

THE RED MERLIN

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PROLOGUE

Sibko Training Center 141

Jade Forest, Ironhold

Kerensky Cluster, Clan Space

2 May 3045, 1925 hours

The distant echo of explosions shattered the night's stillness. Cadet Sebastian felt his heart thundering in his chest, each beat a reminder of his inescapable Trial of Position. Crouched behind a fallen tree, the cold bite of fear gnawed at his resolve. The massive silhouette of a nearby 'Mech loomed over the moonlit landscape, its imposing form commanded both respect and dread. There was no turning back—his future as a warrior hung in the balance.

With a steadying breath, he gripped the rungs of the ladder and climbed to the cockpit of his *Summoner*. The *Summoner's* reactor thrummed beneath him, sending familiar vibrations up through the command couch and into his bones. Strapping himself in, he felt the cool seat beneath him, grounding him amid the storm of anxiety swirling inside. The controls flickered to life, bathing him in a soft glow as he initiated the startup sequence.

Surging with anticipation, he flexed them against the cool control sticks. His heads-up display illuminated the battlefield, and a blip on his radar caught his attention. An *Executioner Prime* materialized, a hulking monster ready to test his mettle. No hesitation. This was a fight to the death.

With a swift motion, he activated his jump jets, feeling the rush of adrenaline as the *Summoner* lifted off, soaring above the treetops to claim the high ground. He couldn't afford to falter. The

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Executioner's pilot reacted with deadly precision, a Gauss rifle shot tearing through the air. The slug whistled past at supersonic speeds, a near miss that sent splinters flying from the impact to nearby trees. Gritting his teeth against the impact, Sebastian focused, narrowing his world down to the target ahead.

As he landed, he unleashed a torrent of PPC fire, the brilliant Azure energy beam sliced through the darkness. The *Executioner* dodged—but not fast enough. The shot grazed its armor, leaving a glowing scar that pulsed ominously. In retaliation, the enemy fired back, energy weapons crackling as heat surged in Sebastian's cockpit. Warning lights flashed, panic rising within him, but he pushed it aside. There was no room for fear. He had to press on.

He closed the distance, launching a volley of missiles that struck the *Executioner* with bone-jarring force. The enemy staggered, but its pilot quickly recovered, countering with a Gauss rifle shot that rocked the *Summoner*. The impact sent Sebastian reeling, alarms blaring as armor integrity warnings blazed red. He steeled himself, every instinct screaming for him to act.

Just as he prepared for his next move, a blinding light enveloped him, and the world dissolved into darkness.

CHAPTER 1

Sibko Training Center 141 – Campsite

Jade Forest, Ironhold

Kerensky Cluster, Clan Space

2 May 3045, 1930 hours

Sebastian's body jerked upright, sweat cold on his forehead. A sudden light flashed in his face, blinding him momentarily. He blinked a few times, disoriented, before the familiar glow of the campfire came into focus. Falconer Carla's voice cut through the haze.

"Still with us, Sebastian?" she asked, her flashlight still aimed at his face.

He nodded, shaking off the remnants of his dream. Around the fire, his *sibkin* chuckled, breaking the tension.

The wood crackled softly, blending with the breeze that stirred the leaves. The air carried the damp bite of crushed leaves and moss, and the fire's warmth pressed gently against his skin. Night insects chirped in rhythm, and above, Ironhold's larger moon glowed in the dark sky, casting pale light across the treetops.

Sebastian tore his gaze from the horizon and refocused on Falconer Carla's voice. Tonight's story followed MechWarrior Byron Binetti and his *Thresher* during the Golden Century. *A fitting tale for their sibko, descended from Binetti-Helmer genes*, he thought, stretching his legs across the grass. *At least she isn't telling The Legend of Turkina again*, Sebastian let out his breath. Falconer Carla continued, explaining the *Thresher's* connection to the *Summoner*—the first OmniMech of Clan Jade Falcon.

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He admired Falconer Carla. She was, by his guess, in her late thirties—too old for frontline duty, too valuable to be thrown into a *Solahma* unit. Instead, the Clan had assigned her to oversee *sibkos*. She was strict but fair, often allowing the cadets to speak freely without needing to ask for permission, though that quickly changed if her temper rose.

In stark contrast, Falconer Demyan—absent that evening—thrived on dominance, taking pleasure in belittling the *sibko* and relishing the fear he provoked. Just the thought of him sparked anger in Sebastian—*Demyan is a hateful, vengeful stragg. He feeds on bloodlust. He wants us to fail.*

Sebastian shifted uncomfortably, returning his thoughts to Carla. She seemed committed to the Clan, determined to forge warriors who could carry its legacy. She'd been with them since they left the *crèche* four years ago. In Sebastian's mind, she would one day oversee a sib-nursery—a surrogate mother for the next generation.

His gaze circled the fire, settling on his closest *sibkin*: Mikel, Norah, and Mayra. They had always gravitated toward one another.

Mikel, his best friend, sat with his usual relaxed sprawl. Jet-black hair, olive skin, and honey-brown eyes like Sebastian's—but wilder, more animated. Athletic. Lanky. Already taller. Sebastian figured he'd pass 185 centimeters easily. What drove Mikel was harder to pin down. Lately, he seemed more focused on impressing Norah than anything else.

Norah, beside him, leaned just enough that her leg touched his. She was the shortest in the *sibko*. Cheerful, unless under pressure—then focused, sharp. To Sebastian, she was the intuitive

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one. Strong without needing to prove it. In other castes she would be considered beautiful. He often felt silly around her, but her attention was always locked on Mikel, never him. The red band she always wore was a unique characteristic that set her apart from the rest.

Past her sat Mayra. If Norah was calm fire, Mayra was flame—bright, hot, and dangerous to touch. She looked like Norah but was a shade rougher. Hazel eyes, lighter brown hair, rarely smiling. Quick to anger, sharper with words. She could sound like a bully, but beneath that, Sebastian saw a stubborn ally.

Mayra was the *sibko's* strongest female cadet. She was built like a brawler, full of endurance and strength. A scar marked her brow, and her voice rasped as she spoke. She carried herself with confidence and a hint of danger. He found that hard to ignore.

Sebastian figured her attitude stemmed from always playing second to Norah. She wanted recognition, to be the best. That hunger drove her—and made her compelling.

Dorian sat beside Carla, as usual. Quiet and withdrawn, he rarely spoke unless asked. He'd been picked on for his stutter and shyness since the *crèche*. *Poor Dorian. Carla's little project. He only seemed to want to survive the training.* But Sebastian remembered a day in the hangar, months ago—Dorian had spotted a malfunction in a 'Mech's actuator that even the techs had missed. *He wasn't weak, just overlooked. One day, Carla would have to let him fend for himself.*

His gaze swept everyone else and then stopped on Cole. Trouble clung to him. Greasy charm, fast talk, always skating the line between clever and reckless. He reminded Sebastian of the sleazy Freeborns he'd seen on holovids, or the shady characters in

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the Laborer Quarter of Katyusha city—always smiling, always scheming.

He's a shadow, Sebastian thought. Latching onto the strong, feeding off their drive. A blood-sucking tick.

We started with nearly one hundred canister-borns. Fourteen years later, only sixteen of us remain. Too small, too slow, too fragile—swept aside like debris in a storm.

Nolan followed. Physically, he was unmatched. The *sibko* had nicknamed him "Bulldozer." But his mind? What a *surat*. *He reminds me of Demyan. Maybe he's Demyan's bastard. He's certainly dumb enough.*

Still, Nolan dominated in strength-based trials and Demyan's combat drills. He let Mayra tease and manipulate him. He followed Cole's lead too often. Potential wasted.

Sebastian's eyes brushed over the rest without pause. They left no impression. Then his thoughts turned inward.

What about me?

He'd always loved machines. Not just as tools of war, but for what they were. Complex. Elegant. Powerful. While others dreamed of combat, Sebastian wanted to know how 'Mechs worked. How everything worked.

He used to spend hours in the hangars, watching techs at work. They came to tolerate his presence, even answered questions. He learned quickly—components, maintenance cycles, power systems. Every detail fascinated him. When he was in the hangar, tools in hand, time disappeared. That was clarity. *Is it chalcas to feel attracted to it? To want to pursue that?*

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That interest led him to tour manufacturing sites when given the chance. Alone, usually. Sometimes Mikel or the others tagged along, but only Dorian seemed genuinely interested like he was. For a while, they went together. But when Dorian became a target of mockery, Sebastian stopped asking him to come. That choice still bothered him.

But he was made to be a warrior. Carla stared at him during drills—steady, expectant. Demyan’s eyes narrowed whenever Sebastian hesitated. Each glance reminded him that he was made for this. But doubt still crept in. *What if that wasn’t enough?*

The fear sat heavy in his chest. He could picture their disappointment. He could picture Mikel and Norah’s disappointment.

His chest tightened.

“Sebastian. You off in orbit again?” Norah asked in a whisper, smiling playfully.

“No—just thinking,” he replied.

Falconer Carla’s voice returned to center stage. She glanced at each cadet in turn.

“Remember,” she said, “like MechWarrior Byron Binetti, each of you has the potential for greatness. You only need to discover what drives you.”

She paused, holding their attention.

“But also remember this—failure in the Trial of Position is not just a setback. It is a mark of dishonor. Those who fail are cast down, relegated to the lower castes to live out their days in menial

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labor, forever shamed. The Trial is not just a test of your abilities, but a test of your very worth. Success means glory and honor. Failure means disgrace—a warrior's life unfulfilled. The stakes have never been higher."

Sebastian narrowed his eyes. *Failure means disgrace—a life unfulfilled...* He wasn't so sure he agreed.

CHAPTER 2

Gymnasium, Sibko Training Center 141

Jade Forrest, Ironhold

Kerensky Cluster, Clan Space

12 October 3045, 1410 hours

Frost etched the gymnasium windows as Sebastian's breath fogged in front of his face despite being indoors. His fingers still burned from the morning's march through knee-deep snow—the campfires of autumn nothing but memory now. In the center of the training mat, Nolan's boot pressed against Cadet Liam's chest, pinning him like an insect. Nolan thrust both arms skyward, veins bulging, a victory roar echoing off the walls.

Sebastian noticed only Cole's voice rising in celebration. The rest of the *sibko* stood silent with the blank expressions of those who'd seen this scene too many times before.

Across the Circle of Equals, Falconer Demyan's lips curled upward as he locked eyes with Falconer Carla. His chin lifted slightly, one eyebrow raised in challenge. Sebastian shifted his weight from foot to foot, stomach tightening as Demyan's finger hovered, ready to select the next opponent. Sebastian averted his gaze, hoping to become invisible. Demyan's eyes never left Carla's face—a predator waiting for the mother to offer another fledgling from her eyrie for slaughter.

