

CHAPTER 11

Falconer Carla's Office, Sibko Training Center 141

Jade Forest, Ironhold

Kerensky Cluster, Clan Space

26 November 3048, 1310 hours

Andreas Helmer sat opposite Falconer Carla, the air between them as heavy as the storm still rolling over the Jade Forest. Rain ticked against the glass, a constant reminder of the battlefield's chaos only hours ago. She hadn't said a word since he arrived, just sat stiff-backed, eyes fixed on the window. He turned to the report terminal and began reading aloud — clipped, precise, because the facts always came first, even when the facts cut.

“Primary ranking responsible — Andreas Helmer. Onsite ranking responsible — Falconer Carla of the 141st Sibko Training Center. Master scenario event record — Intelligence report — Trial of Position.

Scenario — undercut *batchall* issued, trial of possession for genetic repository. Attackers surprised three-to-one after opposing force's last bid arrives as reinforcements. Weather — torrential storm, poor visibility, high winds.”

Andreas advanced to the next field.

“Action initiated per standard operating guidelines. Four cadets engaged their respective opponents. Situation development — *zellbrigen* violated, melee declared.”

Andreas glanced up. Carla wasn't looking at him. Her gaze had drifted to the window, beyond it to the training grounds where the cadets had stood earlier in the rain. Her jaw was set, but her focus was miles away.

He followed her line of sight for a heartbeat, and the memory pressed in unbidden—four young faces lit by lightning, their stances sharp with readiness. It wasn't only determination in their stances — there'd been a sharp edge to it, the kind that came when a warrior understood exactly how high the stakes were.

He forced his attention back to the terminal.

"Per onsite report—retesting assessment recommended for MechWarrior Clint. Justification— poor judgment after melee declared, premature overheating, illogical target selection. Recommendation— Trial of Position retest."

Andreas finished typing.

"Falconer Carla, do you concur?"

Her voice was flat in her response.

"Aff."

Andreas keyed the confirmation, then hesitated, another image rising—not from the field, but from the action footage he had reviewed earlier.

Rain sheeting across the lens, Sebastian sprinting toward Norah's downed *Summoner*, lightning catching on the shattered canopy. The moment he saw the cockpit's ruin, Sebastian's knees had buckled. Seconds later, Mikel had arrived, rage breaking

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across his face until Sebastian shoved an arm into his chest, holding him back.

Their shouts had been muffled by the storm, but Andreas didn't need sound to read their expressions. The rawness of it had made something twist in his gut—too personal, too human for what the Clans claimed warriors should be.

That was the moment the truth about Norah's fate had reached anyone beyond the cockpit.

Just minutes earlier in the feed, Mikel's voice had cracked over the comms — "Ejecting, ejecting, ejecting!" — as his *Summoner* staggered under the concentrated firepower of the remaining 'Mechs on the field.

Andreas let the image fade and cleared his throat.

"Master scenario results list. Killed in action report—MechWarrior Trevor—direct cockpit hit. Fault—none."

Carla gave a single nod. Andreas continued.

"MechWarrior Lars—ejection parachute malfunction. Fault—under investigation."

Another nod. Andreas paused.

"Cadet Norah..."

Their eyes met. Andreas erased the rank and retyped.

"Star Captain Norah—blunt force trauma, cockpit impact. Fault—none."

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Carla's gaze broke away, her hands curling into fists at her sides.

"Bad luck," Andreas said quietly.

Her head turned back toward him, eyes narrowing, but she said nothing.

"Speak freely, Falconer Carla. Today has not been easy. We have always been able to talk openly."

Her jaw worked, tendons tight, as if she were holding back more than words. She looked down, eyes closing for a long moment.

"Fine then. Let us continue."

Andreas scrolled to the next section and read.

"Wounded in action report. Cadet Mayra — cracked ribs, shattered shoulder, and concussion. The cause was 'Mech fall impact. Fault—self, improperly restrained by harness. Downtime— two months plus."

"MechWarrior Clint — injury to the arm and leg, burns, and a fractured tibia. The cause was shrapnel from a cockpit breach. Fault—none. Downtime— one plus months."

Andreas remembered watching Clint's *Hellbringer* in the playback, spraying fire in a useless arc, chewing into trees as much as armor. The sheer waste of ammunition had made his teeth clench.

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“MechWarrior Olga — injury, a dislocated shoulder, muscle strain, and a deep gash on the forehead. Cause — ‘Mech fall impact. Fault—none. Downtime— one to two weeks.”

He set the stylus down, stretching his neck.

“Carla, talk to me.”

“We lost three people.” Her gaze was fixed on the window, glass reflecting the gray sky. “Four, if Clint tests out.”

Andreas lifted his hands in frustration. “That might be good for the Clan — we do not want warriors who mess up that badly.”

A dry laugh escaped her. “Of course.”

“I am upset about Norah too, Falconer.”

Her head snapped toward him. “We have gained nothing!” she shouted. “Eight years I have put into them — into her! They were attuned to one another. Imagine what they could have accomplished together!”

“Carla,” he said, keeping his voice steady, “Had Mayra not made the mistake she made, it is possible they would have downed even more. We did see what they had become.”

“Mayra...” Carla looked annoyed at the name. “She is the one who comes out ahead — in rank, in recognition.”

Carla's voice dropped to a bitter rasp. "Our testing ways often result in a zero-sum game. What we gain does not outweigh what we lose."

"Carla, you know as well as I do these trials are necessary. Simulators do not cut it — would you prefer to find out a MechWarrior chokes under pressure during an actual battle? With assets at stake? That could cost more warriors... could cost a war."

