



FIRST CHAPTER
EMMA LARKINS
MECHALARUM

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CHAPTER 1

“Bec Novus here with my cohost Vody Ganda, bringing you today’s Comm-Panel News Broadcast. We’re reporting live from the Training Sector, ready to witness another amazing display of The Stone Pillar’s Airbound Army.”

“Ah, Serl Jolorn. The Stone Pillar who holds his ground when all others falter. I never get tired of the sound of that, Bec.”

“Neither do I, Vody. Let’s get to the action. Today we’ve got the Golden Boy, Pilot Boril Tash, up against the Reckless Maverick, Pilot Kiellen Corr.”

“Last week, Corr finished the demonstration half-buried in the turf of the training field. Are we expecting to see similar rash behavior this time around?”

“Always a possibility. She doesn’t easily learn her lesson. You have to wonder why the Council puts up with her behavior.”

“Well, it’s not our position to judge the Council. But it is our position to welcome today’s listeners. Rise and fly, citizens of Citadel. Embrace the day so we can keep the Losh at

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bay!”

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“In conclusion, precision in execution is essential to the Mechalarum Flying Suit Corps.” Comant Yulani Caph’s voice was as familiar and uninteresting to Kiellen as the salt in the woman’s cropped, pepper-dark hair. The Comant, second only in ranking to Serl Aris Jolorn, spoke from her position on a platform overlooking the gathered pilots. “And so I name the first pair to demonstrate the latest suit developments. Pilot Tash. Pilot Corr.”

Kiellen’s thoughts drifted far beyond the nanofiber dome above their heads, buffeted not by a thousand-year dust-storm but by visions of wreaking havoc on offworlder scum. However, the sharp inflection Comant Caph put on Kiellen’s title and surname was enough to knock her out of her reverie as it echoed back from the low buildings surrounding the training field.

Kiellen hurried after Tash as he dutifully marched between the ranks assembled for the morning exercise. The other pilots bristled in annoyance at her momentary distraction as she passed. *Guess I’ve got to add ‘lack of appropriate haste’ to the list of ‘things Kiellen does that mean the enemy has already won.’ What’s a girl got to do to catch a break?*

Her feet crushed the scrubby groundcover, releasing fragrant, herbal scents from drought-resistant leaves as she walked. The luminescent pattern of the nanofiber dome darkened, simulating an impending storm. At any moment the rainmakers would activate, releasing stored moisture in a rare deluge.

Monosentient printer bots had rapidly constructed the deployment platform over the course of the previous night.

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As usual, Kiellen scanned the construction for structural weakness, and found none. She knew that, had it been built out in the residential parts of the Citadel, she'd want to think twice about trusting it with her own weight, let alone that of the collection of people and machines currently occupying it. However, here in the Training Sector, bots designed to intelligently execute one function—and one function only—made quick work of such jobs. Just like the monosentient salvagebots would execute the task of repurposing the materials with utmost efficiency as soon as the day's trials were done.

Kiellen's observations sped her progress. Soon her feet tread on steps as solid as the balconied finger of bronze that stabbed upwards less than a hundred feet away, drawing the eye up to the duststorm fury barely held at bay by the dome.

Today was a special day. A collection of officials stood on a raised stage behind Comant Caph. Foremost among them was Serl Aris Jolorn, the highest ranking officer of the Corps and the man everyone knew to be the true authority behind the Citadel's governing Council.

Once on the platform, Kiellen snapped to attention in front of Serl Jolorn and the others. She raised her right fist and covered it with her left palm, making sure to keep her left forearm parallel to the ground as she gestured her respect. For a moment, she indulged in scanning the Serl's ensemble for a missed loose thread, crooked seam, or rank insignia a micron out of place. As usual, she found nothing amiss about the state of the pale blue dress uniform cut to make his thin frame appear more muscular, or his steel-colored slick of hair. Not that she would ever mention the failure—at least not to his face. But she'd have dirt to share with her mechic friend Gage. Which he'd inevitably respond to with a long-winded

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speech about paying more attention to her own failings, and less to the failings of others.

