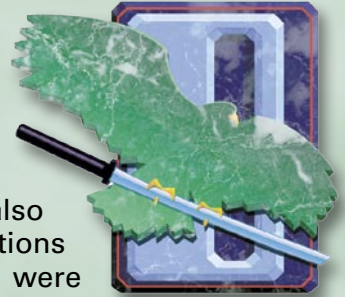


Zeroing In

**A prequel to
*The Legend of the Jade Phoenix***

by Robert Thurston

When Joanna had been very young, her caretakers had worried about her sensitive side. While they believed that a warrior-to-be should have an understanding of what it meant to be a human being, especially one fortunate to belong to the Jade Falcon Clan, they also felt that tender and compassionate emotions interfered with combat skills. Emotions were fine for those who flushed out of training and entered a lesser caste, where some emotional engagement was extremely useful. The scientists, for instance, could not improve Clansmen without some insights into their nature. Artisans needed some feeling to create decorative objects. Technicians had to have a sense of the value of the BattleMech to suit the needs of the warrior and thus had to understand the quirks as well as the traits of the warrior.



The reason Joanna could remember the issue of her sensitivity so well was that she did not have any of it left and could not recall what it had been like. She did not know how she had worked it out, or which life experiences had hardened her, or who was the first to draw her monumental wrath, but now she liked to think of herself as the nastiest warrior in the Jade Falcon Clan. And she was satisfied that many others thought of her that way, too.

Ironhold, Clan Space

What an exhaust fume of a place, Joanna thought as she entered her new quarters at the Ironhold training camp. A dark cloud seemed to hover in the ceiling shadows of the badly lit room of this bleak barracks. Spartan was all right for barracks but this one outdid others in its sheer drabness. Her cot, stripped down, with a bedroll at its foot, showed a definite sag in its middle, along with bent and nearly broken springs. The damn bed was ancient, the damn room with strips of wood curling off the walls and dirt streaks slashed across a bureau as old-looking as the bed, the damn dirty Jade Falcon flag hanging from an old rusty nail. How long had this portion of the facility gone unused? She'd get her fledglings in here to work at once! Still, it was some welcome for her, the *stravag* Joanna who was feeling pretty *stravag* old herself as she dragged her *stravag* duffel bag through the room's *stravag* splintered door.

Old? How old? I have forgotten. I should be dead by now, felled in heroic combat. Or at least alive with a Bloodname. The Bloodname can come. It has to! She recalled when she had been young, twelve or thirteen (an eternity ago) when she had been a trainee herself—so eager, so determined, so certain. She had been the top trainee in her sibko, scoring high on every test, pummeling and flooring all the others in fights. In those days she had been cool, delivering blows with a smile, quite unlike the angry, sometimes furious warrior she was now.

Still, the two others in her sibko who had eventually won their Trials and become Mechwarriors along with Joanna had been less skillful than she, and yet they had advanced further. One had earned a Bloodname and the other would have, but for her valiant defense of a mountain encampment, holding back enemy 'Mechs while the encampment behind her emptied of valuable scientists who had escaped in time, just before she had been blasted to smithereens by a lucky shot; even then she had gotten a line in the Falcon Remembrance.

I need my chance. And how in a field of walking corpses like this Ironhold training camp am I going to get it?

She took a few steps into the room. The floor creaked. Not just creaked, groaned.

Flipping open the bedroll, she flung its mattress onto the squeaking bedsprings and sat down on it. She tossed the duffel bag to the head of the bed, then put her own head into her hands.

She had never felt this empty before. Angry, yes, but not empty. It was as if she had been flung out of a waste chute and, instead of ending in the vacuum of space, had arrived here.

I should probably make the best of it. I should just buy into what Ter Roshak just told me at his briefing. Talk about walking corpses. He is the prime example.

“Training sibkos may not be as exciting as staring down a ‘Mech with only one PPC in operation,” he had said, as he rubbed his prosthetic hand with his good hand almost absentmindedly, “but you know what the manual says—it is just as important to the Clan as combat duty, *quiaff?* These kestrels are the future of the Clan. Few of them will succeed, not even enough to fill the vacancies available in Stars and elsewhere. But at least we know, if we do our job right, we will be sending out warriors so skilled that they will keep the Jade Falcon tradition the best and fiercest of all the Clans.”

He almost mumbled the speech. It was clearly one he gave to every new falconer, and some of it did not sound sincere, but maybe he had been right. Being a falconer was not the worst designation among Clan warriors, it just did not satisfy a real warrior, one who needed to slice a *Dire Wolf* in half with well-placed shots.