He motioned sharply to end it. "It is the way of the Clans, Falconer."

She smirked faintly. "Whatever you say," she replied, the edge in her voice felt like a dare to push the point.

"I know you are upset, but I never thought you would let your temper outweigh your discipline, Falconer."

He pushed on with the report, rattling off salvage tallies and rebuild lists — the usual litany of loss that always followed combat. The numbers were supposed to be clinical, but this time more than ever before, each one carried a face, a name, a voice that no longer answered.

"Final assessment," he typed. "All cadets met the requirements of the trial satisfactorily. New ranks, Star Commander Mayra — two confirmed kills. MechWarrior Mikel — one confirmed kill. MechWarrior Sebastian — one confirmed kill."

"Are we done?" Carla's voice was frayed now, breaking at the edges.

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Andreas rose from his chair with a sigh. “You are dismissed, Falconer. Get out of my sight. I do not wish to see you for the rest of the day.”

She left without a word, the slam of the door echoing in the small office.

Through the window, he saw her stride away into the rain. The image of the cadets after the trial’s sitrep came back to him — their postures loose, grins unguarded, Norah in front like she had been born to lead them.

“*Stravag!*” He hurled the chair into the window, glass shattering outward into the rain. Cold air swept in, carrying the scent of wet earth and scorched metal. It hit him like the battlefield had — raw, empty, and thick in his lungs.

Outside Barracks, Sibko Training Center 141

Jade Forrest, Ironhold

Kerensky Cluster, Clan Space

30 November 3048, 2315 hours

Sebastian and Mikel sat on the rough bench outside the cadets’ barracks, the night pressing close around him. Mayra was already asleep, still recovering from her wounds. The forest was alive with the faint stirrings of nocturnal creatures, each sound sharp in the cool air. It brushed against his skin, a stark contrast to the lingering heat from the day’s exertions. The rough board of the tree bench he leaned against pressed into his back, grounding him in the moment as he tried to make sense of the swirling thoughts and emotions.

A pile of pictures lay scattered between them on the bench where they sat, images of their *sibko* during happier times. They were flipping through the photos, reminiscing about Norah, her fierce spirit, and the moments they had shared.

“Remember this one?” Mikel asked, holding up a photo of Norah mid-laugh, her eyes sparkling with mischief. “She had just beaten Daniel in that ridiculous race around the barracks.”

Sebastian managed a small smile. “She was always so competitive. I remember how she’d never let any of us rest, always pushing for that extra mile.”

Mikel’s grin faded as he turned over another photo. “Do you think she knew how much she meant to us?”

Sebastian’s throat tightened. “I hope she did.”

Mikel pulled out another picture and laughed, showing Sebastian. It was a shot of Norah and Sebastian both mid-laugh, sitting by a campfire with smoke drifting between them.

Manny had dared Mikel to toss a sealed ration brick into the fire, just to see what happened. It burned and smoked more than they expected, and then popped like a grenade, scattering half-melted food everywhere.

They both laughed and laughed, and then went silent as they saw another one. A shot of Norah crouched in the training yard, grinning broadly while holding an injured young red merlin in hand. It was of the day she had found her pet, Akane.

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Sebastian heard footsteps crunched on the gravel path, then saw Carla emerge from the shadows with her usual deliberate stride.

She stopped a pace away, studying them for a moment.

“You should hear this from me,” she said at last, her voice low but steady. “Two months ago,” she began, her voice cutting cleanly through the night, “a JumpShip from the Inner Sphere appeared over Huntress — Clan Smoke Jaguar’s home world. The Khans kept it from the lower castes and most warriors until now. This morning, they made it official: the Clans will not ignore this.”

The words settled heavily over them. The news had already ignited the halls — Crusaders arguing for immediate action, Wardens calling for caution. The *chatterweb* was alight with speculation, but the decision had been made.

Sebastian’s mind raced with conflicting thoughts. The appearance of the JumpShip would likely lead to war, and with war came a chance at glory. It meant advancement through the ranks, a path to honor, maybe even a *bloodname*. But it also meant death, and he refused to lie to himself about that. Losses were inevitable. Warriors were expected to embrace that truth. He’d never managed to.

Mikel leaned forward, eyes bright. “This is it, Sebastian. Our chance to prove ourselves — to bring honor to our legacy.”

Sebastian nodded, though his mind stayed fixed on Norah’s fierce grin and the hollow ache she’d left behind. Glory and honor were one thing. The human cost was another.

“The Clan halls are in uproar,” Carla said. “One thing is certain — your skills will be tested soon.”

Sebastian looked up at her. She carried the certainty of someone who saw the path ahead as clear and fixed. For a heartbeat, he wished he could share it.

“This is your moment, you stand on the brink of greatness, ready to carve your names into history... into the Remembrance. The Inner Sphere awaits. We will take it with the strength and honor of Clan Jade Falcon.”

Sebastian saw the determination in her eyes. She, like many others, believed in the destiny of the Clans. Kerensky’s Hidden Hope Doctrine was no longer some distant legacy — it was coming for him.

When Carla left, her words lingered.

Mikel turned to him, jaw set. “We’ll get through this, Seb. We’ll make Norah proud.”

Sebastian forced a thin smile. “Yeah. For Norah.”

But deep down, the dread remained — a quiet knowledge that the road ahead was paved in blood, and as a Trueborn warrior of Clan Jade Falcon, he had no choice but to walk it.