"Norah."

Falconer Carla's voice cut through the gymnasium. Sebastian's jaw dropped as his heads turned. Whispers rippled

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through the *sibko*. Norah looked half Nolan's size, but she stepped forward without flinching.

The match began. Nolan lunged with a haymaker that would have shattered bone. Norah sidestepped, her ponytail barely disturbed. Again and again, Nolan's massive fists whistled through empty air while Norah pivoted just beyond reach, her breathing controlled, eyes calculating. Sweat darkened Nolan's shirt. His movements slowed, his chest heaved.

Sebastian recognized the pattern—like watching Norah's merlin Akane circling prey. When Nolan finally stumbled to one knee, gasping for air, Norah struck. Her sneakers squealed against the polished gymnasium floor as she gained traction and launched forward, driving her elbow into his sternum with surgical precision. Nolan's eyes bulged. He collapsed, tapping the mat frantically.

The *sibko* erupted. Sebastian caught Falconer Carla's eyes flicking toward Demyan, whose sneer had vanished completely. Falconer Carla addressed the group.

"This is how intelligence and strategy can overcome brute force."

Cafeteria, Sibko Training Center 141

Jade Forrest, Ironhold

Kerensky Cluster, Clan Space

12 October 3045, 2030 hours

After a long, exhausting day, the group gathered in the dimly lit cafeteria, the clatter of cutlery and low murmur of voices forming a backdrop to their meal. They picked at their supper, a bland assortment of reheated stew and stale bread, while leaning in close to discuss the latest buzz they had overheard on the *chatterweb*. The topic was the 132nd Sibling Company's Trial of Position, a spectacle set to unfold that night in the shadow of the Jade Forest's rugged mountains. The *sibkin* whispered excitedly among themselves, plotting a daring escape from camp to witness the trial firsthand. Sebastian noticed Judite lingered near the wall, jaw clenched, while two others whispered but didn't approach.

The final group, however, came together. There was Cole, whose antics Sebastian often found to be reckless. Beside Cole were Nolan, Manny, Judite, and Mayra, who seemed intrigued by the idea. Sebastian and Mikel exchanged glances, their curiosity getting the better of them, and joined in with the group, ignoring Norah's stern objections and watchful gaze.

Even though they had slipped away from camp many times before, observing Cole in action never ceased to amaze. He approached the perimeter fence with the confidence of someone who had rehearsed this very act countless times. With a deft hand, he cut a precise, silent opening in the mesh, slipping through with the grace of a shadow. The others followed, hearts pounding with a mix of fear and exhilaration, stepping into the inky darkness of

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the Jade Forest. Their path was uncertain, lit only by the faint, silvery glow of one of the moons that hung low in the sky, casting an ethereal light on the unfamiliar trail stretching ahead. The trees towered above them like ancient guardians, their gnarled branches weaving together to form a dense canopy that swallowed most of the moonlight. The forest floor beneath their feet was a tapestry of shifting shadows, every rustle of leaves and snap of twigs echoing unnaturally loud in the oppressive silence. An owl hooted somewhere above, its call haunting and clear, while the occasional distant howl of a wild creature sent icy tremors through their bodies.

They'd been picking their way along the narrow dirt trail for what felt like an eternity, the forest pressing in around them with velvet-black shadows and a silence so thick it weighed on their chests. Then—somewhere ahead—a distant boom rolled across the trees, followed by the sharp crack and sizzling hiss of laser blasts. Mayra's hand flew to her throat, Mikel's jaw clenched, and Sebastian's pulse hammered in his ears. Without a word, they broke into a run towards the battle.

They skidded to a halt at the forest's edge, lungs burning, eyes wide. Before them lay a battlefield carved into the hillside. Tree trunks snapped and charred, splinters littering the ground alongside twisted chunks of metal that gleamed dully in the half-light. The air tasted of scorched wood and melting alloy, mingling with the damp, loamy scent of earth. Overhead, a jagged silhouette looped against the dim horizon—a *Summoner*, its jump jets carving hisses of flame into the sky. Sebastian squinted as the mech crested its arc and fired: a searing muzzle flash from its left arm, then the

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thunderous bark of an LB-X Autocannon Cluster round making contact that rolled off the nearby peaks like distant artillery.

Mikel's shout cut through the roar.

"A hit!"

A heartbeat later, a brilliant flare bloomed beyond the *Summoner*, outlining its opponent in a harsh, white light. An ejection seat launched skyward with a shrieking whistle.

Another blast shook loose clumps of snow from the highest branches, and the armored *Hellbringer* pitched sideways, metal screaming as it met its shadow. A wild cheer tore from the group's throats—Sebastian imagined it could only be a cadet's first kill, trial by fire conquered, full warrior at last.

Mayra laughed, voice bright:

"They will celebrate with fusionnaires tonight!"

They surged forward again, scrambling uphill toward a rocky outcrop for a better view. Sebastian's legs felt light, his heart a drumroll of triumph. Every thump of artillery, every hiss of escaping gas drove hot electricity through his veins. He pictured himself in that cockpit, hands on the control yokes, jump jets burning under his command. A fierce grin split his face. The forest's silence was gone forever; in its place pulsed a single, unquenchable beat—Sebastian's own dream of glory.

Trial of Position Site Epsilon

Jade Forrest, Ironhold

Kerensky Cluster, Clan Space

12 October 3045, 2230 hours

Moonlight gleamed off of a chain-linked fence that encircling the trial grounds. Sebastian's nostrils flared at the acrid stench of scorched metal and cordite that hung in the air like a shroud. Far away, technicians hunched under portable floodlights, their shadows stretching grotesquely as they salvaged twisted wreckage. A plasma cutter hissed and spat blue-white sparks that momentarily illuminated a fallen 'Mech's shattered torso.

Sebastian watched Cole drop to a knee and pull wire-cutters from his coat, like he'd done it a hundred times before. Metal links parted with barely a sound. Sebastian watched Cole's fingers work, wondering how many nights those same hands had slipped away while the rest of them slept.

Their boots crunched over debris-strewn ground as they spread out across the battlefield. Sebastian's eyes darted between shell casings and metal fragments, searching for a trophy worth keeping. A nightbird shrieked somewhere in the darkness beyond. He stumbled over something soft and yielding, looked down, and froze.

Sebastian's hand shot up, palm trembling, as he beckoned the others closer. Gravel crunched beneath the boots of his fellow cadets as they closed in around him. His heart pounded so fiercely he feared they'd hear it. Moonlight glinted off a blade embedded in

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a girl's chest. Her jumpsuit—once a crisp shade of green—was smeared with mud and blood. The coppery stench rose in waves, mingling with the chill night air and making Sebastian's stomach churn. He'd seen battlefields littered with twisted metal and ruined 'Mechs, but this—this fragile human corpse—felt unbearably raw.

Her pale face was stretched into a final, frozen scream, and her wide eyes reflected nothing but the black sky above. Every detail felt wrong to Sebastian—he was trained to gauge damage on armor plates and twisted servos, not to see a human life extinguished so violently.

The *sibkin* stood in a hushed semicircle. The knowledge that war demanded death didn't lessen the shock of finding a fallen cadet face-down in the dust.

"*Freeborn sibko* training cadre," Mayra said softly, tilting her head toward the embroidered patch on the girl's shoulder—a phoenix in flight beneath a serrated ring.

"How can you tell?" Manny asked, stepping forward and squinting at the faded stitching.

Cole snorted, shoulders hunched in amusement. "*Surat*, look at the badge." He kicked a pebble toward the corpse, sending it skittering towards the cadaver.

Mikel leaned closer, voice low. "She must have been one of the hand-to-hand combatants of the trial."

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A cold knot formed in Sebastian's gut. Jade Falcons demanded their initiates face Freeborn *sibko* fighters in bare-knuckle combat before even climbing into a 'Mech. He shivered. *Killing someone like this...* He swallowed hard.

Cole glared at her. "Let's see what she has."

Norah's voice shook with anger. "You have no right."

His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed, gaze flicking away from her fiery stare. Sebastian stepped forward.

Sebastian interjected. "She was a cadet just like us."

Cole's fist froze over the open pack. "She's just a Freeborn." The words spat out like contempt.

Sebastian said nothing, forcing his jaw to unclench. the rest of the group backed away, disgust in their eyes. Sebastian watched Cole's fingers pluck out trinkets from the fallen girl's life, and he felt a bitter twist in his gut. He didn't protest further; he wouldn't give Cole any hope that he sympathized with Freeborn sorrow.

As they stalked off through the moonlit clearing, their voices clipped and tense over plans and second-guesses, Judite's sharp cry sliced through the argument. The others spun toward her silhouette—she stood ten paces ahead, arm trembling, finger pointing at Cole, who loomed like a dark statue beneath the skeletal oak. In Cole's hands, a tan canvas pack spun above his head, a satchel charge.

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Nolan and Manny exchanged stunned glances, then sprinted the forty meters in two lunging strides.

Manny skidded to a stop with a grunt, chest heaving. He jabbed toward a gnarled tree trunk at the clearing's edge. "Let's set it off against that tree!" His voice trembled on the verge of a roar.

Cole's grin curled into a sneer. He jabbed a finger into Manny's chest, snapping a twig underfoot. Cole's grin curled at one corner. He leaned in, the fuse's canvas hushed in his grip. "You will set it off, *quiaff?*" he taunted, thumb pressed into Manny's chest like a dagger. His eyes glittered with something cruel. Manny froze, uncertain, his bravado slithering away.

Cole shifted, spotlighting Nolan next. The pale moonlight caught every drop of sweat beading on Nolan's brow. "And you, Demyan's little pet?" Cole hissed, voice rich with scorn.

From the edge of the group, Mikel's boots crunched on damp grass as he strode forward, eager to join them. Norah's hand shot out.

"Mikel! Get back here!" Her voice rang stern and sharp.

Mikel froze, then slunk back as she glowered. At the same time, Mayra scoffed, lips curling. She slithered toward Cole and his cronies, ignoring Norah's warning glare. Her boots pressed into the damp grass, mud squelching beneath the soles.

She tossed her hair, lips twisting in a mock sneer as she advanced on Nolan. Norah's eyes went cold.

“He will not do it,” Mayra taunted loudly, voice dripping disdain. “He is too scared.” A ripple of laughter jangled through Cole and Manny.

“Are you not the toughest, Nolan? Or has it always been an act?” Her words stung like stones. Nolan’s shoulders hunched, his gaze dropped to the grass.

Norah lunged, hands clasping Mayra’s shoulders. “Knock it off!”

“I’m sick of you, Norah!” Mayra shoved Norah hard enough to make her fall, then returned to Nolan, voice rising as she crowed,

“Come on, Nolan! We’re waiting!” She clapped her hands like a child urging a pet *surat*.