She sighed and began taking items out of her duffel bag. The few clothes—fatigues, field caps, old boots whose cracks were hidden by a thick coat of leather treatment—she carried to the bureau and deposited casually in drawers. Reaching into the duffel bag again, she felt her lock-box. *Stupid savashri. No reason to lock up anything in this.* Carefully lifting the box out of the bag, she put it down on the bed and retrieved her keys from her jacket pocket. Maneuvering the key into the lock, she held it still for a moment, then—with graceful wrist action—she snapped the key to the right and the box sprung open with a click that sent some flakes of rust on the spring flying.

Inside were the few mementos she had chosen to carry from place to place. It was her ritual to examine them on the first day at each new assignment. The items would not have drawn much interest from a casual observer, most of whom might have classified these apparently unexceptional things as junk.

She reached into the box and ran her index finger through the stuff. A picture emerged and she picked it up. It was that old holographic picture of Lyonor. Joanna did not remember Lyonor looking so happy any other time, although she did have an unfor-

unattractive cheerful strain in her personality. Her small body was erect in her characteristic pride, her crisp uniform was highlighted in a fiercely bright morning sun that, in the way she stood, cast her shadow in a long stretched silhouette behind her. Because of her thinness the shadow's lines appeared to point at a distant high mountain. What in hell was the name of that mountain? For that matter, what was the name of that damn planet?

Walking with the picture to the dirty barracks window next to the cot, she looked out through its smudged panes at the training field beyond. In the distance a falconer leaned toward a pair of trainees and was clearly barking at them, probably telling them what a bunch of inept *eyasses* they were. It was a pleasant sight, reminding her of the first and only time she and Lyonor had fought. It was not long before the taking of this picture on some other godforsaken planet.

The photo

Lyonor had lovely eyes. Everybody said so, even though it was unlike Jade Falcon warriors to make a compliment about any physical feature. Something about the eyes—their near violet color, perhaps, or maybe the question that always seemed to be expressed in them—easily drew compliments from the toughest and meanest warriors. It had not escaped Joanna's attention that nobody ever said anything about her eyes.

Now Lyonor's lovely eyes were wide in fright. Joanna's outburst, over her drawing back from killing one of the freeborns that were part of the refresher exercise that Jade Falcon warriors went through routinely, had unnerved Lyonor.

"Your autocannon was so close to his cockpit, almost touching it. You could have split that filthy freebirth apart and saved his 'Mech for later exercises. Instead, what do you do, *eyas*? You walk your *Summoner* back a step, slice off his 'Mech's legs and allow him to eject while you blasted his 'Mech into too many puzzle pieces to put back together. The *stravag* freebirth walks away and you get points off, and the unit loses the practice trial because of it, along with wasting a 'Mech. That was damn stupid, Lyonor. I was ready to pick you off myself."

Lyonor's dejection almost touched Joanna's sympathy. "I know," she said. "But I knew that freeborn. We drank together on another exercise just a week ago."

"I do not care if you took him into your arms and gave the wretched piece of trash the only good time of his life. I do not care if you admired his humor or thought he was the most admirable example of a freeborn you have ever met or he revealed himself to be to be a trueborn in disguise. You had to kill the *surat*. That is the point. You had to draw blood."

"Joanna, it was only an exercise, a—"

Joanna became enraged.

"*Only an exercise?* We learn by doing! And we acquire victories through skill. Or perhaps you do not think victories important? By the Founder, how do you expect to ever win a Bloodname with thinking like that?"

"I will win a Bloodname in my own time, Joanna. Or I will fail gloriously in the attempt. I do not have to breathe for it every minute of every day as you do. What is important—"

"Do not tell me what is important, *eyas*. I know what is important, *quiaff?* I tell you what is important. Got it?"

"Neg, I do not get it. I want a Bloodname, yes, but a bloodname is an *honor*, not a battle medal. You do not just earn it for what you do, you earn it for what you are. You—"

"What? What kind of kestrel droppings is that? You're saying there is some sort of ethics in Bloodnaming? You're saying—"

Lyonor put her hands to her ears. "Please do not throw contractions at me, Joanna. You know I cannot stand that."

"Yes? Well, maybe you're—you are cutting things too fine. If an occasional contraction makes you hold your ears, maybe you are not meant to be a Bloodnamed warrior.

"*Shut up, Joanna*. I will get my Bloodname. You can bet on it. And I will get it soon, not when I am as old as you and ready to pack it in."

Joanna hit her with a backhanded fist across her cheek. Blood began to flow from the slash she had created along Lyonor's cheek. Lyonor reeled backward, then rushed at Joanna, screaming like a falcon descending on its prey. Although Joanna was able to reduce the impact of Lyonor's charge by dodging sideways, Lyonor slammed into her shoulder and spun her around. She stumbled. As she fell, she cursed herself for what it looked like. She did not like being seen as clumsy, although she knew that sometimes she was.

Bending down and placing her hand on the ground to steady herself, she regained her footing, did a purposeful spin, and came up with her head against Lyonor's chin. The blow was so hard that it seemed to rattle the teeth inside Lyonor's head. Arms flailing, and growling with the characteristic rumbling explosion of the Jade Falcon attack cry, the two sprung at each other, each showing a readiness to kill in their eyes.