Serl Jolorn acknowledged Kiellen's gesture. She risked a brief glance at his eyes to find out what he was thinking. Most found his expressions unreadable, but Kiellen could tell by the way his eyebrow twitched that he was looking forward to watching her performance. Though they'd had their share of disagreements in the past, mostly due to Kiellen's occasional bending of the rules to push her body and her suit to their limits, she knew without a doubt that she held the position of premier pilot in his eyes.

Kiellen turned to gesture her respect to Comant Caph. The tightness around the corners of the woman's eyes plainly belied her anxiety. *You make a mistake or two in service of the greater good, and from then on your overseeing officer watches you like she's a laprat and you're the last morsel of cubemeat. Why can't she focus on sending us out to save lives from the menace of the planet-stealing Losh instead of wasting time with perfecting these exercises?*

Kiellen moved on to where the sciencers and mechics waited with the Mechalarum suit rigs. The metal-armed, piston-driven contraptions held the suits open like blackened, empty skins. The suits pulsed with lives of their own as they waited for their hosts. A few dangling wires and disconnected plugs showed where the sciencers had sacrificed appearance for functionality, but for the most part the inner workings were protected from view—and from Kiellen's inadvertent collisions—by a slick surface material that was pliable, flexible, and yet nearly indestructible. The material formed a ribbed and curved sequence of panels interspersed with green indicator lights that shone weakly against the

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light-absorbing blackness.

The sciencers and mechics made their last minute adjustments. Since the suits were still in a beta testing stage, there were always last-minute code updates to install, gauges to zero, and meters to calibrate. One of the mechics assigned to Kiellen's team stood on a step ladder peering into the helmet cavity with the light from the metal and meldglass comm-panel permanently attached to her arm, while another kneeled and rapidly manipulated data on his own arm-bound device. Kiellen disliked when they pushed changes this close to deployment. *I hope we don't have any issues.*

Small privacy screens hovered nearby, providing Kiellen a modicum of protection from the view of those gathered. The dried sweat from an earlier acrobatics practice session made the engineered fabric rasp against her skin as she pulled the loose-fitting, off-white tunic over her head and kicked off her pants and undergarments.

As Kiellen waited, naked, for the mechics to adjust the position of the rig, she let her gaze linger on the suit. A slight tilt of a panel here, a minuscule lift of a segment there—the almost undetectable imperfections marked it as uniquely her own.

The sciencer in charge stepped back and gave a curt nod. Kiellen jumped onto the staging scaffold and eased into the hungry embrace of the Mechalarum suit, inhaling deeply the scent of burnt electricity and melted nanofiber. The suit wrapped itself around her, the sensing wires slithering over her skin, the electrodes working their way into position to pick up on signals from her nerves.

The armature spasmed. Kiellen forced herself not to brace against the discomfort—her body suffered less when she let

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the suit twist her limbs to fit its needs. It switched from an exploratory mode to a predatory one, swallowing her exposed skin inch by inch like a virulent case of gangrene. She arched her spine. Her body stretched and contorted, threatening to dislocate a shoulder or snap an elbow at any moment.

And then it was over.

With the joining complete, the screens lifted. Kiellen felt the familiar excitement thrumming in her chest. She turned to Tash. His eyes narrowed. Kiellen smiled and flicked a finger past her head in casual salute. He scowled and looked away. *I was planning on embarrassing you only a little bit, flightmate. Congratulations on changing my mind.*

Kiellen tuned out Comant Caph's recited instructions for the demonstration. The task was the same every time. Fly up to the hook attached to the top of the bronze Citadel tower, grab the hanging ring, and fly back down. She understood that it was important to display the progress of the pilots and the suits to the Council, but if she had to do stupid exercises in the first place, she would much rather be navigating the obstacle courses or practicing in the airship-disablement sim than showing off for a pack of useless bureaucrats.