Nolan looked like his pulse was hammering him, Likely because of being mocked by the one he felt lust for, Sebastian thought. Nolan pressed a hand to the rough canvas satchel and let out a brittle laugh.

“Fine,” he said, voice cracking. “I’ll do it.”

Norah’s eyes narrowed. She hooked her fingers into Mayra’s jacket and yanked, twisting her around until Mayra’s boots lost traction in the soggy earth. They tumbled together, a flurry of limbs and curses, landing in a clump of crushed grass and broken

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twigs. Norah managed to pin Mayra's shoulder to the ground, knee pressing into her back, arms locked around Mayra's flailing elbows.

"Get off me!" Mayra spit, her voice muffled against the cold dirt.

At that moment, Cole bolted toward the scene of the commotion between Mayra and Norah. "Nolan and Manny are going to light it!" he shouted, voice raw with triumph.

A blast slammed into Sebastian's chest, throwing him to his knees and wrenching the breath from his lungs. His teeth ground together as a metallic taste flooded his mouth—coppery, warm. The world flared in a white-hot pulse, then collapsed into shards of fire and smoke.

He crashed to his knees, ears ringing with a constant roar. Every inhalation burned his throat; acrid smoke and the stench of singed canvas choked the air. Through the haze he saw Mayra kneeling beside Norah's still form, her hands pressing against Norah's chest in frantic presses. Mayra's face was a mask of blood, soot, and tears, her screams strangled by shock.

Sebastian lifted his hands to his face. Crimson streaks ran from his fingertips, droplets falling onto the wet grass. Each heartbeat pounded in his skull like a funeral drum.

His vision tunneled, darkness crept from the edges of his sight. He tried to speak, to call out, but only a raspy whisper

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emerged, ripped away by the ringing in his ears. The last image he registered before oblivion claimed him was Mayra's tear-stricken face, stretched in silent agony, lips trembling Norah's name—then the world went black.

CHAPTER 3

Holding Cells, Sibko Training Center 141

Jade Forrest, Ironhold

Kerensky Cluster, Clan Space

13 October 3045, 0537 hours

Sebastian jolted awake. The air in the cell was cold, dry, metallic. For a moment he couldn't place where he was. Then the hum returned—a low static in his ears, dull and persistent. It reminded him of the explosion.

The walls were concrete. No windows. No hatch. A narrow bench and a hard floor. He was alone.

He sat up, back pressed against the cold wall, and tried to piece things together. His heartbeat was still elevated. Fragmented memories surged without order. Norah screaming, medics leaning over him with blinding flashlights, the scorched sky pulsing red. The back of a truck. Cold wind. Silence. Then nothing.

A jolt of panic hit him. He checked his limbs one by one. Arms. Legs. Hands. Fingers. Everything intact. He stripped off his shirt and ran both palms across his chest, his ribs, his jaw. The familiar terrain of his own body had never felt so strange. He touched his face to make sure it was still his.

Everything was there. Relief came—but not peace.

A voice broke the silence. Low. Urgent. Muffled through the cell wall.

“Sebastian! You are awake!”

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He leaned toward the source. "Mikel?" Then, sharper? "What happened?—No, wait..."

Memory twisted. A flash of Norah on the ground, Mayra bent over her in tears.

"I saw Mayra crying over Norah," he said, his voice tight. "Please tell me it is not what I think."

"They are fine. Both of them. Stay calm—we do not want the guards to hear us."

Sebastian exhaled. Relief hit hard and fast. He pressed his forehead against the wall.

"Tell me what happened," he whispered.

Mikel spoke quickly, voice low and tense. The explosion, he said, had turned Nolan and Manny into a red mist. It hadn't been fire—just fluids and blood. One moment they were there. The next, the field was wet with them. Cole survived. Judite hadn't been touched physically, but mentally she was a mess. Sebastian and the others had taken minor injuries, but it was the shockwave that had thrown him to the ground violently and knocked him out cold.

"We were just far enough away," Mikel said. "Any closer..."

Sebastian said nothing. His stomach twisted. The cell felt smaller now. The air felt heavier. He pulled his knees to his chest, wrapped his arms around them, and stared at the opposite wall. His breathing slowed, but the tightness in his chest wouldn't ease. His world had changed in seconds, and now everything felt off-kilter—wrong.

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The guards arrived not long after. Their boots echoed sharp against the concrete hallway, each step like a countdown. When they reached the cells, they pounded on the doors—metal on metal—jolting him upright.

The lock disengaged with a harsh mechanical click. Light from the corridor poured in, blinding and sterile. Sebastian squinted against it.

No words. No explanations. Just orders.

They were marched out into the morning air. Cold. Grey. Still too early for sunlight.

Sebastian saw the others now for the first time since the explosion. His *sibkin* looked like ghosts—ashen, disheveled, bruised. No one spoke. No one needed to. The silence said enough.

Outside the detention wing, two figures waited.

Falconer Carla. Falconer Demyan.

Both stood with arms behind their backs, unreadable.

The guards passed the cadets over without ceremony.

They were led toward a hangar across the compound. The route was familiar, but it felt foreign now. Smaller. Less safe.

The hangar was half-lit, the old fluorescents flickering overhead. The group filed in behind the Falconers, the concrete cold underfoot. They lined up as instructed. Sebastian noticed Judite, arms clenched at her sides, her eyes unfocused. She blinked often, as if struggling to stay in the present. She hadn't spoken a word.

Sebastian took his place in formation, heart steady but slow.

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The light inside cast long shadows behind them.

They didn't speak.

They waited.

"Cadet Norah, follow me," ordered Falconer Carla, her voice slicing through the heavy silence like a lash.

Sebastian saw Norah flinch. Her whole body tensed. She didn't move at first—just stood there under the glare of the floodlights, eyes wide.

"As you say, Falconer," she finally replied, voice nearly swallowed by the still air.

"You will not address me directly!" Carla snapped, her tone electric with fury. "You will only reply when told—or not at all! *Quiaff!*"

Norah stood at attention, her body trembled slightly.

Carla reached into her coat and slowly pulled out studded gloves. The leather was black and heavy, and the steel studs along the knuckles gleamed like teeth under the streetlamp. She made a show of stretching it onto her right hand, flexing her fingers so that the metal caught the light.

Sebastian didn't miss the way Norah's eyes locked onto it. She understood what it meant. Everyone did. There would be no second warning.

"Follow me. No response!" barked Carla, turning on her heel, disappeared into the hangar with Norah.

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Sebastian hesitated, glancing at the others. No one spoke. No one moved.

Falconer Demyan hesitated for a moment—then walked off in the opposite direction, heading toward the barracks without a word. He didn't leave a guard.

The cadets remained in formation, the cold settling in around them. No one moved. No one dared.

Except Sebastian.

He glanced left, then right. No Demyan. No guards. The hangar doors stood slightly ajar, warm yellow light spilling out into the morning gloom.

He shouldn't. He did.

One careful step. Then another. Then he slipped away from the line and crept toward the entrance—heart pounding, breath tight in his throat.

If he got caught, there would be punishment. But not knowing was worse.

Inside, the hangar was half-lit by flickering sodium lights. The scent of oil, metal, and sweat soaked the stale air. Tools lay abandoned. A few overheads buzzed weakly. Everything felt on edge.

Sebastian's mind raced with possibilities—would they be punished? Discarded? The uncertainty gnawed at him, each second stretching into an eternity.

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He held his breath, feeling his pulse in his ears as he listened to the harsh exchange between Falconer Carla and Norah. The fear in Norah's voice, the cold authority in Carla's commands—made him have the feeling of impending doom.

Carla stood behind a metal desk, spine ramrod straight. Norah stood opposite her, shoulders hunched, fidgeting with the hem of her sleeve like a child waiting to be punished. The room was dimly lit, the furniture inside casting long shadows that heightened the tension in the air. Norah's face was pale, her eyes wide with a mix of fear and confusion. She fidgeted with the hem of her uniform, unable to meet Carla's piercing gaze.

"Cadet Norah," Carla began, her tone quiet but charged. "I must warn you ahead of time—do not try me right now. I have no stomach for *savashri* behavior, retorts, or remarks."

She leaned forward, her eyes boring into Norah. "Now. I need you to tell me exactly what happened last night. Respond."

Sebastian narrowed his eyes. He could see Norah swallow. She shifted her feet and spoke just above a whisper: "I—I don't know what you mean, Falconer."

Carla's head tilted slightly.

"I forgot to mention you have three strikes, Norah. And we both know that what you just said is a lie." Her voice was calm now. That was worse.

"This is not about punishment. We do not have time." She paused. "There's an investigator on the way. If your stories do not match—if you tell the truth, the wrong truth—it could get all of you branded as failures. Black marks on your codex. Do you understand? Respond."

The Red Merlin

Norah's eyes darted around the room, it looked like she was searching for an escape.

"Everything else is prepared. But if your group says the wrong thing, the story will not hold. We cannot have that."

Norah remained silent.

"My patience is wearing thin, Cadet," Carla said, her voice rising. Then she slammed her studded fist into the metal table. The *clang!* rang through the hangar like a warning shot. Norah jumped.

"Respond!"

Norah broke. Her breath hitched, and she started to talk.

Sebastian could tell she was lying—not to cover herself, but to shield the rest of them. She was fumbling through a version of the story, trying to deflect, shift blame, soften the truth. But she did not realize Carla wanted the same thing she did. Protection, not punishment.

Carla stood motionless, arms crossed, her expression unreadable. But Sebastian could sense her frustration building. Norah's version wasn't good enough. She was still holding back, not grasping that Carla was not hunting for guilt—she was hunting for control.

Sebastian kept watching as Norah stumbled through it, confused and clumsy. He could feel the moment tightening. They were talking past each other.

When Norah finished, Carla slowly leaned back, arms folding tighter.

The Red Merlin

“Norah,” she said, quieter now. “The truth can be dangerous. But a lie—if shaped carefully—can protect everyone. Do you understand? Respond.”

Norah hesitated. “Aff...” Her voice wavered.

Carla stepped closer, lowering her voice into something almost gentle.

“I am concerned that your version—and your *sibkin’s*—could get you into trouble. But a lie, the right lie, protects everyone.”

Norah looked lost. “I do not want any of us hurt. What do you want me to do?”

“I want you to say that none of you were there. That it was only Cole, Nolan, and Manny. You and your group had nothing to do with it.”

She raised a finger. “Not just you. All of you. You must make sure the others match your words—word for word. It is simple, Norah. But you must all get it right.”

She sighed. “Let us go over it again. Start from the beginning. Respond.”

Norah repeated the lie—but this time, it came more smoothly. As if she was surrendering to it.

Carla nodded once. “Good.”

Then: “We are done here, Cadet Norah. You are dismissed.”