Their fight went on for a long while and both combatants were bruised and scarred for some time afterwards. When each could not lift her arms any longer and their legs were too unsteady, they still flung weak blows at each other. One thing could always be said about Lyonor: she could not be intimidated. She would fight to the last, and this time was no exception.

After they were no longer able to fight, there was no immediate reconciliation. Instead, they went back to attacking each other with words. The argument between the two of them went on for hours, and only total exhaustion ended it.

For the next few days, they stayed in the kind of pain inside that recognized that their relationship would never be quite the same again. Still, they remained close and performed their duties well and often in tandem. A scar from their fight remained as a faint line on Lyonor's cheek. Scars were good, virtual badges of honor for a warrior.

Right before the photo had been taken, Joanna and Lyonor had been laughing hysterically, which might explain, in the photo, the joy in Lyonor's radiant eyes. The scar on her cheek was so fresh, it showed up darkly on Lyonor's fair skin.

Strange, Joanna thought, I did laugh that day. How often do I ever laugh? I cannot remember what we were laughing about.



Walking back to the cot, Joanna smoothed out the edges of the photo and put it back in the lock box, underneath some transfer documents. Running her hand through the box's objects, her finger fell on a comb. She maneuvered it out of the pile and stared at it.

Although Jade Falcons were not known for skills in crafts, this comb approached beauty more than most of their objects. Made

of a shell Joanna had found on a beach on the world of Strana Mechty, it had already had a comb shape, with a scalloped top tapering down to a flat thin surface. At first she had just pocketed it, then found it a few days later when the fatigues she wore that day had reached the slightly odorous, slightly stiff state brought around by too many days of wearing. In readying the garment for laundering, she had reached into her pocket and pulled out the shell, now covered in patches by clinging lint. She wiped the lint away and was again struck by the nearly symmetrical shape of the shell, not only in its shape but in the way light thin gray lines ran across its surface in a design that looked as if it had to be crafted by hand rather than the erosion of sea waves.

She transferred the shell to the pocket of her clean fatigues and, two days later, happened on a village where a labor casteman, actually a specialist in etching designs on Jade Falcon medals, agreed to make a comb out of it for Joanna. She remembered the man—a squinty-eyed freeborn with the kind of rough skin common to such breeding—saying to her that a comb was a good idea to straighten out Joanna’s long unkempt hair. She pushed him against the wall of his Spartan, single room house, telling him never to talk to her, just do the job.

When she returned the next day, the man did not speak but merely handed her the shell, crafted into a comb whose teeth imitated the symmetry of the piece’s overall shape. For a reason Joanna chose not to ask about, he had neatly painted a diamond figure, as symmetrical as the rest of the shell, in the center of the upper portion of the comb. She paid for his work with work credit—eliciting a surprise she ignored, since a warrior simply commands and takes—without complimenting on the man’s impressive skills.

The next time she visited the town, she could not find his house and was told that he had died.

Sitting on the cot, listening to the springs squeak beneath her as she shifted her body, she recalled another day, one soon after their brawl, when she and Lyonor had been linked by the comb.

The comb

Lyonor’s arm was broken, in a fracture too delicate to be immediately fixed, so she wore it in a sling. When Joanna came upon her, she was running the fingers of her good hand through her

dark hair. Joanna noted that the hair, which in Lyonor's strange un-Clanlike vanity was worn longer than most, had lost some of its shine in the days since Lyonor had injured her arm in a simple fall off a ladder in a storage depot while searching for a new edition of the Clan epic, *The Remembrance*, to replace the one she had worn out; even more ironic, considering most considered the use of an actual hardcopy Remembrance superfluous.

"What are you doing?" Joanna asked, standing behind Lyonor.

Lyonor jumped, startled. "Do you always have to sneak up on people?" she asked.

"On the battlefield I will announce my presence. You, *eyas*, I watch with a Falcon's stealth."

Lyonor scoffed. "On the battlefield you have no choice, you mean. How in the name of Kerensky can you sneak up on someone while in a 'Mech which can be seen from kilometers away?"

"It can be done. Fog, snow, blinding rain. A sandstorm, perhaps."

"Telemetry can still detect you."

"Do not split hairs. And, speaking of hair, let me ask again, what are you doing?"

Lyonor held up the comb, one of the small fragile ones issued in the kit of all warriors. Nearly half of its teeth had broken off. One of its teeth dangled, ready to fall. "You ever try to operate one of these devices when you only have one good arm?"

"I do not try to, as you say, *operate* one of those much at all."

"I can tell. But some of us believe in grooming even when it is not time for a ceremony or ritual."

Joanna, resisting the urge to touch her own hair, shrugged.

"You want help? Operating, I mean."

"You sure you know how?" Lyonor asked, handing her the comb.

