

BATTLECORPS

ARCADIA: MORNINGSTAR

Jason Schmetzer

Summerville
Arcadia
Lyran Alliance
10 September 3068

Scarlet laser fire chased the *Jenner* back to the Arcadian lines. Jasper Stark moved his *Enforcer* closer to the edge of the boulders, in case Reeves needed support as he broke into the scrub where the rest of the lance waited. Richard's *Wolfhound* moved up beside him, the long arm of its extended range laser leveled.

"In case it's too far for you," he beamed to Jasper. He almost heard the chuckle in the other MechWarrior's voice. The *Enforcer* carried a laser of similar power, but its range was about a hundred meters less.

"Knock off the games," Hauptmann Porter said. His *Merlin* was on a rise behind them. Smoke whispered from the warm launch tubes of his LRM-5. He'd been covering the *Jenner*'s retreat.

"One lance," Reeves said. His *Jenner* cut through a break in the rocks and stopped within thirty meters of Jasper's *Enforcer*. "The heaviest is an *Anvil*." The *Jenner* hunched down. If it had been a man Jasper would have said it was trying to catch its breath, but he knew Reeves was letting the 'Mech's myomers relax, trying to bleed off more waste heat. It was hot outside of Summerville without the lake to keep things cool.

"And the rest?" Richard asked. His arm-mounted laser tracked slowly across the field. An icon on Jasper's heads-up display flashed orange—probably hostile, but unconfirmed without a line of sight.

"Two *Snakes*," Reeves said. "And something smaller, I didn't get a good look at it." The *Jenner* straightened and turned to face the enemy. "What now?"

The *Merlin* strode down from its rise. "Now we go show them why they're not welcome on our world." The sixty-ton BattleMech stepped clear of the boulders and waited. Jasper stepped his *Enforcer* out to flank the heavy 'Mech. He saw Richard and Reeves move out behind them, ready to fling their lighter, faster 'Mechs at any targets of opportunity.

Kelley and the girls smiled at him from the 2D picture taped to his command console. The photo had been taken six months ago

during a furlough to the Straits. The beaches there were almost transparent, like walking on quartz instead of sand. Jasper reached out and stroked the picture, running his gloved fingers across his daughters' dimples.

"I love you," he whispered...

Ten Hours Earlier

Jasper glanced over to see if the hauptmann was looking before he picked up the communicator again. Kelley's shrill voice still spewed from the small earpiece. He held it to his ear and winced.

"Listen," he said, interrupting her tirade. "I can't talk now. Take the kids to your mother's, and don't stop for anything." He pulled the communicator far enough away to see the tiny microphone, wishing it were a flatscreen so he could see her face. "I love you," he said, and disconnected.

"Stark!" Hauptmann Porter said. "Let's go." He waved him toward the laager. Jasper's lancemate Hal Reeves fell in beside him as they trotted toward the waiting 'Mechs.

"Kelley again?" Reeves asked.

"You'd think after this long she'd know what it's like to be married to a MechWarrior," Jasper said. He forced himself to smile. "I guess not."

Reeves looked at him. "She worries, pal." He squeezed Jasper's shoulder. "She's allowed to."

A rumbling crash fell across the field. Everyone stopped moving and looked up. Porter began bellowing immediately, but no one heeded him.

Stars appeared in the twilight sky, bright streaks that crossed the dusky blue expanse, trailing gray smoke. Jasper shivered, remembering the last time he'd seen DropShips coming in. It had been years, but the Mariks were back again. That time it had been to rescue the Captain-General's sister's 'Mech unit.

This time they came to conquer.

"Let's go," Reeves said. He pointed to the shallow depression where their 'Mechs were parked. The wide snout of Reeves' *Jenner* poked over the ground. Behind them, Jasper barely heard the bull-horn of the maglev as it pulled away from the base. It was carrying the families—Kelley—to shelters in Summerville.

"Godspeed," Jasper whispered.

