but his LRMs and autocannon slugs slammed into its left leg, shattering armor in jagged bursts.

Norah saw the concentrated damage. She shifted her aim low, Gauss rifle booming. The round punched through the *Timber Wolf's* already-battered leg, the massive joint locking for an instant before collapsing under its own weight. The heavy machine crashed to its knee, then toppled into the mud. Himari was out. One less hammer to fall on them.

Looking at his HUD, he realized they had twenty seconds at most, until his other two adversaries would be in range.

"We need to block them — now."

He angled north toward the southeastern forest, trying to force his two opponents to adjust their trajectory and confuse them. Every second they could keep them away was another breath to keep things in their favor.

To his right, Mikel traded blows with his opponent in a *Hellbringer Prime*, LRMs streaking through the air while its AMS spat down intercepting fire.

Mayra's *Summoner* leapt skyward, cutting across Mikel's line of fire. Her alpha strike slammed into the *Hellbringer's* chest, ripping it apart before Mikel could finish it. His adversary was gone — but not by his hand.

Sebastian's stomach sank. *That should have been Mikel's kill* — but now Mayra had two. And the price for her aggression was

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exposing her back as Carla's *Summoner* Prime and the other *Summoner* D approached. The plan had frayed, and the fight was about to turn.

Sebastian caught the movement on his HUD — the *Summoner* D cresting the rise behind Mayra, another heavy silhouette close behind, Carla. The Falconer wasted no time. A PPC blast flared azure across the storm, followed by the deep, concussive thud of her autocannon. The hits ripped open Mayra's rear right torso and tore her right arm free, spinning her *Summoner* sideways and leaving her back bare to follow-up fire.

Even crippled, Mayra refused to break off. She wrenched her machine around just enough to bring the Ultra Autocannon twenty to bear on the fresh *Summoner* D. Twin slugs slammed into its torso, followed by the ripple of her SRMs. Armor and internal structure blew apart under the barrage.

It was all she had left. Carla was already flanking her. Both the *Summoner* D and Carla struck in perfect unison, energy beams and autocannon shells hammering into Mayra. The impacts rocked her machine from multiple angles, staggering it backward before it collapsed into the churned mud. The canopy stayed intact, but no ejection seat fired. Mayra was down.

Mikel was already hammering the *Summoner* D when Mayra fell. Breaking from cover, he slapped a Narc beacon onto its torso and immediately began backing away from the two advancing heavies. Guided by the beacon, his missiles tore into the ragged wounds Mayra's autocannon had opened seconds before. The enemy machine reeled under the concentrated

barrage, but its return fire — now joined by Carla's *Summoner* Prime — smashed into Mikel's forward armor.

Sebastian and Norah fell back together into the southeast forest, weaving between the trunks to break line of sight with his two remaining adversaries. They angled toward Mikel's position, not to chase a kill but to pull clear of the guns at their backs and see if they could tip the balance in his fight. Ahead, the hulking *Gargoyle* held the gap between them and Mikel's target.

Norah's *Summoner* strode into the open, her Gauss rifle booming. The slug punched straight through the *Gargoyle*'s cockpit, vaporizing the canopy and pilot in an instant. The machine crumpled into the undergrowth, sending a shockwave through the ground.

"That makes three!" Sebastian muttered, tracking the kill marker on his HUD. Norah was running on her last weapon now — her other arm gone to Himari's fire earlier.

They pushed toward Mikel, closing the angle on the *Summoner* D. That was when Sebastian's threat indicators screamed — his last two adversaries had found their shot. The *Executioner* Prime's Gauss rifle hit first, a crushing blow that slammed him back in his seat as armor shattered across his left side. The other *Summoner* Prime followed, ERPPC discharge flashing energy across his vision, autocannon fire hammering into his center torso.

Warning klaxons blared, drowning even the storm. Sebastian's *Summoner*'s frame lurched under him, restraints biting into his shoulders.

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The world went white with the explosive bloom of his own machine tearing apart beneath him. For an instant, there was only light and the deafening roar, blotting out thought. Then the sky filled his view, weight crushing him into the seat as the ejection system hurled him clear. His visor rattled with the roar of detonations below until his parachute opened. From here, he could see the whole central gap sprawled before him — burning wrecks, the black columns of smoke twisting into the storm, the ragged line of the forests hemming it all in. As he soared down, he could see the intensity of the battlefield, a patchwork of fire, smoke, and writhing machine forms.

He hit the ground hard, the shock of impact jarring up his spine. His helmet slammed against the harness. He vomited into the visor, coughing as he fought for breath.

Sebastian took off his helmet and tossed it aside, watching Mikel still in the fight, pounding the *Summoner* D.

“You have to finish it now!” he shouted, voice raw, even though no comms link would carry the words.

Gauss rifle rounds ripped through the air, the shockwave rattling Sebastian’s chest as they tore apart a stand of trees a hundred meters from Norah’s *Summoner*. Even at that distance, the hypersonic shriek of the projectiles cut through the storm, sharp and unnatural — each one a promise of death if it hit.

The *Executioner* Prime and *Summoner* Prime were swarming her now, Gauss fire and autocannon bursts flaring against the storm-darkened sky. PPC fire from the far flank stitched the tree line near Mikel, exploding trunks into splinters.

And to top it off, the *Warhawk* Prime and *Warhawk* C looked to finally be within seconds of being in range. They had stayed back until the melee had been declared. Even then, the *sibkin*'s deliberate positioning had slowed their approach through the forest. With their arrival, it would be six against two, and Mikel and Norah were already battered and heat-stressed.

The *Executioner* shifted and fired again — the first Gauss round shrieked past Norah's *Summoner*, close enough to leave vapor trails curling in the rain. Sebastian flinched at the sonic crack. The next slug hit square in her upper torso. Norah's *Summoner* staggered, then toppled with a deafening crash, mud spraying from the impact. His throat closed. Only Mikel was left.

Sebastian's voice tore from his lungs, raw and useless in the storm. "Finish it, Mikel! Now!"

Missile fire erupted from Mikel's *Summoner*, warheads punching deep into the battered enemy. The *Summoner* D seemed to convulse under the impacts before its canopy blasted free — the ejection seat arcing into the clouds.

Relief slammed into Sebastian hard enough to leave him dizzy, his knees weakening, breath coming hard and shallow. Mikel had his kill. He'd passed. Despite the chaos, despite the impossible odds, they'd both done it. For a heartbeat, the noise of the battlefield seemed to fade, his mind caught between pride for his *sibkin* and the gnawing dread of what was still coming.

A heartbeat later, Mikel's hatch blew clear and his own seat rocketed skyward. Then the battlefield erupted — Gauss slugs, ERPPC bolts, and torrents of autocannon fire from all five remaining enemy 'Mechs slammed into his abandoned *Summoner*.

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The machine crumpled in place under the combined barrage, shattering into burning fragments.

The forest went eerily silent, the echoes of battle fading into the distance. Smoke hung over the wrecks like a low ceiling, and Sebastian stood among it, the sudden quiet pressing in on him harder than the storm ever had. The cadets had achieved their objective, but at what cost.