Joanna waved it away, saying, "Not that one. Got my own."

Lyonor's eyebrows raised. She clearly was surprised that Joanna would even carry around a comb. Staring at it, she started to smile,

then took a better look at the item. Light seemed to flash off it, even though the sky, filled with dark clouds, hid the sun. Impressed by the piece's symmetry and its diamond symbol decoration, Lyonor allowed herself to do something Jade Falcon warriors rarely did—express an aesthetic opinion. "That is pretty," she said. She touched the diamond design with her thumb. "Pretty. And strong, too. Looks unbreakable."

Joanna held it up. "Yes, it probably is. Turn around."

Lyonor took up her position, her back straight, her head slightly down. With her good hand, she fluffed out her hair so it hung down over her shoulders. Joanna smoothed its surface with her hand, noting that Lyonor's hair, even in disarray, felt smoother than her own. Choosing some strands, Joanna slowly ran the comb through Lyonor's hair, felt its strong smooth teeth disentangle strands of hair easily. The firmness of grip that the comb allowed and the unbreakable strength of its teeth made the process of combing effortless. Gathering bunches of Lyonor's hair, she began creating order out of the mess.

As she was smoothing out the last strands, she heard a loud guffaw behind her. Whirling around, she saw Garvy, one of the most disagreeable warriors in her Star. He liked to provoke all the other warriors, said he did it to make them better fighters. Joanna could not deny that Garvy was skillful in his 'Mech cockpit. With his long thin neck and body he looked more like a seabird than a warrior, but in spite of his slim frame he could attack another with a special viciousness. His hawklike face was distorted into a gleeful sarcasm.

"Wipe that smirk off your face, Garvy," Joanna said. "What is rattling your gyro, anyway?"

"You two. Such a pretty picture."

Joanna stiffened. In warrior circles words like pretty, beautiful, lovely, as applied to warriors, were usually setups to a further insult that would start a fight. Garvy had a mean look on his face. He probably had been drinking fusionaires somewhere, and she and Lyonor were the first potential victims he had found.

"So domestic, *quiaff?*"

Another fighting word. The last thing a true warrior was, was domestic. Warriors did not live in households, and words like family often made them sick to their stomachs.

"You know what the two of you look like? Like a pair of freebirth villagers during a— "

And, of all the words in a warrior's vocabulary the word *freebirth* was the worst. It could be, and often had been, an invitation to a fight to the death.

Joanna started to lunge at Garvy, but the strong sudden grip of Lyonor's good arm held her back. "He is mine," she whispered. She stood up and wrested the comb from Joanna's fingers.

Lyonor did not lunge, did not even look menacing as she strode casually toward Garvy. There was a hint of a smile on her face.

"Garvy," she said. "Although you look like a canister mistake, you are a trueborn warrior, after all. I respect you for that and so I give you a shot at performing *surkai*."

Surkai was an ancient Clan ritual, which gave a chance for warriors to extricate themselves from words or actions that had been too rash, too impulsive. When a warrior acknowledged *surkai* and asked for the forgiveness allowed by the ritual, the rash acts would be forgiven without penalty, without recrimination. Meaningless fights were useless, and *surkai* was a Jade Falcon way to eliminate them.

"*Surkai!*" he grunted. "I would not waste *surkai* on a freebirth like you."

Lyonor nodded, turned as if to return to Joanna, then whirled around, holding the comb straight out in the hand of her good arm, and aimed it at Garvy's neck. Its teeth broke the skin and she pushed it in. Lyonor wrenched it out and blood came spurting after it. Garvy's hands went to his neck to stem the flow. It looked to Joanna as if he were strangling himself.

Lyonor wiped the comb off on her sling and walked casually back to Joanna.

"Guess we should get him some medical help," she said, then looking back: "Or not."

"How about it, Garvy?" Joanna yelled. "Want some help? Nod if your answer is aff."

Garvy just looked at them, his eyes bugged out, and clearly was steadfast in his resolve not to answer her. His eyes glazed over, and he staggered. For a moment the eyes became clear, and he

did nod, vigorously, then they returned to the glazed state and he fell. He must have been unconscious because his hand fell away from the wound and the blood began flowing freely.

Handing Joanna the comb, Lyonor quickly ripped a piece of cloth off her sling and went to Garvy's side, where she knelt down and pressed the cloth to his wound. Joanna, remembering Lyonor's useless compassion when she had refused to kill that freeborn, wanted to kick Lyonor away from Garvy's body. On the other hand, she had admired the quick brutal way she had wielded the comb. There was hope for her yet. She was certainly the best warrior that Joanna had ever taken under wing. She might just win that Bloodname she claimed not to want as desperately as Joanna did.

"Think we should save this freebirth?" Lyonor asked.

"Well, he is a warrior and he is fairly skilled and we would just have to train a replacement ... "

"That is it, then. I think I can manage with one arm. I will take his head; you take his feet. Just a minute first, help me to do a field compress."

