

BATTLECORPS

HIT FAST, HIT HARD

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***Tsu Ice Shelf, Gondwana
Unclaimed Territory, Marshall
Kerensky Cluster, Clan Space
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A savage wind kicked up a snow flurry just as Jade Falcon Point Commander Talon pulled his reticle over the Elemental's image. For an instant, the targeting lock flashed gold. Then it blinked red even as he raised the extended range micro laser his five-ton *Centaur* carried in its arms.

"Freebirth," Talon snarled.

The Steel Vipers had proved most adept at using the ugly weather as cover. His mixed Point of ProtoMechs had only managed to dig out a dozen of the *surats*.

A feral grin tightened the muscles of his face.

If there was one thing Steel Vipers excelled at, it was hiding.

They were fools if they thought they could hide for long. Talon could *feel* the snow swirling around his *Centaur*, each flake a needle of ice against his skin. He could hear the desolate howl of the wind. He felt the location of every member of his Point in the same way he felt the web of agony that tightened the muscles of his back.

He was tied directly into the *Centaur*'s sensors through Enhanced Imagery. He did not pilot the machine.

He *was* the machine.

How could the Steel Vipers hope to hide from that?

Talon stalked his five-ton *Centaur* forward. It was a dangerous maneuver in the swirling, shifting whiteout. Visibility had dropped to a few meters. If he stumbled over an exposed lip of volcanic basalt or slipped on a patch of ice, he would go down.

But Jade Falcon tactical doctrine was simple: hit fast and hit hard. Strike your enemy with overwhelming force before he could employ any trickery. That was the Jade Falcon way: honorable and ruthless.

And Talon was a true son of his Clan.

The wind died just as suddenly as it had come up, and Talon suddenly found himself standing in a pocket of clarity forty meters behind his enemy. The Elemental's armor was painted burnt steel with metallic green highlights. Talon pulled his reticle over the green snake scale pattern painted on the Elemental's SRM-2 pack. The target lock flashed gold.

And burned steady.

He fired his SRMs at point blank range.

The Elemental was just starting to turn when Talon's missiles corkscrewed into the pack. A molten orange fireball swallowed the soldier. By the time it dissipated, the Elemental was nothing but a rain of jagged metal shards and cooked meat.

Talon rose out of a crouch and scanned his heads up display for more Elementals. None moved.

Sheryl's *Centaur* stood over the broken corpse of a Steel Viper. A flash of ruby fire from Petra's *Gorgon* signaled the death of another. Marilyn and Hosni turned slow circles in the snow, looking for more targets.

But they were all gone.

Talon growled low in his throat. He hungered for more *surats* to kill.

The Steel Vipers were long-standing enemies of Clan Jade Falcon, second in arrogance only to the destroyed Smoke Jaguars. The Vipers had once tried to steal worlds within the Falcon Occupation Zone, only to lose all their holdings in the Inner Sphere as a result. The Steel Vipers had never gotten over that humiliation. They might call this battle a Trial of Grievance, but really it just a way to harass the small Falcon contingent on Marshall.

Talon gritted his teeth. The *stravags* would learn it was no easy task to push Clan Jade Falcon off a world.

The whip crack of heavy fire pulled his attention left. An enemy *Mad Dog C* poured Gauss slugs into MechWarrior Peter's *Grendel Prime*. The Jade Falcon *Grendel* staggered under the attack, armor shattering under each hammer blow, unable to muster any return fire.

Talon pulled his reticle over the *Mad Dog*. It flashed gold. The Steel Viper 'Mechs was 400 meters away, well within LRM range.

He stared at the image of the enemy *Mad Dog* for a long moment. Hardly a scar marred the burnt steel paint job. His eyes narrowed as he sought out the emblem of the Steel Viper's Beta Galaxy: a gray snake with a yellow underbelly rising to strike, gaping mouth revealing lethal fangs, a malevolent glow in the viper's demonic yellow eyes.

A spasm of hatred rippled through Talon's lithe body.

Then he gritted his teeth and broke the targeting lock.