"Helmets up!"

Tash's helmet slipped smoothly over his head. Kiellen concentrated her thoughts on activating the mechanism that would raise her own. Her helmet slid upwards, then seized and issued a warning whine. Kiellen winced. A few of the gathered pilots stifled laughs. She shot a scathing look toward Gage, who stood on the opposite side of the platform waiting to check the fit of Tash's suit. Her friend shrugged. There was no way he was going to run across and tend to her issue with the entire Mechalarum Flying Corps standing

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at attention below. Instead, Kiellen was forced to endure the ministrations of people far less capable than the only mechanic she considered to be worthy of the title.

She tilted her head back. The mechanics manually pulled the semi-flexible helmet and visual display into place, then adjusted the neck-piece of her suit. Her graphical display visualized the fluctuations of the dome as it bucked and heaved under the pressure of the outside winds. The nanofiber rippled in waves of viridian and crimson, more beautiful than anything in the stark, colorless world of the Citadel.

Kiellen focused on the tower, and the heavy steel ring hanging from a hook far above her head. The tall structure was not at all like the fermicrete and hewn stone that composed the rest of the buildings of the Citadel. Dull bronze walls flowed upwards, punctuated here and there by broad platforms spread out like flattened, supplicating palms. The arid environment, combined with frequent care, kept the structure from forming a patina, although here and there a splash of verdigris showed. Even though today was a special demonstration day, the balconies remained empty except for the occasional, rebellious child. The Council frowned upon its citizens taking any such leisure—even the smallest hands needed to be constantly at work when so much was at stake.

Kiellen's feet tingled as she resisted the subversive urge to hop into the air and chart her own course. She imagined herself airborne, bouncing from platform to platform, ducking under overhangs, savoring the gut-wrenching thrills as her suit hugged the curved surfaces with only inches to spare. Continuing on to the portal that supposedly provided the Mechalarum pilots egress into the storm, and finally to the world beyond. Or what was left of it, after two decades of

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destruction at the hands of the Losh.

A red sheet of nanofiber went up in the clutches of a flag-waving monosentient robot. Kiellen's muscles tightened, reenacting memories from endless stimulus-response training. The suit curved to force her into a takeoff stance. She fought to maintain her pose. *The pilot's in charge here, bolt bucket. I'll take your advice if and when I feel like it, thank you very much.*

Her breathing slowed, sounding loud in her ears as it cycled through the circulation system. The sensing wires worked their way deeper into her skin, searching to connect with her muscle-controlling nerves. She gritted her teeth as she made a mental note to report the immensely uncomfortable sensations to the sciencers.

But not yet. Not if it meant delaying the flight.

The flag flashed downward. Tash shot into the air, with Kiellen only a fraction of a second behind. Her takeoff was normally far and away the fastest in the class. Someone had obviously given her a handicap. Her temper flared, and her resolution hardened. The day's exercise wasn't just a dry, formal demonstration of recent suit enhancements. *If it's a show they want, it's a show they'll get.*

Kiellen looked up to see Tash gaining the lead, but didn't let it faze her. She'd worked hard at the physical and mental exercises that separated mere pilots from true aerial artists. She understood intimately how the subtlest flex of a bicep or tweak of a psoas could make the difference between victory and defeat.

The latest upgrade package to the suits included a rear-view system, fed to the heads-up display through a series of microscopic optical pathways. Tash's feet swayed in front of

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her as he tried to keep her in his sights. She shifted to slip by. Tash mirrored the maneuver.

Kiellen made a series of quick side-to-side movements. Tash mimicked the rippling pattern. She rolled to the right. He responded as anticipated, biting on her fake. She snicked by on his left, arching her back to twist past his head in a perfectly mathematical curve, more for flair than out of necessity. Her disruptor field came just close enough for him to feel it. But not so close that it would appear from the ground like she'd made contact. She stretched her hand out to claim the rapidly approaching prize.

