

EPILOGUE

*Vinny's Brau Haus
Ciudad del Mar, Dominika, Buena
Lyrans Commonwealth, Inner Sphere
09 February 3064, 2230 hours*

Sebastian leaned back in his chair, the movement slightly off-balance, betraying the effects of more than a few pints of Vinny's finest ale. He chuckled, thinking of some of the dives he'd visited on backwater planets—places where you kept one hand on your drink and the other on your weapon. What a comparison, he thought as his eyes swept the warm, crowded room.

"Here's to the best team at Arcturan Arms!" Sebastian slurred slightly as he raised his glass, a triumphant grin on his face.

His colleagues, equally tipsy, cheered and clinked glasses with him.

"I still can't believe we pulled it off on time," Daniels said, shaking his head in wonder. "That new targeting system is revolutionary."

Sebastian nodded vigorously—his vision a little blurred, but his mood soaring. "We did it. Now, let's drink to that!"

They all drank again. The low murmur of other patrons, the smell of grilled meat from the kitchen, and the clink of glassware filled the pauses between their laughter.

Across the table, Belen, one of the younger engineers, hesitated before speaking. “Sebastian, if you don’t mind me asking—how did you get here? I mean, what’s your story?”

The table quieted, the change in atmosphere palpable. Sebastian’s smile faltered for a heartbeat at the weight of the question.

Belen caught the shift and quickly added, “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to—”

Sebastian waved her off, picking up his glass before setting it down again. “No, no, it’s fine. You want to know? I’ve kept it bottled up long enough.” He glanced around the table, gauging them. “Do you really want to know? It’s a long story.”

They exchanged knowing smiles—after working with him for over a year, they’d all wondered. “Yeah,” they answered in unison, nodding.

“For that,” Sebastian said, leaning forward, “I have to tell you the story of the Red Merlin—my friend Norah.”

He began to recount his early years, the brutal rigor of Clan culture, the Trial of Position, and the fate of his *sibkin*. The din of the bar faded for him as the memories unspooled. When he finished, his colleagues sat in stunned silence.

Daniels broke it first. “Wait, so you were actually part of the initial Clan invasion of the Inner Sphere?” His tone held both awe and disbelief. “I mean, we knew you were a Clanner, but being there from the beginning?”

The Red Merlin

Sebastian gave a small nod. “Yes. After my Trial of Position, things moved quickly, though not in the way I expected.”

He took a slow drink, letting the moment settle before continuing. “After our Trial, Mikel and I were transferred to Peregrine Eyrie Cluster. From there, we both—luckily—rotated into the 8th Falcon Regulars. With Operation Revival in motion, we hit Anywhere, Bone-Norman, Steelton, and finally Apolakkia in rapid succession. After that, they put us on garrison duty until Tukayyid. I don’t know why. On Tukayyid, all we did was provide security—watch over supplies and equipment.”

“Sounds like they wasted you,” Marc said.

Sebastian shrugged. “Maybe. A few months later, I was rotated into Gamma Galaxy’s 12th Falcon Regulars. I thought I’d never see Mikel again after we were separated, but we crossed paths during the Lyran raid on Sudeten in ’53. That was the last time I saw him.”

He set his glass down with care, his expression tightening. “We shared a lot of memories there. Drunken nights, close calls. I found out later he fell during the Refusal War in ’57—ironically, on Sudeten. The Wolves ignored every pretense of *Zellbrigen*, targeting warriors one by one until none were left.”

The table stayed quiet, letting the weight of that land.

“What about Mayra?” Marc asked gently.

Sebastian’s gaze dropped to the table. “Her story ended even sooner. Right after our Trial of Position, she joined the Jade Eyrie Cluster. She fought on Twycross, then transferred to Delta

Galaxy's First Falcon Striker Cluster just before the second battle of Twycross. She missed the Falcon Guard's humiliation at the Great Gash—if not for that, her fate would probably have been different."

He took a measured breath. "During the year of peace before Tukayyid, she was offered sponsorship to compete for the Helmer *bloodname*. She was ambitious—couldn't imagine life without one. She disabled her ejection seat in every fight. That choice cost her life in her fourth duel. She made it far, but not far enough. She never passed on her *giftake*."