Jade Falcons fought according to the rules of *zellbrigen*, an honorable duel between warriors. Other Clans might try to skirt the rules of honor.

But not Jade Falcon.

A Gauss slug smashed into the *Grendel*'s cockpit, and the 'Mech went down hard, sending a tremor rippling through the hard, cold ground.

Talon tried to reestablish target lock, but the Steel Viper heavy had backed out of range.

He blinked.

All the red triangles on his HUD seemed to be pulling back. It was not obvious, but it *was* happening. A *Fire Moth* stepped behind a natural ice revetment. A *Timber Wolf* ducked left and slipped back under the assault of a Jade Falcon *Linebacker*. To a MechWarrior engaged in a one-on-one duel these would seem like natural maneuvers, but Talon saw a pattern.

The battle seemed roughly even. So why were the Steel Vipers giving ground?

It was a trap.

Talon's eyes flickered across his HUD. *Where were the Elementals?* Each side was supposed to field a trinary of 'Mechs and another of Elementals. The enemy 'Mechs were all accounted for, but the bulk of the Steel Viper infantry was missing. Perhaps they were hiding. Or perhaps the winning Viper commander had bid low on infantry.

Talon turned to look behind him, and saw a jagged blue opening in the face of the glacier at their left.

Perhaps not.

Talon selected the command channel. "Screech One, this is Proto One. Recommend you cease advance, over."

"Say again, Proto One," Star Captain Robert Newclay snarled.

Newclay was a humorless conservative, unimpressed by new ideas. Not surprisingly, he showed no appreciation for the opportunities presented by ProtoMechs.

And he was not the only one. Jade Falcon doctrine focused on stand-up fighting, and ProtoMechs were weapons of subtlety, ideal for scouting missions or feints. Talon wondered if he and his Point would ever find a place in the Clan's Touman.

Talon drew a deep breath. "Sir, I believe the Viper withdrawal is designed to draw us into a trap."

"I do not give a *damn* what you believe." The channel went dead.

That was clear enough.

As if Talon needed a reminder why his Point was here. In bidding for the right to answer the Steel Viper Trial of Grievance, Star Captain Marra had bid away most of her assault machines, leaving her with a force of mostly heavy and medium 'Mechs. Star Captain Robert Newclay couldn't afford to weaken the force and still hope to win the battle. (So Marra must have thought.)

But he had tricked her. He had answered her bid with an identical bid, except he had substituted a Point of ProtoMechs for one of his light 'Mechs. And since everyone knew that ProtoMechs were weaker than their bigger cousins, he had won the bid.

Now he was paying for it.

Which would have been fine.

Except Clan Jade Falcon was going to pay right along with him.

Talon clenched his jaw. "ProtoMech Point, follow me."

He set off in a lope for the narrow ice canyon painted on his heads up display in glowing white phosphor. He expected to find enemy infantry there. The terrain left no other possibility.

Even if Star Captain Robert Newclay would not listen.

The area Clan Steel Viper had selected for the Trial of Grievance was an unloved stretch of land located on the edge of Gondwana,

Marshall's southernmost continent. A thick ice shield stretched across what would have been a bay in a warmer clime. The ice was meters thick where it met the snow-covered basalt of the "shore," but thinned considerably as it ran out to meet the black waters of the Southern Sea.

The shore was narrow, no more than a few klicks across at its widest point, bracketed by the ice sheet to the west and an immense glacier to the east. Not trusting the ice and unable to traverse the glacier, Newclay had restricted his fourteen 'Mechs and his trinary of Elementals to solid ground.

He had made it clear that he did not give a damn what the ProtoMechs did.

Which was just fine, thought Talon. He planned to claim all the initiative his Star Captain would allow.

The Steel Viper *stravags* were coming from the south, Newclay's forces from the north. The Viper withdrawal was pulling the Jade Falcon force south, opening up their rear for anyone who might be hiding in that canyon.

It had to be the missing Elementals.

Talon reached the north side of the canyon's opening and took position a good ten meters back, Sheryl's *Centaur* behind him. The green and silver ProtoMech looked like a massive Elemental, except where the chest should be was the giant head of a mad horse, nostrils flaring, ears up, teeth bared, eyes painted a glowing crimson.