The Red Merlin

Norah didn't move. Her body shifted slightly, as though a question had pulled itself to the surface before she could stop it.

Carla noticed. "You may speak freely."

Norah stared down at her feet. Then she looked up, hesitant. "The *Summoner* we saw yesterday... in the Trial of Position—was that the cadet, *quiaff*? Did they succeed?"

Sebastian froze. He hadn't realized how badly he wanted to know, too.

Carla's eyes narrowed instantly. Her voice dropped half an octave.

"Why do you ask?"

Norah hesitated again. "To tell the group that... this mess was at least worth something."

Carla's face hardened. Her knuckles tensed around the edge of the desk.

Carla replied angrily, "It was not worth it!"

Her fist slammed the desk—clang!—louder than before.

"You could all be dead. Do you not get it?"

Her voice cracked, something behind it fraying. Norah said nothing. Her hands hung limp at her sides. Sebastian could only imagine what was running through her head.

Carla stepped away from the desk, pacing like a caged beast.

"I am counting on you to look after them," she growled. "Even that floozy Mayra!"

The Red Merlin

In the middle of the heated argument, Sebastian saw movement—far side of the hangar. Another figure in the dark. Tall. Watching. Silent.

Someone's eavesdropping too... an officer? Investigator?

Sebastian pressed further into shadow.

Inside, Norah lifted her chin slightly. "May I still know, Falconer Carla?" Her voice was barely audible.

Carla's body coiled like a whip.

"Savashri child!" she hissed—and then vaulted the table.

Sebastian's heart stopped.

Carla seized Norah and slammed her to the floor. The sound echoed—metal on metal.

She crouched low, face inches from Norah's. "Why must you test me?" she snarled. "I warned you at the beginning!"

She lifted Norah again and slammed her down once more.

"Maybe I will start summoning Mikel to my quarters," she spat. "Every. Single. Night. Until you learn some obedience."

Sebastian's breath caught. He couldn't move. Couldn't blink.

Norah twisted her face away—but Carla grabbed her by the neck and turned her head back.

"I assure you, eyas... I can teach him much more than you can. Much better than you can."

Norah froze, her body rigid.

The Red Merlin

Carla's hand lingered around her neck for a moment longer, then released. She stood.

Norah coughed, pushing herself upright.

Carla stepped forward again and shoved her back down.

Then her voice changed—cold, but tired.

"Do not fret, little Norah," she muttered. "I will not take away your toy. Unlike some of my *trothkin*, I do not meddle with nestlings in that manner."

She stared down at her, jaw tight.

"I will continue to summon Falconer Demyan. As I have done. For countless detestable nights."

Sebastian felt ice creep down his spine. He understood. She wasn't threatening—she was protecting. She'd been keeping Demyan busy to keep him off of them.

Norah's eyes widened. She understood too.

Carla took a long breath.

"The *Summoner* you saw last night," she said, voice hollow, "was piloted by a volunteer trainer. Not the Cadet. The cadet failed. There was no victory. Nothing for you to worship. Nothing to distract you. Anything else, cadet?"

Sebastian's gut sank.

Norah looked up, lips trembling. "*Neg*, Falconer Carla."

Carla extended a hand.

Norah took it, numbly.

The Red Merlin

She rose like a ghost and walked out slowly.

Sebastian scrambled back into formation, heart pounding.

He didn't speak.

Neither did she.

But something inside him felt like it had been broken.

Falconer Carla remained inside the hangar long after the cadet had left.

From the shadows near the rear wall, a man emerged. His Jade Falcon MechWarrior jumpsuit bore a Star Captain's insignia, the falcon's claw wrapped around the green diamond. The man was tall and wiry, fit in a way that suggested recent combat. Andreas Helmer. Newly *bloodnamed*. A *Ristar*.

He stepped into the dim light.

"She is the one you spoke of, *quiaff*?" he asked.

Carla turned. "Aff, Star Captain."

"I like her," Andreas said. He didn't mean it as a compliment—just an observation. "Strong. Smart. Loyal. But not just that."

"She is all of those," Carla said, allowing herself a slight smile. "But she can be too—protective."

Andreas snorted. "And you are different how?"

The Red Merlin

He stepped closer, arms folded. "You are protecting them too, *quiaff*? Why?"

"Permission to speak freely?" Carla asked.

He nodded once.

"Because she will become a *ristar*. Like you, Star Captain Helmer." Carla met his gaze without hesitation. "She has the instincts of a leader. The kind the Clan needs. Her judgment saved lives tonight—I would wager her entire group is alive because of her choices."

Carla met his gaze. He did not blink. He gave no sign of flattery—just quiet agreement. She could see he believed her.

He looked at her thoughtfully, saying nothing. That was enough—Carla knew he saw the same thing in Norah that she did. The eugenics program produced warriors by the thousand, but leaders were rarer. Even with the best genes, true command was unpredictable. Carla had once helped shape him from a defiant cadet into something more. He knew what her belief could forge—if she was willing to go to war with the system to protect it.

He pressed the point. "But the satchel charge. What is the story?"

Carla's lips pressed thin. "Still unclear. The lead Falconer of the 132nd believes the Freeborn trainee was targeting the Cadet's 'Mech—sabotage to ruin her chances at the Trial. It fits. But we will never know for sure. And I see no value in digging deeper."

Andreas gave a slow nod, his expression unreadable. If he had doubts, he did not show them.

Still, something else nagged him.

The Red Merlin

He tilted his head. "Why did you lie to Norah about yesterday's Trial of Position?"

Carla didn't answer right away. She paced the hangar, her boots clicking against the floor panels.

"The *Summoner's* pilot was a Cadet. I have her on my assignment list," Andreas added. "She passed."

Carla stopped, looking toward the open hangar doors. Then:

"I lied to keep them focused. To remind them that surviving is not success. That failure comes from distraction—and dreaming."

Her eyes met his. "I do not need them fantasizing about glory. They need to fear failure. You need warriors ready to fight, not cadets chasing ghosts."

Andreas crossed his arms. "You don't think she deserved to know someone made it?"

"She will earn that knowledge when she has earned the right to join them," Carla said. "Not before."

He folded his arms and let out a slow breath. Carla could not tell if he approved—but he did not object. She hoped he had seen as many cadets die chasing illusions of glory as she had—if so, he would understand.

He stayed quiet for a moment longer, then tilted his head slightly.

"You are not done with the interviews, *quineg*?"

The Red Merlin

“Indeed, I am,” said Carla. “Cadet Cole will bear the full weight. The deaths of Cadets Nolan and Manny are pinned to him. The rest—their involvement ends here.”

Andreas nodded slowly. “Will that satisfy the investigator?”

“It will,” Carla said flatly. “I have spoken with everyone who knows. The 132nd’s lead Falconer agrees. His officers will follow his direction. The rest of this facility reports to me. All that remains—” she looked at him, calm “—is you.”

Andreas exhaled through his nose. “And the investigator?”

“He will hear what we tell him.”

There was silence for a long moment.

Andreas shook his head. A small smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. Carla could tell it was a smile of approval.

“Just like old times.”

He rubbed his jaw, then added, “You have my *rede*. The official report stands.”

He started to turn away—then paused.

“But you really don’t want to hear the full story from Cadet Norah?”

Carla’s jaw tensed. “They are nestlings. Still wet from the shell. I already know they were involved. They are not innocent, especially Mayra. But I will not listen to them damn themselves. I would rather leave that truth buried than see it etched into their codex.”

The Red Merlin

Andreas nodded, slowly.

“Is it not a bit hypocritical of you,” he said, “to accuse Norah of being too protective of her group—while you orchestrate this entire conspiracy for the same reason?”

Carla’s face flushed, and for the first time in hours, she looked momentarily caught off guard. She stood straight, snapped a sharp salute.

“For Clan Jade Falcon.”

Andreas returned the salute with a grin.

He glanced once more toward the doors where Norah had exited.

“I will keep my eye on her,” he said, voice quiet now. “When the time comes—I want to sponsor her. For the Trial. And when that is done... for her *Bloodname*.”

Carla blinked, and then nodded once—wordless.

Andreas turned and strode into the dark.

CHAPTER 4

Training Center 141

Jade Forrest, Ironhold

Kerensky Cluster, Clan Space

2 November 3045, 0930 hours

Sebastian sat alone in the observation alcove above the firing range, knees drawn to his chest, helmet resting beside him. The hum of the servo motors moving the targets reached him before the voices did—too sharp, too close to the ringing that still haunted his ears. Down below, his *sibkin* moved through targeting drills in near silence.

So long ago, there had been one hundred of them. Canister-born. Screaming. Crawling. Now they were twelve, for now. And today, it did not even feel like that.

Judite had vanished quietly, her bunk stripped bare one morning—no note, no farewell. No one said a word, but Sebastian remembered the blood beneath her fingernails.

Cole was gone too. Not reassigned. Not demoted. Gone. He was publicly flogged, directly blamed for the deaths of Nolan and Manny. Falconer Demyan had taken his turn with him as well—every blow landing like a verdict. No one ever heard Cole's side of the story, he could not speak with a shattered jaw. Sebastian had thought Cole might die then and there. Instead, Carla had him loaded onto a VTOL and flown toward the dead zones—where bandits scavenged flesh as readily as scrap.

The Red Merlin

Let the scavengers smell his rot. Let them take him apart, piece by piece.

And then there were the ones who left nothing behind. Nolan and Manny. No punishment. No disappearance. Just a single instant. Vaporized. Red mist, and then nothing.

The range stank of scorched capacitors and old lubricant—burnt smells clinging to the walls like failure. Mayra’s voice snapped through the haze. Sharp. Hollow.

“Reset your angle, *Stravag*! You are dragging your elbow!”

Paula flinched. Adjusted. Fired again. Tighter grouping. Still not enough to matter.

Mayra paced the line, her braid coiled like a whip, her expression fixed and unreadable. She had not laughed in weeks—not even the derisive snort she used to give when someone botched a drill. She did not speak to Norah. Barely acknowledged anyone. Whatever had cracked inside her had not softened. It had set. Since the blast, she had only pushed harder—driven, some whispered, by the memory of the cadet who had failed their Trial. Mayra would not end that way

Norah crouched under the awning at the edge of the range, fingers toying again with that red band. Her movements were crisp, her shots clean. But she barely spoke. She was not angry—just emptied. Wrapped in silence like armor.

Mikel moved in his own orbit. Trained alone. Spoke only when pressed. He never smiled in front of the Falconers. Sometimes, when Carla was not watching, he still made faces during lecture. A flicker of the old spark—but it never caught.

The Red Merlin

The rest were scattered across the firing line like debris from a blast, each keeping space between themselves and the next.