"With one good arm? Let me do it by myself."

"*I can do it.*" Lyonor's voice was low but menacing, then her voice became softer. "I can do anything, you know that, quiaff?"

"Aff. I do know that."

It was a struggle, but the two of them did manage a tight field compress and got Garvy back to a medic, and he lived to continue his usually drunken unpleasantness.



Joanna smiled as her thumb ran along the edges of the comb's teeth. They were not as sharp as they had once been, as they must have been when Lyonor shoved them into Garvy's neck. She shut her eyes and saw Lyonor again for an instant, on her face that curious combination of confrontation and respect toward Joanna as if she realized that Joanna had made her into the fine warrior she was. One of the best. *Maybe I do have a talent for training, maybe I do belong at this stravag facility,* she thought.

She flipped the comb back into the lock-box and was about to close it, when a rare flash of light through the dirty window made something briefly sparkle in the box. Pushing other detritus away from it, she saw the piece of armor that was her most distressing memento. It had fallen from Lyonor's *Summoner* on the day Joanna had learned what hell truly meant.

The armor

Twelve hours out from Tokasha, preparing for battle with the Ghost Bears, most warriors would feel elation. The call to Trial surging in their blood. But Lyonor had still been in a miserable mood, so much so that the scar Joanna had given her was a darker line than usual. She had not been selected to participate in one of the Trials of Bloodright rituals back home, and she was bitterly angry about it. Joanna, too, had not been selected, but that had happened so often, she just cursed and vowed to find a way to get the Bloodname at any cost. Twice now she had joined the melee that would produce the thirty-second contestant, and both times she had been defeated in the melee's late stages, in each instance through a dirty trick rather than a one-on-one confrontation between warriors. She knew that there was something about her ferocity that put fear into others and made them resort to trickery rather than go against her. She could try the melee again, but not this time around, she told herself.

They were in a DropShip, on their way to challenge the Ghost Bears for the legacy of one of their warriors. It was apparently from a genetic line worth fighting for, although Joanna never took much interest in that sort of thing. A fight was a fight, and she was always up for it.

"Damn it, Joanna," Lyonor said. "I deserved the chance at a Bloodname. Look at what I have done. Who is going, do you know?"

Joanna hesitated a moment, deliberately extending the silence. She had to admit to herself that Lyonor had certainly changed in her attitude about getting a Bloodname. The indifference to Bloodnames she had once professed had vanished.

"Tell me, Joanna."

"Garvy, I think."

Lyonor's remarkable eyes seemed to have a fire blazing behind them. She was clearly ready to destroy anything she could reach. And she did reach. For Joanna. She pushed Joanna away, and Joanna began to laugh uproariously.

The laughter sent the anger right out of Lyonor. It was more of a shock than that of Garvy's selection for the Bloodname ritual.

In between bursts of laughter, Joanna said, "I was—joking. Lyonor, it is a joke, *quiaff?* Garvy would not be selected. I have not heard who has, but it would never be Garvy. If that happened, I would simply challenge him to Trial. And he would lose."

Lyonor lunged at her, but this time Joanna's laughter drew a vaguely disreputable Lyonor smile.

And a half-day later, the Star was assembled to fight in a battle over the Ghost Bear warrior's genetic legacy.

Ensnared in the cockpit of her *Hellbringer*, going through her weapons checklist, while the 'Mech's lasers and PPCs were powering up, and the telemetry whirled and flashed in its activating of the 'Mech, Joanna had a brief thought of how odd genetic legacy challenges were. Yes, it mattered that her Jade Falcon Clan challenge for the nearly sacred ideal of a legacy. Yes, a warrior would have to fight for a valuable warrior's legacy to the death. Yes, Joanna would never scale down her efforts under even the most doubtful conditions. Still—there was a part of Joanna's mind that wondered if such a skirmish over a legacy really was a proper occupation for a warrior. Skirmishes were, in a way, just rituals to keep warriors in condition, hone their skills with an imagined goal. The true goals of a warrior were matters like defending a city or planet from attack, attacking another Clan with the purpose of destroying it, conquering new worlds. Many warriors, Joanna imagined, dreamed of all-out war. It was the forbidden fruit. And its taste would not come today.

This particular skirmish was being fought on a vast hilly plain spotted with abandoned archaeological digs. Joanna knew nothing about these archaeological digs or, for that matter, anything about archaeology itself. She knew that a lot of strange unkempt tech-caste people dug into mounds looking for lost artifacts from before the Clans, from the time of the Star League in Exile. Very few significant discoveries had ever been made in this region of Clanspace, but that could not stop archaeologists from trying.