Aside from the laser it hauled in its arms, the *Centaur* carried a missile pod over each shoulder, one an SRM-2 launcher, the other an LRM-3.

Hosni's *Centaur* took position on the southern side of the canyon's opening. He also had Petra and Marilyn's *Gorgons* a half-klick back, where their massive LRM-10 launchers could fire at range.

The *Gorgons* were ugly machines: a bulbous head with beady, close-set eyes set over slavering jaws. Talon did not like them because they were a good 30 kph slower than his *Centaur*, and once they had exhausted their LRMs they were left with nothing but their micro lasers.

But used properly, they could provide quite a punch.

"Ready, *quiaff*?" Talon whispered over their tactical frequency.

"Aff," said Hosni.

"Aff," answered Petra.

"Go," shouted Talon. He bounded forward, covered by Sheryl and Hosni. He stepped past the shelter of the wall of ice.

Nothing.

Just cold, barren ice.

The sounds of battle echoed behind him. Had he made a mistake? Had he abandoned his brothers and sisters right when they needed him most?

He peered into the fissure, unable to see the flaw in his reasoning. The opening was five meters wide, but narrowed as it stretched seven, eight meters back into the glacier. He noticed an irregular line of blue ice.

Like the shadow of a wall.

No 'Mech would be able to get back there to check it out.

But a ProtoMech could. "I will probe. Stand watch here."

"Aff, Point Commander," said Hosni.

Talon edged across the slippery ice, moving carefully and, he hoped, quietly.

Reached the wall's edge.

And stepped beyond it.

He flashed on Elementals. Too many to count.

Talon fired his laser at the closest soldier, melting armor on the warrior's chest. Then he turned and charged out of the fissure, passing between the twin ruby beams of suppression fire laid down by Sheryl and Hosni. The beam of a service laser caught him above the right hip and an SRM passed close by on his left, but he did not turn.

As soon as he cleared the fissure he keyed his comm. "*Hit them*," he sang out.

"Aff," Petra shouted back. The *Gorgons* unlimbered their LRM's, hitting the mouth of the ice canyon just as the Elementals charged out.

The carnage was absolutely *beautiful*.

Steel Vipers died like the insects they were, maybe six, maybe ten, their bodies spread across the fissure's opening like a macabre offering to the God of War.

Talon knew instantly it would not be enough.

"Centaurs, fall back," he shouted over the tactical channel. *"Gorgons, hit them again."*

Talon watched Petra and Marilyn's LRM's smash the mouth of the fissure, but the *surats* had learned. They dispersed as soon as they hit the opening. The missile barrage took down only one Elemental.

Talon sighted in on a soldier stepping past his fallen comrades. He raised his micro laser and ruby fire sparked off the *stravag*'s dark visor until the soldier's helmet transformed into a bubbling mass of melted armor.

The Elemental crumpled to the snow.

But another Viper slipped through the fissure. And another. And another.

And they were atop the glacier, too. Rising on plumes of golden plasma, taking the high ground with their jump jets. Spread out so no more than one or two of them could be felled by a single missile.

Crimson fire rained down on Talon's ProtoMechs, melting through armor, filling the world with the hiss of snow flashing to steam.

Talon fired missiles up at the Elementals on the glacier while he keyed the command channel. "Screech One, Proto One. Sitrep: engaging large Elemental force at your rear. Request 'Mech support, over."

"Neg, Proto One." Talon heard the whine of heavy laser fire over Newclay's harried voice. "Cannot spare a 'Mech now."

"Sir, estimate force of three zero to four zero Elementals. If they break through they will hit your rear, over."

"Then do not allow them to break through," Newclay snapped. "Screech One, out."

On his left, Talon saw Sheryl go down. A well-placed laser shot had severed her right leg at the knee.

A trio of Elementals bounded towards her.

She struggled to raise her *Centauro* to a sitting position, blew one of the Elementals off his feet with a flight of SRMs. Talon got the second one with his laser.

The third one made it through.