Sebastian leaned forward, resting his arms on the rail. Mayra's shot shredded a target in half. Mikel's cluster landed square between the silhouette's eyes. Norah's burst drifted right. Paula's missed entirely. The servo motor whined as it dragged the silhouette away—chest cavity smoking faintly from the damage.

He flinched. Not a choice. Just a reaction. His shoulders tensed, heat blooming in his neck. He dropped his gaze quickly, hoping no one had noticed.

Far below, Carla stood at the far end of the range, arms folded behind her back, her stance precise, her uniform immaculate. She watched them all with that same practiced stillness. But even at this distance, Sebastian could see the hollowness in her eyes—like she was watching ghosts, not cadets.

He wondered whether she saw how far they had drifted—or if she was pretending not to.

That night, the barracks were silent. As they had been since the explosion.

Lights dimmed. Fans hummed. No whispered jokes. No laughter about someone's snoring. Just the rustle of sheets and the press of silence, heavy as a loaded Gauss.

Sebastian lay flat on his bunk, arms folded beneath his head, eyes fixed on the ceiling.

The Red Merlin

He remembered the shriek of warped metal. Mayra's scream. Norah shaking. Cole's laugh—high and broken—until Demyan's fist crushed it from his face.

He wondered whether they would ever look at each other the same again.

Three weeks had passed. The silence lingered. The silence had become a kind of fracture itself.

Sibko Training Center 141 Campsite

Jade Forrest, Ironhold

Kerensky Cluster, Clan Space

12 December 3045, 0615 hours

Carla sat with her back against a tree, one knee drawn up, the coals beside her long since gone cold. Her joints ached. She had not slept—not truly—in four nights. The frost bit through her uniform. She ignored it.

She opened the old journal across her leg, flipped to a page she knew by memory.

*Today was difficult. I do not know if I can keep up. But I must.
For my comrades. For myself.*

The handwriting was disciplined. Centered. That much, at least, had endured.

She had copied those lines into too many cadet journals to count. Dawn filtered through the treetops. Soon the cadets would wake. Twelve remained. Holding formation. Barely.

She closed the journal.

The Red Merlin

They will recover, she thought.

But the certainty was no longer there.

She remembered a sparring drill—one of the last before the explosion. Sebastian and Mikel against Paula and Nolan. No instructor oversight. Full contact.

“Sebastian, you are holding back,” Paula said.

He blocked her strike. “Then stop giving me reasons.”

Nolan lunged at Mikel. “Freebirth coward.”

Mikel dipped his shoulder and sent Nolan sprawling with a twist and a shove. “Footwork, brute.”

From the edge of the mat, Cole barked laughter. “You let him drop you? Pathetic!”

Mayra crossed her arms, speaking more to the air than to Paula. “You swing like a merchant, you should fix that if you are to remain here.”

Paula flushed, advanced again. “You will see how I swing.”

Carla stood at the perimeter, arms behind her back. The movements were still within bounds. Barely. No one was holding back.

She stepped forward. “Discipline guides the body. Mind before motion.”

No one responded. But their pacing shifted. Harder. Sharper.

The Red Merlin

Paula struck Sebastian's shoulder harder, but he was unmoved. Mikel shoved Nolan down again and did not offer a hand. This time Nolan didn't rise. He just sat there, breathing hard.

Later, as helmets came off and heat steamed from backs and brows, Mikel clapped Nolan's shoulder. Too hard.

"You did not lose as badly as usual."

Nolan shoved him. "Try me now that I do not have Paula as a dead weight."

Sebastian stepped between them and redirected Mikel, eyes cold. "Enough."

Paula wiped blood from her lip, glanced sideways at Mayra. "Your advice was unnecessary."

Cole spat. "Well she was right, you do fight like a merchant."

Mayra said nothing. They were not friends. But for a moment, they were aligned. And that had been enough.

The sun crept higher. She had not moved.

Another memory surfaced. The day Sebastian had lingered after a punishing course. She had been reviewing demerits when he approached, hesitant.

"Falconer Carla," he said. "A moment?"

She looked up. "Speak."

He stood stiffly. "You train us for more than fighting. Why?"

She set the slate aside. "Walk."

The Red Merlin

They moved past the barracks, boots crunching frost. She kept her tone neutral.

“When I was a cadet, I believed skill would be enough. My Falconer disagreed.”

She remembered the shame of falling in full view of her *sibko*. The ache in her ribs. The heat in her face.

Her Falconer had not mocked her. He had simply said:

“You have spirit, Carla. But spirit alone is not strength. It must be forged.”

Years later, her cockpit had ruptured during a fight. The result was that her optic nerves were damaged. No implant could replace what she had lost.

Her depth perception was gone. The neurohelmet compensated, but not enough. She could still pilot, still fight—but not on the front line. Not for long. In simulations, she managed. In training, she kept pace. But real combat demanded more. In a real engagement, vision like hers would make her a liability.

“I considered ending my life,” she said.

Sebastian said nothing. He did not flinch.

“I remembered my Falconer’s words. Strength is not body alone. It is choice. Endurance. Direction. I chose to become something else. Something that would benefit the clan.”

He nodded.

“You push us,” he said, “because you want more than soldiers.”

The Red Merlin

"I want survivors."

She stopped walking.

"You have potential. But sometimes I wonder if you even want this. I see you drifting—like your mind is elsewhere."

Her voice stayed level.

"The Clan will not keep you here. That must come from you. You need a reason to stay. Not for the Clan. For yourself."

"Understood, Falconer."

"See that you do."

She blinked. The memory faded.

Birds called beyond the camp. No other sound.

She opened the journal. Then closed it.

The words inside were old.

The cadets outside were breaking.

She would hold them together. The alternative was failure.

Carla flipped past the last written page in her journal and stopped at a folded corner—one she avoided more often than not.

The entry was dated five weeks after Nolan and Manny had died.

The Red Merlin

She had thought a live-fire drill would shake the cadets out of their paralysis. Rebuild cohesion. It had nearly done the opposite.

The morning had smelled of lubricant and cordite. Sunlight sliced long across the field. She remembered watching them set up—Paula, Dorian, Liam, Lena—quiet, methodical, too focused. The others followed Demyan off toward the tree line for a maneuvering drill.

The exercise began cleanly. Movements tight. Grenade launchers handled with care. Carla had just begun to believe it might work when a yell cut across the clearing.

“Watch out!”

Boots thrashed through brush. Demyan’s cadets, disoriented and off-course, stumbled into the impact zone. He’d led them too wide around the perimeter. Carla shouted to cease fire—but Paula had already launched.

The grenade arced above them.

Dorian yanked Lena down. Liam tackled another cadet. The blast ripped through the clearing.

Silence followed. Then coughing. Moaning.

Carla strode into the smoke, her voice cold.

“What in Kerensky’s name was that?”

She didn’t need to shout. Her tone did the work.

Demyan didn’t flinch, but something flickered in his eyes—resentment, maybe.

“No excuse, Falconer.”

The Red Merlin

His stare followed the cadets like a blade. Carla saw the weight land on him, whether he admitted it or not.

Cadets stood in staggered formation, dirt-streaked and wide-eyed. No one met her gaze.

"This was not a simulation. You violated containment. You violated discipline. You would be dead."

"Aff, Falconer," they mumbled, barely audible.

"Learn from it. Dismissed."

She turned to Demyan. "Remain."

As the cadets dispersed, Carla stayed behind. Her shoulders ached. She had not unclenched since the blast. It had been close. Far too close.

She closed the journal.

Dorian had left not long after that drill. No outburst. No ceremony. Just another bunk stripped bare. She hadn't asked why. She already knew.

The frost was gone now. The grass still damp from last night's cold. She shifted her position against the tree trunk. A sliver of sun cut across the camp.

Later, she sat near the remains of the fire pit. No flames now. Just ash and char.

Norah approached. Quiet footsteps, like she didn't want to intrude.

"Falconer Carla."

Carla didn't look up. "Speak."

The Red Merlin

“You look—troubled.”

“I am always troubled,” she said. Then, after a moment, “But not always for myself.”

Norah paused. “Why do you push us so hard?”

Carla finally turned. “Because readiness is the only mercy I can give you.”

Norah’s posture straightened, her voice quieter. “We will be ready.”

Carla gave a slight nod. “See that you are. Go get some food.”

Norah turned and left.

Carla stood at last. Her knees complained. The camp was waking—faint rustling from canvas, the low thud of boots hitting dirt.

She would hold them together. Until something stronger came along—or they broke completely.

CHAPTER 5

Sibko Training Center 141

Jade Forrest, Ironhold

Kerensky Cluster, Clan Space

26 May 3046, 0720 hours

Spring had settled hard over Ironhold, pressing the scent of wet earth and new growth into the air. The Jade Forest was thick with leaves, birds cutting arcs over the tree line. It should have felt clean, even hopeful. But Sebastian had learned nothing here came without a cost. Cadets vanished, and the ground took their names without ceremony. Spring only meant the next trial was closer. Some would pass. Some would break.

Today was different. The anniversary of Operation Klondike meant a rare reprieve from drills. The Falconers had given them the morning, and the *sibko* had drifted to the Emerald Natural Conservatory—a quiet stretch of grass and water three kilometers from the training center.

Operation Klondike—Sebastian had heard the story a dozen times. The day the Pentagon Worlds were taken back from the so-called barbarians after the Great Father's death. The end of the Exodus Civil War. The founding of the Clans as they were now. To the Falconers, it was proof their way was inevitable. To Sebastian, it was just the reason they weren't running obstacle courses today.

Near the lake, Norah was showing Mikel how to handle her merlin. Her bird, Akane, twitched on her arm, eager for the sky. When the knot on the tether came loose, the merlin burst upward,

The Red Merlin

wings cutting against the sunlight. Sebastian watched from the grass, his eyes drawn again to the red band on Norah's wrist. She always had it somewhere—ankle, hair, even as Akane's tether. She'd once told him some cultures wore such things to ward off evil.

He skimmed two stones across the still water beside Mayra, his thoughts drifting to the last half-year. Six months since Nolan and Manny had died. Judite had lasted only days after that—panic in the isolation cell, bloody knuckles from pounding the steel, fingernails torn from clawing at the hatch. She'd been reassigned out. Months later, word reached them. She had taken her own life. The knowledge had lodged deep, surfacing at quiet moments like this, unbidden and unwelcome.

Lilian was gone too, redirected into another caste where her skills would be better used. He let another stone slip from his fingers and watched the ripples fade.

Cole's end had been different—public, and in Sebastian's mind, deserved. He hurled a rock harder than the rest, sending it arcing far out over the water. *Good riddance.*

Above, Akane swept across the rising sun before stooping to Mikel's gauntlet. The bird settled, and both Mikel and Norah smiled as if they'd won something rare. Watching them, Sebastian felt the faintest sense that the cracks in their *sibko* were knitting shut—slowly, imperfectly, but closing.