The Clan Ghost Bear leaders may have chosen this area because they believed Jade Falcon warriors would be less effective

in such a strange terrain. To Joanna this was not smart strategy. It was just another trick like those of her victorious opponents in her two melees. No matter how familiar they might be with this planet, where Ghost Bear maintained some storage depots, it was uncomfortable to have to take note of holes in the ground while mounting assault or defense strategy. Anything that distracted attention from the fight irritated Joanna, even though she had been trained in all possible terrains and practiced hundreds of tactical situations. Well, at least her Trinary had been bid into the skirmish and she was happy with that. As they touched controls, her fingers actually itched with the anticipation of the coming battle.

“You daydreaming, Joanna?” came Lyonor’s voice over the comline.

“Why do you say that?”

“You are standing still. We have been waiting for your signal for—well, for longer than I would like. Why do not we start?”

“There have been no orders from the Star colonel.”

“When have you been one to stand on ceremony? Or signals? Or even obeying a mere colonel, quiaff?”

“Aff. We will move.”

Soon Joanna’s Star was crossing the plain, up small hills, down larger ones, and skirting the archaeological digs, which were at least spread far apart. As the Star advanced, Joanna saw the Ghost Bear ‘Mechs gradually appear in the distance. At first, the ‘Mechs, strung out in an uneven line, looked like toys that were slowly being expanded as they came closer. And they were so far away that their advance seemed agonizingly slow. There were so many heavy ‘Mechs in the line that they were slowing down the faster ones.

Joanna wanted to spring her own ‘Mech forward, run right into the center of the Ghost Bear string of ‘Mechs, wreak havoc on its orderly arrangement, then burst past them, turn and attack others from behind. It would instigate a grand melee, a free-for-all much like the one she was missing back on Ironhold. A doomed tactic, probably, but she was tempted, just this once.

Before she could think any more about the Bloodname, the Ghost Bears opened fire. Joanna and Lyonor, both of whom had bid for particular enemy ‘Mechs during the prebattle Ghost Bear advance,

responded first, sending a flurry of PPC blasts that knocked armor flying from the enemy each had chosen.

Joanna sent her *Hellbringer* lunging forward, zeroing in on an enemy *Mad Dog*. Her cockpit shook as the *Mad Dog* landed a glancing autocannon shot across her shoulder. She had control of the *Hellbringer* in a second, and rocked the *Mad Dog* with a barrage from both her PPCs. Something was disabled in the *Mad Dog*. Both its arms dropped, apparently useless, though their nervous jerking movements indicated its pilot was trying, probably desperately, to lift them. Joanna took advantage of the moment and downed the *Mad Dog* with a powerful barrage.

Near her she could see that Lyonor was having similar success against a *Warhawk*. Her short-range missile salvo had made a good hit and the *Warhawk* was staggering, ready to go down, an event that occurred after Lyonor's well-placed PPC bursts in the *Warhawk's* gyro area.

On her forward screen, as Joanna quickly traced out the action of the battle, she saw that the Jade Falcons were holding their own against the Ghost Bears. As far as she could tell, each side had about the same number of fallen or clearly disabled 'Mechs. No one for her to challenge. Looking out the cockpit for a visual check of the battle, she found there was too much smoke and fire to the left of her *Hellbringer* to discern many details. To her right, where Lyonor was now stalking her next target, the view was clearer and Joanna could see all the way to the edge of the plain, where a tall leafy forest seemed to rise up toward a sky which apparently was darkening fast. A storm was coming.

She hated storms. In fact, she hated any weather condition that distorted the view of a battle. There had been many times when, caught in a sudden heavy downpour or a blizzard of swirling snow, she had raged as the enemy seemed to shape-shift, become larger or smaller, losing all defining outline, fading in and out of sight. Although it might be just a Clan legend, she had heard that Ghost Bears were particularly dangerous in inclement conditions.

She spotted a *Stormcrow* trying to blindside Lyonor, heading toward her with its typical quickness. Lyonor herself was bearing her *Summoner* down on a *Mad Dog* that had already suffered considerable damage but had managed to down its own opponent. She destroyed the *Mad Dog's* right arm pulse laser, which sputtered flame. Nevertheless, it still came toward the *Summoner* steadily, a bit slowly. The slowness also seemed to suggest that this particular Ghost Bear pilot was in trouble but, with character-

istic Clan persistence, would rather die fighting than take a brief and safe retreat.

This Stormcrow's mine then, Joanna thought, and started racing her Hellbringer toward the ambushing 'Mech. She pushed the Hellbringer as hard as she could, trying to get every ounce of energy out of it. Instead, the Hellbringer slowed down and became difficult to handle. Something in one the Hellbringer's leg actuators must have been hit or chosen this strag time to malfunction. She felt like her 'Mech was heading toward the Stormcrow at half speed, as if sludging through a field of mud. Working her controls frantically, she tried to increase the speed, but the Hellbringer did not respond. Twisting in her seat, she tried to urge the 'Mech forward with her body. If anything, it seemed to slow down more.