Summerville
Arcadia
Lyrans Alliance
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The *Snakes* came first, the twin 'Mechs painted a garish orange and charging straight at the Arcadian lance. Porter growled across the airwaves. "Easy meat, boys," he said, and fired.

The *Merlin's* PPC took the right-hand Snake high in the shoulder. The whorl-spun blast ripped most of the armor from the medium 'Mech's left arm. It staggered, shedding plates like lice before straightening. It had fallen a dozen meters behind the other *Snake*.

"That's showing them," Reeves called. Richard made a noncommittal noise and stepped left. The *Wolfhound's* extended-range large laser took the same *Snake* on the right shin, but the 'Mech kept coming.

"These aren't Mariks," Porter said. He started his *Merlin* at a walk to the left, trying to throw off the *Snakes'* aim. Both enemy BattleMechs targeted him with their cannons. The *Merlin* rocked under the impact of a dozen submunitions, but didn't go down.

Jasper kept one eye on his HUD's range counter. Both of his weapons maxed at 450 meters... the *Snakes* were passing 470. He brought the *Enforcer's* arms up, targeting the already-damaged 'Mech. 460.

455.

His finger tightened on his left-hand trigger almost without conscious thought. The large laser that replaced the *Enforcer's* left hand flickered briefly, flashing a scarlet pulse of light at the orange *Snake*. A puff of smoke and an angry red weal on the 'Mech's torso armor were reward enough. He shouted in triumph and brought his other arm into play.

The *Snakes* broke apart, one going left, the other right. Behind them a smaller 'Mech charged forward. It was a slender 'Mech, but moving at speed, and a massive barrel protruded from its body.

"Shit," Reeves said. "That's a *Talon*, boys."

Jasper shifted his aim and took up the slack on his trigger. His eyes flicked to the range. Still a little over 600 meters. Much too far for his Federated autocannon.

But not for the *Talon*.

The *Enforcer* rocked as the light 'Mech blasted him with its PPC. Jasper's displays skittered into static for an instant, shaken by the electrical discharge of the PPC strike. When they reformed, the schematic showed more than half a ton of armor stripped from his left arm.

"Keep steady," Porter said. He tracked back and right, keeping in a rough line with the rest of the lance. "And get moving!"

Jasper jerked his yoke to the side and darted the *Enforcer* right. Richard kept with him, his *Wolfhound* staying in Jasper's shadow. The red flare of his laser brushed past Jasper's cockpit as he sniped at the enemy 'Mechs. Reeves darted forward, staying with Porter and the slower *Merlin*.

"Watch for the *Anvil*," Porter said. "Concentrate fire where you can. If we can bring one or two of these buggers down, maybe they'll back off."

Pain in his mouth made Jasper stop grinding his teeth. The *Talon* bent around and moved toward the *Merlin*, leaving the damaged *Snake* to Jasper and Richard. The *Wolfhound* burst forward, leaving the slower *Enforcer* behind. Jasper grinned, recognizing the tactic. If they could make the *Snake* split its fire, so much the better.

He vented his frustration with the *Talon* on the damaged *Snake*. Orange-painted armor shards fell like rain as Jasper's autocannon slammed round after round into the left side of its torso. Richard's laser punched at the thicker armor over the *Snake's* center, but didn't penetrate.

Jasper released his left joystick and keyed a quick query into his computer. Schematics for the *Snake* popped into the lower-left quadrant of his HUD. He searched the display, looking for one nugget of information. He found it.

"Go for the torso," he sent to Richard. "It's got an extralight engine. If we can knock out enough side armor, we've got him." Taking up the controls once more, he bent the *Enforcer's* right arm around and snapped a shot off with his large laser. He missed.

The *Wolfhound* stumbled as the *Snake* caught him with a burst of cannon fire. Richard cursed over the frequency as Jasper watched the 'Mech hobble to cover. One of the slivers of dense metal had penetrated the thin armor over the *Wolfhound's* knee, robbing it of some speed.