He let the rest of his stones fall from his palm, but kept four clenched in his fist, tipping his head back into the sun's warmth and letting it wash over his face.

Sibko Training Center 141

Jade Forrest, Ironhold

Kerensky Cluster, Clan Space

27 May 3046, 0800 hours

With Liberation Day's homage and remembrance over, the *sibko* returned to routine. Falconer Carla took her place at the front of the room, her slate balanced against one arm, and began recounting the history of the Clan's founders. Hanati Binetti and Samuel Helmer's stories came last—a deliberate choice for the Binetti-Helmer *sibko*, meant to spark pride in their genetic legacy. Seven seats now sat empty. Sebastian's gaze lingered on the gaps in the rows, the neat geometry of their absence. He could still picture who had filled them, their faces fixed in memory even if the rest of the *sibko* had learned not to look.

The air in the classroom felt stale, heavy with the weight of yet another retelling. Carla's voice carried the clipped precision of someone who could recite this speech in her sleep, pausing only to snap a correction at a cadet whose posture sagged.

Sebastian sat toward the back, his noteputer on the desk blocking the Falconer's view of him. The Falconer's words blurred into background noise, a rhythm he'd heard too many times. On the tower's repeater display, the schematics of a *Hellbringer's* Artemis IV fire control system took shape under his fingertips—clean lines and sharp angles, infinitely more interesting than tales of dead heroes. The heritage they wanted him to honor felt distant, embalmed in repetition.

The Red Merlin

What pulled him forward was the thought of that evening's exercise—a live gunnery run in stripped-down *Kit Fox* OmniMechs. He could almost feel the throttle in his palm, the recoil in his shoulders, the machine answering his every move. The ancestors might have won their glory centuries ago, but tonight, in the cockpit, he could make something of his own.

Fire Range Gamma 02

Jade Forrest, Ironhold

Kerensky Cluster, Clan Space

27 May 3046, 1300 hours

Sebastian leaned against the cold railing in the control tower, watching Lena climb into the *Kit Fox*. Mikel was already waiting in his own. At least Sebastian was done—he and Mayra, Norah, and Remi had already cleared the exercise with solid scores. Liam and Dina had scraped through. Paula and Daniel had been berated by Demyan for their slow reactions.

The wait dragged. Techs swarmed over the two OmniMechs, replacing panels while Demyan barked at them as if yelling would speed the process. Finally, the ready light went green.

Carla's voice came over the comms, flat but sharp enough to cut.

"Every mistake here could be your downfall in your Trial of Position. There will be no second chances. Train like your life depends on it—because it does."

The Red Merlin

Sebastian's eyes tracked Mikel's *Kit Fox* as it weaved through Lena's opening shots. He was smooth, deliberate, never where her crosshairs wanted him to be. Each miss made her aim jerkier, her movements tighter.

"Watch your heat, Lena," Carla warned.

Sebastian could see the heat curve climbing in her HUD feed. She ignored it, throwing out shot after shot like hitting him would fix everything.

Then the shutdown alarm blared. Her *Kit Fox* locked up mid-stride, venting steam, the torso slumping forward in surrender.

Mikel didn't hesitate. A clean pivot, a burst from his autocannon—straight into her left leg actuator. The joint buckled, and Lena's 'Mech pitched over hard enough to make Sebastian wince. The crash echoed even up in the tower.

Carla's reprimand came instantly, sharp with the weight of years behind it.

"Lena, you waste resources. You waste oxygen. Your lack of discipline is a stain on this *sibko*."

Sebastian felt the air go heavy. No one spoke. This wasn't just bad—this was final.

Third time in these units, he thought. Or fourth. Doesn't matter. She's finished.

The Red Merlin

Demyan took his turn, his voice a snarl.

“Your lack of basic motor skills is beyond anything I have witnessed. Cadet Mikel made you look like a *stravag* fool.”

Lena stared at his boots, flinching when flecks of spit hit her cheek.

Carla’s tone shifted from icy to volcanic.

“Why were you not checking your heat scale? I have warned you ad nauseam. Countless times. Years of training—for what? Respond!”

Nothing.

Carla’s jaw worked like she was biting back something worse. She looked at Demyan.

“We are done here—yes?”

Demyan gave a curt nod.

“Cadets! Quarters. Now. Double-time!”

Sebastian fell into step with the rest. Lena trailed, her gaze flicking from face to face, searching for some crack of sympathy. No one gave it. Not even him. Better to keep his eyes forward than risk seeing himself in her place.

Sibko Training Center 141

Jade Forrest, Ironhold

Kerensky Cluster, Clan Space

28 May 3046, 0800 hours

Lena was gone—another name stripped from the roster, another bunk left cold.

Sebastian had watched her leave that morning, two escorts flanking her to the gate, a duffel slung over one shoulder. She hadn't looked back. He doubted she could ever survive in a BattleMech, but numbers and formulas—those she understood.

The Falconers had granted her request to transfer to the scientist caste. There, she'd get the schooling to serve in a lab, turning her skills toward work that would help the Clan in other ways. Useful work. Just not warrior work.

Life didn't slow for the rest. Nine *sibkin* remained, and the Falconers filled every hour. That morning's schedule held one of the few sanctioned diversions—the annual indoor-soccer tournament. For the local *sibkos*, it was part of an ongoing league, a tradition that served as another kind of trial. Sharpening teamwork, building endurance, and forcing bonds to hold under pressure. Falconer Carla had pressed this one harder than usual, determined to drive their focus back since the incident.

The match was brutal. Every kick and shout slammed off the walls. Playing defense, Sebastian kept his eyes on Mikel as he tore down the sideline. A corner kick arced in. Mikel launched up,

The Red Merlin

met it clean with his forehead, and sent it screaming into the net. For a moment, Sebastian thought they might turn it around.

But the Mattlov–Pryde *sibko* they faced didn't ease off. Their passes cut through gaps before his team could close them, their pace never flagging. By the final whistle, the score sat at three-to-one against them. Sebastian's chest heaved; sweat slicked his back. No one spoke.

Demyan's expression was carved from stone.

"Line up!"

His voice cracked like a rifle shot.

The losing team—Sebastian among them—was marched out for a long run up Mount Chistu. Punishment in the shape of a lesson. The climb started slow, but the slope punished every step. Their legs were already wrecked from the match. Breath came in short bursts, the tang of iron creeping into Sebastian's mouth. Boots scraped on loose stone; the air was thick with sweat and dust.

Mikel, normally unstoppable, slowed to match Sebastian's pace. Norah kept her eyes forward, stride steady, jaw locked. Mayra pushed through with the same clipped determination she brought to the firing range. Paula and Daniel lagged again, both flushed and glassy-eyed. Demyan's gaze found them more than once, lingering in a way that told Sebastian exactly who might be next to vanish.

The Red Merlin

The valley opened below as they neared the summit, green forests spilling to the horizon. To Sebastian, it was just more ground he'd have to cover to be done. Demyan stalked alongside, his shadow sliding over whoever faltered.

At the top, Sebastian bent forward, hands on his knees, lungs clawing for air. His legs trembled. The rest of the *sibkin* stood in various states of collapse.

Demyan looked them over, his voice level but carrying an edge sharp enough to cut.

"Pain keeps you alive. Forget this lesson, and you will not last."

The *sibko* stumbled back into camp at dusk, every step stiff with the day's punishment.

They headed straight for the showers. The room echoed with the hiss of water and the slap of bare feet on tile. Sebastian stepped under one of the streams and let the heat pour over him. The first rush made him exhale hard, muscles loosening under the steady pressure. He leaned forward until his forehead rested against the cool wall, eyes closed, steam curling around his face. For a while, he let the sound of water and the dull ache in his body push away thought.

At some point, his knees softened under him, and he jerked back upright, realizing he'd drifted. He blinked away the haze, breathing deep. Across the row, Mayra's shower mist blurred her outline, but her eyes found his. She held his gaze for a beat—just

The Red Merlin

long enough to give him a faint, knowing smile—before turning away, fingers combing soap from her hair.

Clean and exhausted, they made their way to the cafeteria. The room was quiet—just the clink of utensils against plates, the slow scrape of trays being shifted. They ate more out of obligation than hunger, chewing without tasting, each bite settling like a weight in Sebastian's stomach.

Sebastian sank into his pillow, letting the day's strain drain away. The steady patter of rain on the barracks roof lulled him under.

He opened his eyes, the air was cold and damp. He was standing in a cave high on Mount Chistu, stone slick at his back. Beyond the tree line, Ironhold City shimmered under the planet's twin moons, its lights scattered like stars on the horizon—until a shadow passed over them.

A shape moved through the mist. Vast wings beat the air, sending a rush of wind into the cave. As it drew closer, the wings eclipsed the skyline, swallowing the light.

It landed beside him. A merlin—Akane—but impossibly large. She stood more than five meters tall, her wingspan stretching wider than any DropShip's cargo bay. Her feathers burned in shades of molten red, the glow casting flickers across the wet cave walls. For a heartbeat, he swore he saw a strip of red cloth tied at her leg.

The Red Merlin

Her voice filled his head, melodic and resonant. There is no time to waste, Sebastian. He has sensed your fear—hurry. I will take you to the others.

He climbed onto her back, gripping a red rope that felt warm and alive, pulsing faintly under his fingers. The air bit cold against his face as they dove into the night, the forest below twisting into warped, unnatural shapes.

“He has found us,” Akane whispered into the wind.

Sebastian looked back. A dark gyr followed, its green eyes cutting through the rain. Its feathers sliced the air like blades, its shape breaking and reforming in the shadows. Lightning split the sky, and for an instant its full size filled his vision—before the thunder cracked across his ears.

Akane dropped into a stoop, the dive pressing him hard into her back. The forest warped beneath them—hills bending, trees stretching upward like skeletal hands. Still, the gyr gained. Then came Demyan’s voice, warped and heavy.

“You cannot escape me!”

They landed in a meadow glowing from no source Sebastian could name. His *sibkin* waited. Mikel stepped forward, handing him a spear.

“I hope you’re ready.”

The Red Merlin

Even Mikel's voice echoed unnaturally. Remi, Paula, and Liam worked the tips of rough wooden spears against the ground until they were as sharp as they could make them. Daniel, Mayra, and Dina gathered heavy stones—good for throwing or smashing when the beast came close.

Akane's voice rose above the wind.

I feel the end of the road is near.
The thought of losing you cuts deeper than death.
Let my courage be your pride,
your desire, your fire—
your swift and terrible vengeance on the dark gyr.

She launched skyward as the gyr's shadow fell over the meadow. Lightning flashed, and the beast dove. Spears flew but clattered harmlessly away. The gyr struck, crushing Paula in its talons before carrying her off. Her body dropped from a cliff moments later, the impact echoing like a distant drum beat.