Belen's eyes welled. "I'm so sorry, Sebastian. Losing friends like that...I can't imagine."

Daniels laid a hand on Sebastian's shoulder. "They sound like good friends. I'm sorry for your loss."

Sebastian managed a small smile.

Belen tilted her head. "What's a *giftake*?"

"A DNA sample," Sebastian explained, "used to produce trueborn children in a *sibko*, sibling company. A warrior has to be exceptional to pass it along. I never cared much about getting a *bloodname*. I was *chalcas*—that's what I am. I cared more for mechanics—for manufacturing. I wasn't skilled yet, but I understood it."

"*Chalcas*?" Belen asked.

"It's a Clan term for someone who doesn't follow the norm. Most warriors crave *bloodnames*. I didn't."

"Why not?" Daniels asked.

The Red Merlin

“Since I was fourteen, I spent my off-hours in ‘Mech hangers, helping techs. Occasionally touring manufacturing facilities. I wanted to know how things were made, how they fit together. Most of my *trothkin* expressed themselves through art—writing, painting, music. I was just...different.”

Marc spoke again. “So—what happened after Sudeten? How’d you end up here?”

Sebastian drew a breath. “During the Lyran raid on Sudeten, I made the mistake of assisting my Star Captain in defeating an opponent. He was a traditionalist—didn’t appreciate the help. He reassigned my *Summoner* and put me in a *Hellbringer*. I hated it, and he knew it—it’s like sitting in a tin can. Not that it mattered... I was transferred out of the 12th Falcon Regulars soon after for alleged misconduct. They took the *Hellbringer* too. It was an OmniMech—frontline gear—not for garrison units or washed-up warriors, which is how they saw me.”

“That’s harsh,” Belen said.

Sebastian gave a half-shrug. “They threw me into the 8th Provisional Garrison Cluster after the Steel Vipers kicked them off Trell I. They put me in a *Black Knight* BL-6b-KNT—probably sitting in a Brian Cache since the Golden Century. By then, I even missed the *Hellbringer*. I clashed immediately with my new Star Captain. She saw me as a threat and used my blunt tongue to demote me from Star Commander to plain MechWarrior.”

“One doesn’t appreciate what they have until it’s gone,” Daniels said, raising his glass.

"The next few years were quiet—until Butler. Hot world. Nice beaches. We clashed with the Vipers a few times. In one duel, I downed a Viper and claimed his *Summoner* as *isorla*. The *Black Knight* had truly been great. My Star Captain issued a *batchall* for the *Summoner*—a Trial of Possession. I chose Hand-to-hand combat. It wasn't my intent, but I killed her—snapped her neck."

Belen stared, eyes wide. "I'm...having trouble picturing that. You're one of the nicest people I know."

Sebastian met her gaze evenly. "I appreciate that. But it's the truth. I was a different person then. In the Clans, brutality was survival. She wanted me gone—my protests against her orders humiliated her. We were better off without her."

He took a drink before continuing. "I became a Star Commander again. The techs liked me—they restored my old loadout, replacing the LBX with an Ultra. The *Summoner* was mine again."

Belen nodded. "It's hard to imagine, but I understand. It's your past—it made you who you are."

Marc leaned forward. "We appreciate you sharing it. Can't be easy."

"And not easy for you to hear," Sebastian said, "but it's who I am."

Daniels glanced at him. "So—what came after?"

"3057. The Refusal War. We were ready for Clan Wolf on Butler, but intel failed—they never came. Lucky for us, I am sure that would have been my end. We lost a lot of warriors in that war."

The Red Merlin

Afterwards, Martha Pryde needed replacements. They sent me and my *Summoner* to the 12th Falcon Regulars. My old unit was being rebuilt in Rho Galaxy.”

“The Khan wanted to prove we were still strong, so in ‘58,” Sebastian went on, “she drove into Lyran space. Engadine, Bucklands—too many worlds to list—until we reached Coventry. We took it. The Lyrans fell back into guerrilla war. That’s when I was downed.”

“How?” Daniels asked.