"Soon I'll be as slow as you," Richard said. He twisted the *Wolfhound* at the waist and snap-fired his large laser. The bolt took the *Snake* high in the torso again.

If Jasper had been driving the *Snake*, he'd be staring at the damage schematics and considering his options. One or two more hits from any of the *Enforcer's* or *Wolfhound's* weapons would be enough to damp his fusion engine. Jasper wouldn't want to face two-to-one odds with an exposed reactor.

Neither did the *Snake's* MechWarrior. He jolted the 'Mech to a halt and began backtracking. Jasper chuckled and pushed the *Enforcer* into a trot, trying to pace the other 'Mech.

"Stark," Richard said. "Wrong way." The *Wolfhound* pointed.

Porter had gotten the worse of the exchange. The *Snake* on his side of the field had kept its distance, chewing at the heavy BattleMech's armor with its cannon. The *Talon* was still running, stabbing its particle cannon into the mix whenever its mount faced the Arcadian 'Mechs.

The *Anvil* had gone toward the largest 'Mech. As Jasper watched, the heavy enemy machine ignored Reeves' medium laser attack and struck at the *Merlin* with both large pulse lasers thrusting over its shoulders. Porter's machine twisted beneath the barrage of green laser pricks, finally falling to one knee beneath the onslaught of light.

"Best speed," Jasper said, turning away from the stricken *Snake*. "Use what you have left, Richard."

"Get out of the way," the other MechWarrior said. Even hobbled, the *Wolfhound* was faster than the *Enforcer*. Richard passed Jasper at the run, his laser already tracking.

"The *Snake* is the killer," Porter said. His voice was strained. Jasper watched the *Merlin* rise, shaking. It fired its own PPC at the fast-moving *Talon* when the light 'Mech strayed too close. The iridescence was duller than the *Talon's* own weapon, but the damage the same. The light 'Mech retreated with the armor over its right thigh sparkling and shattered. "I've got the armor for the *Anvil*, but that blasted cannon is picking me apart."

Jasper adjusted his course around a small copse of trees and then inched the throttle to its stops. The other *Snake*, the less damaged one, twisted away from a flank-speed assault by Reeves in his *Jenner*. The Arcadian had risked exposing himself to the

enemy machine and its deadly Streak short-range missiles, but no fat-bodied SRMs followed him away. His lasers worried at the armor over the *Snake's* right arm.

"Get out of there," Jasper called. He clutched his controls, firing. His laser cored the armor over the *Snake's* right leg, but his cannon fusillade nearly missed, barely catching the crook of the *Snake's* left arm. Jasper swore. Nothing had hit the medium BattleMech's torso.

But now he had the MechWarrior's attention.

Still running as fast as the *Enforcer's* legs would carry him, Jasper heard the clunk of the autocannon reloading and brought his 'Mech's right shoulder down. He leaned the fifty-ton 'Mech to the right, trying to make the *Snake's* pilot work at his aiming.

Richard, a hundred meters closer, fired all of his front-facing weapons. The *Wolfhound's* large laser missed, spending its fury on the scrub between the *Snake's* legs. The three torso-mounted medium lasers probed at the armor over the *Snake's* center torso, right arm, and left leg, but didn't penetrate. The *Wolfhound* slowed even more as the barrage littered the 'Mech's insides with waste heat.

"Watch out, damn it!" Porter shouted.

The *Talon* appeared out of the backfield and caromed into Richard's *Wolfhound*. The 'Mechs were evenly matched in mass, but the *Talon* was moving more than twice as fast as the slowed *Wolfhound*. Richard's 'Mech crashed to the ground and slid ten meters across the landscape. The *Wolfhound's* left arm snapped off at the elbow, taking that and the hand and wrist with it. The *Talon* staggered, but didn't fall, and continued its charge past Jasper's position. The two lasers it beamed at him missed, but shook him out of his surprise.