It rose again, dove, and swallowed Daniel whole. His scream cut short. Dina froze as the beast lunged—but this time the spears struck deep into its chest. The *sibkin* swarmed, smashing its skull with stones until Akane tore down from the clouds, her talons sinking into its back, her beak closing over its neck. One violent twist, and the creature went still.

The others cheered. Mayra stepped close, her words at his ear soft enough to steady the hammering in his chest.

The Red Merlin

A crack of thunder jolted him awake. The barracks ceiling swam into focus.

“Sebastian, are you awake?” Mayra’s voice again—this time from his bedside. He wiped his eyes, unsure if the dream had truly ended.

She slid under his blanket without waiting for an answer, curling against him, her legs hooking around his waist and her head lay on his chest. It wasn’t affection. In the Clans, it never needed to be. *Sibkin* took what they wanted when the chance came, and everyone understood why. Elsewhere in humanity’s scattered worlds, it might be whispered about as taboo. In the warrior caste, it was just another way to burn off pressure, though neither of them had the energy for more cardio that day. The shared warmth was enough.

Cafeteria, Sibko Training Center 141

Jade Forrest, Ironhold

Kerensky Cluster, Clan Space

29 May 3046, 0715 hours

Two more gone—just as in that dream months ago.

Paula’s dismissal came after another round of poor scores in critical skills. Demyan didn’t shout, didn’t even sneer—just a curt gesture to the guards, and she was gone.

Daniel didn’t wait for the same. One night he was there; the next, his bed was stripped, sheets folded, locker empty. Sebastian

The Red Merlin

couldn't decide if it was courage or cowardice—walking out before the Falconers made the choice for him.

Seven of them remained. The number hung over the barracks like a weight, pressing down in the silent spaces between words. There was no pause, no reprieve—training pressed on as if nothing had changed.

The remnants of the *sibko* moved toward morning calisthenics at a clipped pace. Don't be late. Don't stand out. Don't give Demyan a reason to notice.

CHAPTER 6

Northeast Mechbay, Sibko Training Center 141

Jade Forrest, Ironhold

Kerensky Cluster, Clan Space

24 November 3048, 0930 hours

Two and a half years had burned away in drills, Trials, and the slow narrowing of their ranks. One by one, faces vanished—transfers, washouts, failures—until only those too stubborn, too skilled, or too fortunate to fall remained. The Falconers had grown harder in that time, their praise rare, their punishments sharp.

Sebastian stood in the shadow of his *Summoner*, the bay lights throwing hard angles across its green armor. At eighteen, taller and stronger than the boy who had once stumbled through obstacle courses, he still felt the same quiet awe each time he looked up at the machine. In two days, it would decide his fate.

He had always found machinery more compelling than stories of warriors past. WarShips might be the pinnacle of war, but this—this was power made personal. Every plate and joint spoke of purpose, shaped by minds and hands that understood the demands of battle.

Techs swarmed the chassis, fitting the loadout for his Trial of Position. The deck plates thrummed faintly under his boots as a test cycle sent vibration through the frame. The sweet smell of coolant hung in the air, sharp against the heavier scent of grease, and the acrid scent of ozone from a nearby technician's welding filled the air. Somewhere, a hoist groaned under the weight of a

weapons pod, and static from a nearby arc welder prickled along his forearms. Sebastian tracked every motion, every tool, every hiss of hydraulics.

His focus drifted inward, to the gyroscope. Without it, a 'Mech was nothing but a collapsing tower of metal. The *Summoner's* casing was forged from high-grade titanium alloy—grain-structured under immense pressure to survive impacts that would crumple lesser metals. Inside, a tungsten-alloy rotor spun at brutal RPMs, its bearings of heat-treated ceramic composite built to take the torque.

He pictured the chain from design to installation—blueprints refined until every curve and tolerance was locked, forging dies shaping titanium under a press that could crush ferrocrete, CNC machines cutting the seats for the rotor and sensors to micron precision. Every piece inspected, stress-tested, and balanced before shipment to the assembly line.

He knew that, if he chose, he could learn every step—heat curves, press cycles, final fitment. Was it *chalcas* to think that way? To picture himself in a design bay or a foundry instead of a cockpit? In the warrior caste, such thoughts bordered on heresy. But the idea lingered, stubborn as the scent of oil on his hands.

Mikel's voice broke into Sebastian's thoughts. He stepped up beside him, both of them watching the techs work on the *Summoner*.

"How's your machine coming along?"

The Red Merlin

“Slowly,” Sebastian said, keeping his eyes on the ‘Mech. “They’re just about ready to swap the LB-X Autocannon for an Ultra Autocannon. I also tried to get the ER PPC replaced with a Large Pulse Laser, but the Falconers refused.”

He let out a short breath.

“What about yours?”

“Nothing to change—it’s already perfect,” Mikel said, dry humor in his voice.

Sebastian shook his head. He had never understood how Mikel could be content with Alternative Configuration B and its lack of real burst power.

“Reliable, balanced, and nothing I haven’t mastered,” he added with a shrug. “You can keep chasing shiny toys — I’ll keep what wins.” His tone wasn’t smug, exactly, but Sebastian caught the quiet certainty there. For Mikel, predictability wasn’t a weakness — it was the edge.

“What about Norah? Did the techs give her everything she wanted?”

“Aff, though not without grumbling. Look.”

Mikel pointed toward MechBay B3, where a ring of scowling technicians worked on Norah’s *Summoner*—Alternative Configuration A. A welding torch flared, throwing sharp shadows as another tech bent over the open access panel. Across the torso,

The Red Merlin

fresh paint glistened where they were laying in the silhouette of a merlin in bold red.

Sebastian barked a laugh. “They agreed to help her with that? Unbelievable. She does like red.”

Mikel gave him a sideways look, biting his lower lip. “If you only knew. You should see what she wears under her cooling vest.”

Sebastian returned the look with a faint smile, though his thoughts wandered. If those two ever took a break from one another, he might try. But risking the balance of the *sibko* for it was a line he would not cross.

He remembered a night at the campfire when she had spoken about the color with the same certainty she brought to combat planning.

“Red is a powerful color,” she had said. “It shows dominance and confidence. On ancient Terra, bullfighters used it to control the focus of the bull, to draw it in. And the Red Baron—he painted his fighter crimson so his enemies would see him coming and fear him.”

She leaned closer to the fire. “It grabs attention like nothing else. Blood, fire—life and danger. Passion, urgency, even fear. But it also puts a target on your back. The Red Baron’s enemies feared him, and some fled. Others marked him instantly, making him a prize to bring down. Wearing red is a challenge. It says—I am here. Come get me.”

The Red Merlin

Sebastian had wondered then, and wondered now, if she wore it deliberately—as a statement as much as a habit. She was daring the world to try her.

Mikel's hand on his shoulder pulled him back. "Ten-hundred hours. Barracks. Norah wants everyone there—we have planning to go over." He started walking away.

Sebastian shook his head, a quiet laugh escaping him—but it faded almost immediately. Two days from now, the Trial would decide everything.

He drank from his canteen, wetting his lips, but the water did nothing to ease the dryness in his throat. The mechbay's noise carried on around him—the scrape of tools, the clank of a weapons pod being locked into place—but his mind was already on the fight ahead.

A clatter from across the bay drew his eyes toward MechBay C, where a tech straightened from under a 'Mech's knee joint.

Sebastian noticed a familiar face, recognizable even after three years and under the layers of dirt and dried grease that covered the hard-working tech's features. It was Dorian, a washout from their *sibko* who had been deemed too weak to be a warrior. Sebastian felt a quiet satisfaction seeing he had found his place. The man looked leaner now, his movements deliberate, as if every task was a test he meant to pass. The grime couldn't hide the precision in his work — torquing a coupling with a steady wrist, catching a slipping tool without looking. Whatever the warrior caste had denied him, he had carved out skill here.

The Red Merlin

The sight pulled him back to when they were about ten, freshly out of the *crèche*, to one of the many tormenting onslaughts Mayra had inflicted on him.

“What is wrong, duh-duh-duh-Dorian?” Mayra mocked, her shadow falling over his small frame on the dirt playground.

“Get up and defend yourself, *surat!*”

Dorian’s speech impediment and insecurity had been constant targets throughout his time with the *sibko*, and Mayra had been one of the worst offenders. Sebastian remembered Norah blitzing over, shoving Mayra back and jabbing her chest with two fingers.

“Do you not have better things to do than pick on him, Mayra?”

Mayra slapped Norah’s hand away, scowling. “Why respect something I could just as easily crush?”

She spat, hitting Dorian square in the eye, then stormed off.

Sebastian had imagined the humiliation Dorian must have felt as her spit drizzled down his face under the gaze of the *sibko*. But there would be no Circle of Equals—not that day. Dorian would not dare.

Mayra and Norah had always clashed, but things had eased between them over the past couple of years. Sebastian realized their rift had mostly closed around the time Mayra and he had become

personal. Perhaps she had simply found another outlet for her temper—one that left her calmer after leaving his bunk.

The clatter of a large socket wrench hitting the concrete pulled him back. He turned to see Mayra overseeing work on her *Summoner*, an Alternative Configuration C. The techs were replacing her ER Large Laser and ER Small Laser with a Large Pulse Laser, and swapping the Streak SRM-6 for a standard SRM-6.

Sebastian noticed Dorian and Mayra briefly lock eyes, sharing a brief nod before returning to their work. A nod of respect from Dorian — and from Mayra, the barest flicker of something else. Her jaw tightened like she was holding back words, and her eyes slipped away as if she'd walked into a memory she didn't want. It was gone in a heartbeat, the mask back in place.

Sebastian was glad she had outgrown most of her petulance—but regret would not bring back past victims. As much esteem as he had for her, he knew she could still be too vicious.

His group had dwindled to Mikel, Norah, Mayra, and himself. Liam, Remi, and Dina were gone, having failed crucial exercises or quit over the previous year. Time had rebuilt what the explosion had shattered. The four of them trained, sparred, and argued like before—not as if nothing had happened, but with the years wearing the edges down. They were whole again, or close enough for the Trials ahead.

Sebastian turned back to the techs working on his *Summoner*. *I cannot fail — I will not fail — I refuse to fail.*

The Red Merlin

But if he did fail, at least there would be this to come back to, as dishonorable as it might be to fall to a lower caste. In his mind, he saw himself among the techs, sleeves rolled, hands black with grease — building instead of destroying. The image came unbidden, as stubborn as the scent of oil in the air.

He pushed the thought aside, though it was oddly comforting, and the dryness in his throat vanished.