Sebastian’s eyes narrowed slightly at the memory. “April 11, ‘58. Towards the middle of the occupation. There was always trouble on the outskirts of my control zone. We were spread thin. We went on patrols routinely. I followed a ghost blip, went farther than I should have. Found Lieutenant Sven Bauer of the 10th Skye Rangers. He had baited me. He knew Clan ways and challenged me to a duel. I accepted. He had a *Banshee* BNC-5S—ninety-five tons, Gauss rifle, two PPCs, enough secondaries to strip armor fast. What a mean machine.”

The table leaned in.

“I don’t know why I always ended up against Gauss rifles. Maybe part of me was looking for a quick end—like Norah. The tech gap we’d enjoyed was fading. Still, I thought I had an edge, but his tonnage evened it. Bauer took me as his bondsman—my *Summoner* as isorla. We used Norah’s band as the *boncord*.”

Sebastian raised his left wrist, turning it so the worn red band caught the dim light. “I pulled it from her ‘Mech on the day

of our Trial. Kept it all these years—along with my other trinkets and memories.”

Belen’s gaze lingered on the faded fabric around his wrist. “You’ve had that for...what, fifteen years?”

Sebastian gave a short nod. “Sixteen.”

Daniels shook his head slowly. “Hard to believe something that small has been through that much.”

“It’s memory,” Sebastian said, lowering his hand. He took a sip before continuing.

“It wasn’t long before the Inner Sphere forces offered hegira to Khan Martha Pryde. By then, I’d come to like my bondholder, Sven—and surprisingly, he liked me. We compared notes on Clan and Lyran tactics, argued strategy, and learned more about each other than I’d have thought possible.”

“Throughout my career, I’d been treated with disrespect, never valued. The Lyrans were different. Even in the middle of a guerrilla war, losing people daily, they treated me with respect. They joked with me. They cared. I’d never gotten that even from my own people.”

He let the words hang for a moment.

Belen tilted her head. “So, you just... stayed?”

Sebastian chuckled. “Not quite. After the battle of Coventry, the two sides arranged to exchange all prisoners. Sven asked me if I wanted to stay, and I did. He told Falcon Command I was dead.”

The Red Merlin

Daniels leaned forward. “And your *Summoner*”

“He saw the value in the Lyrans having that around too. My knowledge of Omni technology was deep compared to what the Inner Sphere knew at the time. He figured I could do more for the Commonwealth off the battlefield.”

Belen’s brows rose. “So, what happened next?”

“He released me as a bondsman—pulled strings to make me a Commonwealth citizen. They said I needed a surname. I chose Binetti. I hadn’t earned it in Clan terms, but I didn’t care. Sven had friends at the Buena Military Academy—he placed me there as a technical auxiliary, later I became an instructor. A Falconer, if you will, though...a very jaded one. That’s how I got here.”

He swirled the ale in his glass, watching the foam. “Statistically, I should be dead you know?”

Marc lifted his glass. “You’re here now. Enjoy it.”

“I am. I live a life most Clan warriors can’t imagine—They’d be disgusted by what I’ve become. But me? I thrive on it. Teaching at the academy, running drills with my *Summoner*, showing cadets what an OmniMech can really do. We’ve stripped and rebuilt it countless times, learning every lesson in its design.”

Belen smiled faintly. “Is that what led you to Arcturan Arms?”

“Yes. I earned my degree in mechatronics while teaching at the Buena Military Academy. Arcturan Arms saw value in my Omni experience and offered me the job. I still get to instruct at the

academy. Working on projects like the *Manteuffel* upgrade—this is what I had been dreaming of since I was fourteen.”

He glanced around the table. “And now my wife Susan and I have a child on the way.”

They raised their glasses.

“Did you know,” Sebastian said, “that one of the main drives for a Clanner is to pass on their genes to warriors they’ll never even meet? I’ll get to see my own child grow—teach them, guide them... play with them, be there.”

Belen’s expression softened. “That’s so beautiful! I want that too.”

Daniels smirked. “You’re what—twenty-five?”

“Twenty-three!” Belen shot back.

Marc nearly choked on his drink. “You’ve got time before you need to start worrying about that Belen.”

The table laughed, the sound mingling with the low hum of the bar. Sebastian leaned back, taking in the scene—friends, a good drink, and a life he’d built far from what anyone in his *sibko* would have imagined.

He lifted his glass in a small gesture. “For now, that’s enough.”

Glasses met with a dull clink, and the conversation turned to lighter things.