Ahead of her, Lyonor was in more trouble than she realized. Joanna tried to raise her on the comline, but all signals were jamming and all she heard was noise. She shouted a warning to Lyonor, hoping that maybe her abrasive voice would get through all the static.

Whether Lyonor heard or not, she suddenly shifted position and shot at the Stormcrow. The shot went wide but it diverted the Stormcrow just enough. It raced past Lyonor's Summoner.

It had also accomplished its goal in tempting Lyonor—tricking her—into firing on two different targets! By the rituals of battle, she had agreed to a two-against-one battle!

If the Ghost Bears could play such games—the same tricks that had cost her a Bloodname twice!—Joanna felt no shame in unleashing her full fury against them. A grand melee. So be it. She worked furiously at her controls, trying to get more power and speed out of the Hellbringer. Ahead of her the storm cloud seemed to be racing toward them with the speed of a Stormcrow.

Edging her Hellbringer toward the Stormcrow's path, she watched it begin to make a turn, back toward Lyonor's Summoner. Its medium lasers were already engaged, sending bolts toward the Summoner. They went astray, but Joanna knew that once the Stormcrow got into close range, it could be deadly. The red bolts seemed brighter against the dark oncoming storm. Joanna could see the lines of rain, the storm was that close.

Lyonor's concentration seemed to be on the Mad Dog, which was now reeling, ready to fall. In her mind, Joanna urged the fall with the same intensity she urged her Hellbringer onwards. As

it fell, the *Mad Dog's* pilot managed a strong green burst from its large pulse laser. Hitting Lyonor's *Summoner*, it sent pieces of its ferro-fibrous armor flying. The *Summoner* rocked slightly from side to side at the laser's impact, but maintained its position as the *Mad Dog* fell in front of it, its head just missing the *Summoner's* feet. *Lyonor should be proud of this one. Her combat skill there shows she should earn a Bloodname.*

But the *Stormcrow* still headed steadily toward the *Summoner*. And the storm reached the area, releasing a downpour whose impact felt just as powerful as a hit from a PPC. And her *Hellbringer* continued to trudge along, going into the heavy wind. Now it was not too far away from the *Stormcrow*. And Joanna hoped the enemy had not detected her approach.

A flash of lightning illuminated the scene in eerie colors. To Joanna, it seemed like a chalk drawing, done by a child. The shadows on the *Stormcrow* seemed sketched on with no relation to any object throwing them. Further in the distance, Lyonor's 'Mech was more like a smudge against the landscape, its edges uneven, as if the child wielding the chalk had not stayed within the lines.

In a moment all three 'Mechs were in close proximity to each other. Joanna could see the silhouette of Lyonor through her darkened cockpit shield.

Power suddenly surged back into the *Hellbringer* and it lurched forward. Joanna thought she might lose control, but with quick deft movements she manipulated some switches and levers to steady her 'Mech. She felt the 'Mech gradually picking up speed, as if finally responding to her growled urgings.

The pilot of the *Stormcrow* clearly had the *Summoner* in his sights, as more red bolts hit their targets and further weakened the *Summoner's* armor. Joanna could see Lyonor silhouetted in her cockpit, and she could visualize the determination on Lyonor's face as she responded to the *Stormcrow's* assault with her PPCs. Aiming toward the legs of the *Stormcrow*, her shots caused heavy damage to the left leg, sending the *Stormcrow* staggering. It slowed down and its feet hit the ground at odd angles, reminding Joanna of the limp of a staggering drunk.

The storm got worse. The wind whipped the rain around the trio of 'Mechs, making them sway almost as much as a well-placed laser burst might have done.

Now the *Hellbringer* was racing along as fast as it had formerly been slow. Joanna struggled with her controls. Something in the

Hellbringer's leg actuators needed adjustment. She vowed that, as soon as the battle was over, she would get her tech on it right away to restore the equilibrium.

The *Hellbringer* was now closer than the *Summoner* to the *Stormcrow*. She could ambush it and down it before its pilot knew what hit him. Taking aim with her right arm PPC, she trembled slightly with anticipation as she neared the point at which, as her judgment indicated, she could release a barrage that would surely prove fatal to the *Stormcrow*.

Just before she took the shot, she felt the left side of her *Hellbringer* suddenly dip and go sideways. It was a moment before she realized it was falling and her PPC attack, instead of targeting the center of the *Stormcrow* was merely adding to the damage on the Ghost Bear 'Mech's leg.

What happened before and after she crashed, she only sorted out later, when she learned that her *Hellbringer* had indeed stumbled, and where else? On one of those damned holes left behind by the archaeologists. It was a fairly shallow one that the *Hellbringer's* left leg plunged into. Someone told her that the leg came down so hard at the bottom of the hole that it unearthed some strange metal artifacts, but Joanna saw the story was clearly legend and gave no credit to it.