"Richard!" he shouted. The *Enforcer* felt sluggish, still dealing with the small amount of heat gained during the last few seconds. He couldn't get near the fallen *Wolfhound* before it shuddered and began to climb to its feet.

"At least it missed the important arm," Richard muttered. There was pain in his voice, but he turned the *Wolfhound* toward the enemy, and away from home.

"You three hit the *Snake* again," Porter ordered. "I've got the *Anvil*."

The *Merlin* staggered into a trot toward the *Anvil*, the heavy mercenary 'Mech twisting away from Porter. The hauptmann fired his lasers, each medium beam cutting deeply into the armor over the *Anvil's* right arm. The *Merlin's* machine gun chattered, but Jasper saw the bullets kick up dust instead of sparking off of armor. The *Anvil* twisted around, trying to bring its large pulse lasers to bear.

Porter fired his PPC.

The high-energy ions hammered the armor over the *Anvil's* left knee. The force of the impact slammed the joint straight in mid-stride. The heavy 'Mech's toe caught when the leg came down and flipped the *Anvil* to the ground with a crash. The pair of large pulse laser shots flickered harmlessly into the sky.

"Nice shooting!" Jasper called. He tracked the *Snake* as it ran across the field, toward where its brother 'Mech had retreated. Taking half a breath to steady his hands, he squeezed his right trigger. The Federated autocannon boomed, pounding slug after slug into the weakened armor over the *Snake's* right chest. His laser stabbed at what was left of the armor on the *Snake's* right arm.

Richard's laser cut into the armor Jasper's cannon had just mutilated. The beam lanced deep into the *Snake's* interior, and Jasper was rewarded with a beep from his scanners. A section of his HUD switched to infrared to show him a new blossom of waste heat. Richard had tagged the *Snake's* reactor shielding.

Reeves chased the *Talon*. He was staying close enough that the speedier 'Mech couldn't get its PPC to bear while Reeves fired his lasers as fast as they could cycle. The *Talon* shed armor from its arms and, most threateningly, its rear torso. It finally retreated after the first *Snake*, with the second *Snake* limping after both.

The *Anvil* had climbed to its feet and smashed Porter to the ground with another barrage of light. Jasper and Richard turned toward the heavy 'Mech. It turned away from the struggling *Merlin* as soon as Jasper washed his targeting scanners across it. It paused, as if taking stock of the field.

It ignored the *Merlin* and fled.

"Let 'em go," Porter said. He brought the *Merlin* to its feet and faced the dwindling 'Mechs. Richard limped up to stand beside him. Reeves moved slowly back, letting the *Jenner* sink its waste heat. Jasper stood still, a hundred meters or so from the *Merlin*.

His chest was heaving as he gasped for breath he hadn't realized he was short of.

"Back to the barn," Porter said. "As soon as I report." The *Merlin* was still for several moments. It was only because Jasper was watching the skyline past the heavy 'Mech's shoulder that he saw the *Merlin* shudder.

"Hauptmann?" he asked.

"Jasper," Porter said. Jasper looked at his console in surprise. The hauptmann was on a secure channel. "Was your wife on the maglev?" The officer's voice was hard, emotionless.

"Kelley," Jasper said. "And the kids. They got out last night."

Porter's voice broke. "My Isobel, as well," he said. "Jasper, they hit the maglev."

Jasper swallowed. He looked at the photo taped to this console. He swallowed again. His HUD was clear of red icons; the mercenaries had escaped.

"What's the word, sir?" Reeves asked. Jasper heard the words but didn't listen as Porter told the rest of the lance. Another signal burned to life on Jasper's console.

"Jas," Reeves said. "Maybe they missed it. Maybe it's a mistake." The *Jenner* took two steps closer to the *Enforcer*, but no more. "Jasper. Are you listening to me?"

Kelley and the girls smiled at him from his console. Jasper squeezed his eyes shut, ignoring the tears that watered his cheeks. He breathed.

"I hear you," he said. The *Enforcer* started back toward the base, leaving the torn, littered battlefield behind.