He pounced like a leopard, pushing himself forward with his jets and smashing into her at the terminus of his jump. Then he tore into her with his claw.

Talon poured laser fire into the nearest of the advancing hoard of Elementals in a desperate attempt to avoid the same fate. Hosni and he fell back, moving from a dune of snow here to an outcropping of volcanic rock there, all the while trading fire with the Elementals, picking off the close ones. Petra and Marilyn pounded the Vipers from long range.

There were just too many of them.

Even worse, some of the Elementals were not advancing toward the remaining ProtoMechs. Three or four of them had dropped to a single knee, clearly sighting their SRM-2 packs in on the Jade Falcon line.

In blatant disregard of *zellbrigen*.

Talon's scream of rage cut through the sounds of battle. "ProtoMechs, forward." And then he charged into hell.

Fortress-class DropShip Raptor's Cry

Tsu Ice Shelf, Gondwana

Unclaimed Territory, Marshall

Kerensky Cluster, Clan Space

14 October 3067

With a hiss, the *Centaur*'s head rose on hydraulic arms, revealing the cramped piloting chamber. Talon silently detached the wires that linked him to his machine. The black, ribbed body suit wrapped around his lithe form covered him as snugly as a second skin.

He climbed down from his Protomech. He was dead tired, and his right arm throbbed where a laser hit had cut through his armor and scorched his skin black.

A technician tossed him a towel. Talon nodded gratefully and wiped the sweat and blood from his face. Ordinarily he would have seen to his Point after a battle.

But he no longer had a Point.

Sheryl's body was a bloody, violated mess. Hosni's *Centaur* had taken multiple SRMs at point blank range. What was left of him was mixed with tiny fragments of metal along a line ten meters long. The Elementals had burned Petra out, cooking her alive inside her ProtoMech with sustained laser fire.

He carefully folded the towel and handed it back to the tech.

Only Marilyn had survived.

If you could call it that.

They had pulled a battered, bloodied mass from her *Gorgon* and rushed her to sickbay. She might live.

But she would never fight again.

But they had held.

Long enough for Newclay's main force to smash the Steel Vipers, to hunt down every last *surat* and send him or her to the Great Kerensky.

"Point Commander Talon."

He turned.

Star Captain Robert Newclay approached. Newclay was a big man, even taking into account the difference between the MechWarrior and aerospace pilot phenotypes. He was the kind of warrior who wore his sandy blond hair in a high-and-tight. He had not changed out of his shorts or cooling vest yet, must have come strait from his *Hellbringer*.

Talon came to attention and raised his blackened arm in a salute. He did not allow the pain to show on his face. "Star Captain."

He was surprised when Newclay returned the salute. "Perhaps you should have someone see to that arm."

Talon said nothing.

A muscle pulsed in Newclay's cheek. "You fought well today, Point Commander. Against the Elementals you were... ferocious."

Talon followed Newclay's glance. Deep furrows of melted armor criss-crossed his *Centaurs* chest. Like his arm, the green and silver paint was scorched and blistered. The right arm was completely gone, the left hand smashed into a twisted clump of steel. The horse's face had been mangled as if crushed within the jaws of some great predator.

"I learned of your losses," said Newclay.

"There is no need to worry, Star Captain," said Talon bitterly. "It is not as if any true warriors died, *quiaff*?"

Newclay's head snapped around. "I could kill you in a Circle of Equals for such a comment," the Star Captain snarled.

Talon met Newclay's flinty gaze. "As you wish, Star Captain," he said coldly. If Newclay was waiting for him to request *surkairede*, he was going to wait a long time. "Without the sacrifice made by my warriors you would not have won the day."

Newclay exhaled heavily. "Point Commander Talon, we Jade Falcons would never violate the precepts of *zellbrigen* as the Steel Vipers did today. For that reason, some of the other Clans see us as tired and slow. But they are wrong. Aye, we hold to ways of honor."

His voice dropped to a whisper, but it burned with intensity. "But that does not mean we cannot learn."

His dark gaze met Talon's. He extended his hand.

After a moment Talon took it.