A warning tone drew Kiellen's attention to her rear-views as Tash swung wildly into the spot she'd vacated. He overcorrected and careened into her. They crashed into the hook, knocking the ring from its precarious perch.

Tash caught his balance and hesitated as Kiellen stabilized. She flipped over backwards and dove after the falling ring, accelerating faster than the pull of gravity in a quest to claim her reward.

"Current trajectory exceeds the specification parameters of this suit implementation." Gage's calm attitude surprised her, but then she remembered it wasn't actually him speaking. He'd seeded the natural language application with his own voice patterns and modulation. "Suggest immediate flight path modification."

The 'suggestion' was followed by a jerking sensation as the Mechalarum suit fought Kiellen's command. The suit rippled and bucked in a self-generated pocket of turbulence. Kiellen inhaled sharply as the first pinch of panic stapled itself to her chest, then relaxed into the emotion and let the waves wash over her and fall away. She'd fought the suit for control in the

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past and always managed to overcome the algorithms that thought they knew better than her how to fly. Might as well—it was her job as a beta-tester to break the suit so that the sciencers could make a better version the next time around.

“Kiellen.” Comant Caph’s voice echoed in her helmet, unmodulated and pitching wildly. “I order you to obey the suit directives and return to the deployment platform.”

“Aren’t we supposed to train to overcome any obstacle in the fulfillment of our mission?” Kiellen replied as she gained on the falling iron ring. “How are we supposed to overcome fear of failure if you never allow us to take risks? Comant.”

“I’m perfectly happy to let you risk your neck on your own time.” It was Serl Jolorn who spoke. Kiellen tried not to let the up-rank throw her. “But for now, you’re under my orders, and by proxy, under the orders of the Council. Do not disobey us further.”

Kiellen took several deep, stabilizing breaths. His words stung. *I know he has an image to uphold in front of the Council. But I can’t bring myself to blindly follow orders when they don’t make sense. Even if it means incurring his wrath.*

She refocused her attention on the ring as it rapidly approached the tower base. Everything else disappeared from her mind and field of view. The Serl’s voice faded into the background, overwhelmed by interference from the sudden downpour released by the rainmakers. The suit’s surface registered the strikes and returned the feedback as a multi-sensory purr.

Kiellen brought up the augmented visual display to show the closing distances between her, the ring, and the ground. She ignored the angry indicators flashing red admonitions.

A mere score of feet from the training field surface, she

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dipped low and shot back on a plane parallel to the ring.

Kiellen wrapped her body around the falling target. The combined momentum sent her spinning through the air in a tightly tucked ball. She glanced off the side of the tower, wincing at the impact, then quickly untucked to see the ground perilously close to her head. One final twist righted her. She landed unsteadily on her feet, stumbling as she regained her balance. Hoisting her prize high into the air, she turned to see the reactions of the gathered crowd.

The Mechalarum ranks shifted and rustled, some with excited smiles on their faces, and others with angry scowls. A warm glow of gratification bloomed at the thought that they were responding to her spectacular feat. *Not that their opinions matter, of course. I did it for myself.*

Up on the platform, Gage stood rubbing his temples. Kiellen knew he cared about her safety, but wished he wouldn't take her actions so personally. She squared her shoulders. *No point in dawdling. Might as well get the reprimand over with.*

A short hop through the air brought Kiellen back to the spot from which she'd departed only a few short minutes before. She straightened her back and held her chin high as she presented the ring. Her breath caught in her throat as she tried to assess Serl Jolorn's expression. Even she couldn't get a read on him as he gave the tiniest of nods to acknowledge her presence.

It was customary at this point for the pilot to reveal her face. Kiellen's helmet still refused to operate, remaining in the closed position despite her efforts. She briefly considered ripping it off in celebration, but figured Gage wouldn't be too pleased with having to melditac it back together.

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