CHAPTER 7

Barracks, Sibko Training Center 141

Jade Forrest, Ironhold

Kerensky Cluster, Clan Space

24 November 3048, 1105 hours

Sebastian was the first to reach the barracks, a little late by his own measure. The overhead strips cast a pale, even light that flattened the metal walls, their dull panels humming faintly with the ventilation system. Norah paced near the center of the room, boots whispering on the deck plates, glancing at her wristwatch like she meant to burn a hole through it.

“Sebastian!” she called, her voice sharp with energy. “Mayra and Mikel are right behind you, *quiaff?*”

“Neg. Probably running late.”

Norah scoffed and kept pacing. The faint curl of her lip said she wasn’t surprised. Sebastian noticed the red band on her wrist — she always wore something red. A trace here, a flourish there. Minor touch. Lavish detail. She had always worn it — sometimes in her hair, sometimes woven into laces, today tied neat around her wrist. Once, she’d traded it for a split lip.

His thoughts drifted, unbidden, to another time she had worn it. Two years ago, when Falconer Demyan still oversaw their *sibko*. Morning calisthenics, a dusty training field.

Demyan noticed it almost immediately, his expression souring before his voice lashed out.

The Red Merlin

“*Freebirth!* What is this on your wrist? Are you intentionally trying to provoke me?”

The insult alone could stiffen any Jade Falcon spine. Norah froze, but her neck muscles tightened.

He closed the distance, breath sour with the tang of coffee.

“Is this the latest fashion among you nestlings? Or is this how your master claims you? A brown-nosing puppet’s tether?” His eyes slid toward Falconer Carla, daring her to interject.

Carla stepped forward. “Enough, Demyan. Get on with the exercise.”

But Demyan ignored her. Sebastian thought he looked more irritated than usual — a simmering edge that wanted a target. He ripped the band from Norah’s wrist so hard she stumbled to her knees. Holding it up, he sneered.

“It resembles a *boncord*. Do you even know what you are wearing?”

Sebastian had noticed it then, too. The same cord she used to tether Akane during training — likely tied on her wrist by habit, without thought.

“You are not yet a Warrior, eyas! But should anyone ever claim you as their *bondsman*, it would be best for the honor of Clan Jade Falcon that you beg them for *bondsref* instead! On your feet, nestling!”

The Red Merlin

Norah rose, the red band gone, her eyes locked on Demyan. She let out a sharp *tsss* — defiance made into sound.

It earned her a backhand that knocked her flat. The *sibko* looked away, their expressions tight with shared unease.

“Enough, Falconer Demyan,” Carla said, stepping forward.

Norah stood again, blood on her lip.

“I challenge you to a Circle of Equals.”

Demyan turned, laugh sharp and mocking. “You would dare?”

“Aff,” Norah said, voice flat, detached. She flicked her tongue over the copper taste of her lip. “Bare hands. Here. Now.”

“You surprise me, eyas.” He smirked. “Well bargained and done.”

“No. I forbid this,” Carla cut in.

“The challenge has been made and accepted,” Demyan shot back, his voice rising. “By the code that binds us It is my right.”

Around the circle, Sebastian read his *sibkin*’s faces. Most were pale. Mikel looked almost sick. They knew what Demyan could do in close combat.

But he never touched her. Norah flowed around him, slipping past every strike. His frustration built, his reach growing wild.

The Red Merlin

Then he charged full-force. Sebastian thought — *he should have remembered her fight with Nolan*, but part of Sebastian was glad he hadn't.

Norah pivoted aside. His own momentum carried him past. She was on him instantly, knees digging into his back, one arm snapping around his neck.

The circle went silent except for the scuffle of boots on dirt. Demyan clawed at her grip. When he nearly pried it loose, she bit — teeth sinking into his ear.

The tearing was sharp, ugly. His cry split the air. She spat the ear aside, blood streaking her face.

She cinched the choke tighter, cutting off his air. When his knees buckled, she rode him down, slamming his face into the ground. The crunch of his nose carried across the circle.

Norah rose, lifted a fist high, chest heaving, mouth curled in a grin edged with crimson. Always a little red.

Demyan lay sprawled, blood pooling under his face. Whether he chose synthskin later was none of their concern. Within the week, he was replaced by Falconer Bren.

Norah had been unpredictable that day, too — and unpredictability had saved her life.

It was the same quality Sebastian trusted now, even if it meant following her into a plan that might get them all killed.

The Red Merlin

The barracks door clanged open, snapping him back to the present. Mikel and Mayra stepped in together, boots heavy on the deck plates.

The red band was still on Norah's wrist. She stood with arms crossed, watching the newcomers. Sebastian wondered if the others carried moments like that in their heads — or if it was only him.

"So — what did you want to see us about, Norah?" Mayra asked, tone edged with impatience.

"Get comfortable. We need to discuss the engagement."

Mikel frowned. "We do not even know where the trial will be. How can we prepare for what we do not know?" Sebastian was about to agree when Norah raised both hands.

"That is not important right now." She pointed to a map tacked to the wall, its edges curled from years of use.

"Look at where we are — most terrain around here is similar. We already know which areas are off-limits, too close to infrastructure. That narrows it to a few likely sites. The trial ground will almost certainly be gated, like the one we visited years ago."

Her voice was steady, but her eyes cut briefly to Mayra — testing.

She had their attention now. "We prepare a basic plan on shared terrain features. Once we get the recon report, we adapt and execute."

The Red Merlin

The plan had taken shape over weeks between her and Sebastian, built from records of past Trials and after-action notes. She handed the floor to him.

Sebastian stepped forward. “When melees happened by accident, or without every warrior committed, the pass rates were poor — worse than trials fought under strict *zellbrigen*. But when a melee was deliberate, with all warriors aware, coordinated, and striking together, the results were statistically better.”

Mayra’s eyes narrowed. “That is *chalcas*, and it will draw censure. Are you prepared for that?”

Sebastian could tell she wasn’t just quoting doctrine — she meant it. For her, breaking form wasn’t just risky, it was dangerous in ways beyond the battlefield.

Her voice was cold, each word deliberate. Mayra continued.

“If you cannot pass on your own merit, then you are nothing more than a pretender in a warrior’s cockpit — and perhaps you were never meant to stand among us.”

Sebastian thought he saw more than just contempt in her eyes — a flicker of something sharper, like fear. Not fear of losing, but of what losing would mean for her. Regardless, her comment was an open-handed slap, meant to bruise pride, not skin. And it worked.

The air in the room tightened. Norah’s head turned just enough to pin Mayra with a look — not full anger, but a challenge of her own. Sebastian caught the way Mayra’s chin lifted, daring

The Red Merlin

anyone to dispute her. Mikel's eyes hardened, his jaw worked, holding back his first reply.

Mikel spoke first. "And what if the best warrior falls to bad luck? Does that prove they lacked skill? Neg. It means circumstances favored someone else. What matters is winning the war, not a single engagement."

Sebastian nodded once. "Exactly. We fight to win — and we fight to pass. All of us."

Mayra's arms crossed tighter. "Continue," she said — more command than agreement.

Norah tapped a spot on the map. The map's edges curled from having just been unfolded.

Sebastian knew the ridge she pointed at — they had run live-fire drills there.

"The core is to crush the first opponents before the second opponents can bring weight of fire to bear. Keep the rest at least a klick away, more if possible. That distance buys us time to destroy the first group before the others close."

Mayra made a quiet, skeptical noise under her breath, the kind she used when she thought a plan was built on wishful thinking.

Mikel's mouth twitched. "Fine by me," Mikel said, the corners of his mouth curling, "so long as my target stays mine." He smirked, but there was an edge under it — *Mayra did take credit from him once during an exercise, and he hasn't forgotten about it.*

The Red Merlin

Norah's eyes flicked — just for a heartbeat — toward Mayra. The look was enough. It landed like a small stone in still water — not much on the surface, but the ripples would reach everyone in the Circle.

Mayra's chin lifted a fraction. "You think I would need to?"

she asked, voice edged with frost. The heel of her boot slammed into the leg of a nearby chair, sending it skidding a hand's breadth across the deck with a metallic scrape.

Norah's hands came up slightly. "No offense meant — only that we cannot afford any doubt in the Circle."

Sebastian's gaze flicked between them, the air still tight. "Then we keep it clean. No mistakes. No opportunities for anyone to... take what's not theirs."

He leaned over the map, tapping a point. "If they close too soon, we get boxed in. In a Trial, that's the difference between a warrior's rank and disgrace."

For them, there would be no second chance — failure meant the end of years of training and a future spent in a lower caste, laboring under the eyes of those who had passed.

"From a klick to six-fifty meters is about ten seconds at their best running speed," Sebastian continued.

"That would take a fast 'Mech," Mikel said.

"The first pair will be lighter and quick," Norah replied. "The next two will match our pace or be slower."

The Red Merlin

“Worst case, eighty-six KPH through forest and hills,” Sebastian said. “Slower if the ground works for us. That’s twelve to fifteen seconds, maybe more.”

Norah traced a ridge line with one finger. “Force them to take the long way — bait them around obstacles or into bad ground — and we buy another ten.”

“And if we back away from reinforcements while finishing the first fight, we stretch it further,” Sebastian added.

Mayra made a skeptical sound. “So thirty, maybe forty seconds of uninterrupted fire on the first four — all lighter than us.”

“If we can hold the others at a click or more before the melee is declared, yes,” Sebastian confirmed.

Norah moved pieces across the map with deliberate precision. “Angles of attack here. Fallback here. We dictate the trial’s tempo, not them.”

As they moved markers across the map, Sebastian could still feel the earlier words hanging over them like a weight. Plans could be perfect on paper — it was the people executing them that broke.

At one pause, Norah asked without looking up, “You good with this, Mayra?”

“Aff,” Mayra said — flat, more to end the question than from conviction.

The Red Merlin

She didn't look up from the map. Sebastian saw it for what it was, consent given so no one could accuse her of holding them back, not because she believed in the plan.

Sebastian caught the way she avoided eye contact. She'd go along with it — if only so no one could accuse her of holding them back.

They walked the plan across each likely trial site. Norah's confidence filled the space, but Sebastian felt the edge beneath it — that it would only work if every one of them committed. And in a Trial, that was never guaranteed.

This was crazy enough to work, or crazy enough to see them stripped of their place and sent to live as castoffs among the laborers.

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.

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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

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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.

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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?"

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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.

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“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.

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"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.

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.

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“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.”

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

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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."

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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."

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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

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

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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 , 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.

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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*.

The Red Merlin

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.

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."

The Red Merlin

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

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."

The Red Merlin

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.

The Red Merlin

“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.”

The Red Merlin

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.

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.

The Red Merlin

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.

The Red Merlin

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 Red Merlin

“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.

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.

The Red Merlin

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, Andreas Helmer offered her 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 Red Merlin

“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

The Red Merlin

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.

The Red Merlin

The End