The *Hellbringer* staggered in reaction to the stumble. Joanna nearly steadied it but, as she tried to lift the left leg out of the hole, it stumbled again, on the lip of the hole. Frantically working controls, she could not bring the *Hellbringer* under her control and realized that the 'Mech might go down: *savashri!* As she attempted to raise the *Hellbringer's* arm and target other areas of the *Stormcrow*, she refused to eject and vowed to stay with her 'Mech all the way to the ground.

This last stumble finally threw the leg's actuators completely offline and an alarm in Joanna's control panel showed the leg malfunctioning, shutting down. A strong push forward with the 'Mech's other leg dragged the damaged leg along for a step but the right leg began to slide sideways in the mass of mud caused by the heavy storm. The *Hellbringer* pitched forward, out of control. Joanna struggled to will the 'Mech upright, but the *Hellbringer* began to collapse. Rocking the throttle full forward, Joanna got another good push from the right leg, thrusting the 'Mech further ahead.

As she was told later, Joanna's barrage as her 'Mech fell, both her shots to the leg and those on the *Stormcrow* torso, set the Ghost

Bear 'Mech up for Lyonor's final attack, which sent the *Stormcrow* reeling forward. It should have landed on top of the downed *Mad Dog*, at the *Summoner's* feet, again reenacting the traditional heroic picture of one 'Mech defeating another.

But it did not work out that way.

The *Hellbringer*, in spite of its collapsing legs, had been advancing at a stunning speed, and now hurtled onward, even as it fell. One Jade Falcon pilot, who observed it, told Joanna that her 'Mech seemed to turn into a missile as it shot forward, its arc propelling it ahead on its own flight, a flight that sent it crashing into the *Summoner*.

Lyonor should not have died. It was just two 'Mechs crashing into each other, something that happened often enough in BattleMech combat. It was just a desperate final burst from the *Stormcrow's* lasers that penetrated Lyonor's already damaged cockpit as the two 'Mechs fell. It was just a damned combination of chance events that sent the red laser burst through Lyonor's chest and then, if she had any life left in her, crushed her as the pair of machines fell into a shattering and shattered pile.



Lyonor should not have died. It was not logical. Joanna's *Hellbringer* should not have stumbled. It should not have even touched the *Stormcrow*. The *Stormcrow* should just have fallen into the traditional warrior tableau of battle. The *Summoner*, by all the rules of chance, should not have been in the falling *Stormcrow's* path.

But it happened. It all happened. And Lyonor would never fight for the Bloodname she craved.



Afterward, the storm over, Joanna oversaw Lyonor's body being extracted from her *Summoner*. She knew from the onset that Lyonor was dead. Her face was peaceful, as if satisfied she had died bravely. The scar on her cheek was so faint now, Joanna could barely discern it.

Joanna watched the body being carried away. *My mistake*, she thought, *if I had been late to the fight, Lyonor would be alive*. Then she seemed to hear Lyonor's voice in her mind, saying, *Not your mistake. We fight, we die. Is that not what is meant by the Way of the Clans?*

Every muscle of Joanna's body ached from being bounced around her cockpit as the *Hellbringer* crashed. Her head was on fire with shooting pains, but she did not want to rejoin her unit just yet.

Joanna stared at the remains of the *Summoner* and saw that it was now scrap, parts of it usable for other 'Mechs. She remembered the last sight she had of Lyonor's falling *Summoner*, as her own 'Mech crashed. Pieces of the *Summoner's* aligned crystal steel armor had fallen all around as if part of the storm.

Next to the *Summoner* now, she noticed that slivers and chunks of the armor were strewn around the fallen 'Mech. Walking a few steps, she noticed a flash of light, a sparkle, coming from one of the armor pieces. The piece's radiance made no sense. There was scarcely any light in the dark sky to cause the flash.

She leaned down and picked up the armor fragment. It was still warm from the battle. There was nothing interesting in its shape or in the battle scars on its surface, but it was from Lyonor's 'Mech, so she put it in her jacket pocket and trudged on through the mud.



Now she stared at the armor piece and considered tossing it. There seemed no reason to keep it. She really did not want to remember Lyonor anymore, not now or in the future. She held it up, as if measuring it for destruction. She held it for a long while, then shook her head, and placed it instead in the lock-box. She flipped the lock-box cover down and shoved the box under the cot. It clattered on the uneven floor.

She considered taking a nap, but knew she could not get to sleep.

Glancing around the decrepit room, her home for who knew how long, she pulled on her gloves, strode through the doorway and slammed the door shut behind her. Outside the air was fresh and a strong breeze hit her. She felt it rumple her long dark hair. Strands of hair brushed against her neck and sent a pleasant shudder through her.

In the distance she saw what she had hoped for, a group of trainees to kick around. Breaking into a run, breathing in the welcome fresh air, closing her hands into fists, watching rays of light rising off her gloves' metal studs, she zeroed in on them.