ARCADIA:

CRESCENT MOON

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BATTLECORPS

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Hauptmann Isaac Porter ignored the smells. A MechWarrior became inured to odor after enough years in the cockpit. A 'Mech stank like burnt lubricant, or ozone, or decades of sweat after it had been dried, and wetted, and dried, and wetted. The air in the maglev terminal smelled burnt, but beneath the burnt tinge was the watery scent of copper.

The smell of blood.

A spot of roughness made him look down. The bracelet he held was simple, as jewelry went: a simple gold band chased with platinum. He ran his finger across the engraved letters again until he found the scratch, between the S and the O. Porter frowned, rubbing his calloused thumb across the sharp metal.

A child's shout made him look up. Jasper Stark embraced two small girls at the end of the terminal. He was crying as he hugged both of the four-year-olds. Porter blinked back his own tears. His daughters were grown and gone. Both of them to Gienah.

Where it was safe.

"Hauptmann Porter?" a man asked. Porter turned and faced the militia officer. "The Colonel requests your presence at headquarters, sir," the aide said. "They're coming back."

Porter squeezed the bracelet. The edge, dull and rounded, cut painfully into his hands. A deep breath filled his soul. He slipped the bracelet into a pocket.

"We'd best not keep them waiting," he said.

He squeezed Stark's shoulder on the way past. The MechWarrior didn't look up. He was too busy weeping across a sheet-covered stretcher while an orderly held his daughters away from the shattered husk that had been their mother.

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"*Damn* it, Purcell!" Porter shouted. "Suppress that *Centurion* on the right!" He struggled with the *Merlin*'s balky controls. The sluggish 'Mech turned ponderously. Porter stared into his HUD, willing the targeting reticle to turn green. The *Merlin* came around, finally unmasking his LRM battery. He fired.

The quintet of missiles exploded harmlessly on the desert floor a dozen meters behind the charging medium 'Mech. Porter swore and tugged the *Merlin* the other way. The *Centurion* had missiles, too. Isobel's bracelet, hanging from a cord at the edge of his HUD, swung as the *Merlin* changed course.

"I can't hit him, Hauptmann." Purcell called. His was the heaviest 'Mech in Porter's provisional lance. The problem was that the rookie couldn't hit a damn thing with his *Archer*'s missiles.

"Then scare him off!" Porter said. He brought the *Merlin* into the shadow of a stand of oakwood trees and halted there. None of the mercenary 'Mechs had a line of sight to him, so he was safe for a moment. His eyes flickered across his HUD and tactical display while his mind digested the icons and tried to paint him a picture of what was going on.

He missed Stark and Reeves.

A platoon of militia ground armor anchored the Arcadian line. The four tanks, two squat Demolishers and a pair of LRM Carriers, held steady behind a small hillock. Sergeant Patterson's Carrier was smoking, having expended half its load of Thunder ammunition. Porter smiled as he found the red icons of the two mercenary 'Mechs—both heavies, a *Thunderbolt* and a *Grasshopper*–-that had been caught and disabled by the heavy minefields.

Purcell and Radcliffe, the two rookies filling out his lance, both flanked the armor platoon. Purcell's *Archer* was firing, but not steadily. His missiles usually landed within a hundred meters of their targets. Radcliffe was using his *JagerMech*'s cannons sparingly, only sniping with the light forties at targets that presented themselves.

Richard was running his *Wolfhound* ragged trying to tie up the other four mercenary 'Mechs. He sprinted across the field, trying to tag the enemy *Caesar* with his laser.

Porter eyed the *Caesar*.

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"It was this bastard." The Colonel froze the image, showing an orange-painted, seventy-ton *Caesar*. The image was from a civilian holocamera, one that they'd recovered from the wreckage of the maglev. The Colonel raised the remote.

The shaky, garbled holo lurched into motion. The *Caesar* walked sedately toward the camera. Porter imagined the other people in the maglev car; probably at least one child, more interested in what was outside than what was in, would be pointing the garish machine out to his parents.

A flash of silver flickered between the 'Mech and the camera. Porter's analytical mind knew he'd just seen a gauss rifle shot. The camera shook and went blank. Isobel's bracelet felt cold in his pocket.

An orange *Caesar*.

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The *Merlin* rocked as the *Caesar*'s PPC chewed on the armor protecting the 'Mech's right leg. Porter rocked in his seat, letting the gyro feed from his own sense of balance through his neurohelmet. Isobel's bracelet swung like a pendulum, tapping against the unyielding ferroglass canopy.

"Bring him right, sir," Richard called. Porter glanced at his HUD display. The *Wolfhound* was hiding behind another clump of oakwoods. If he could draw the *Caesar* another hundred meters to the right, Richard would have a shot without exposing himself to the rest of the mercenaries' fire.

"Right," Porter breathed. He stopped trying to get a solid targeting lock for his PPC and instead slammed his feet on two pedals to either side of his console. Jump jets mounted on the rear of the sixty-ton 'Mech picked it up and hurled it a hundred and twenty meters right. He punched out an LRM barrage at the apex of his jump, more to keep the *Caesar* interested than to do any real damage. The missiles missed wide, but the *Caesar* stomped after him.

"Patterson," he called as he grounded. "Hit the ground between me and the *Caesar*. Full barrage." The green icon representing the Thunder LRM Carrier blinked in acknowledgement. A moment later Porter watched a whistling cloud of missiles explode a dozen meters over the space between him and the charging *Caesar*.

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The *Caesar* halted, then cut to its right, toward Purcell and Radcliffe. Porter pounded his console. He'd just removed himself from the battle.

"Richard, get after them," he said.

Porter prepared to jump back across the newly-laid minefield, but before he could stomp the pedals again a flight of missiles arrowed in and tugged at the armor over the *Merlin*'s left arm. He twisted the heavy 'Mech's torso around. The *Centurion* was coming up fast.

"All right," he muttered. "If you're stupid enough to give up ten tons, come on in." The *Merlin*'s targeting scanner slid over the *Centurion* easily enough. The PPC pinged readiness, and he squeezed the trigger, adding a freshly-loaded barrage of missiles as well.

The *Centurion* dodged the missiles, but the snarling incandescence of the PPC dug hungrily into the armor over the medium 'Mech's chest. The sleet of ions exploded against the tough armor, knocking the *Centurion* a step off-kilter. Porter snarled in satisfaction and brought his arm-mounted medium lasers into play.

The big Luxor autocannon in the *Centurion*'s arm barked fire at him. The *Merlin* lurched as it lost more that half a ton of armor from its left leg, but it stayed on its feet. The swarm of missiles that blasted a small oakwood to red-tinged toothpicks was close, but not close enough.

"They're pushing," Richard said. Porter caught a glimpse of him rushing back across the field. One of the *Snake*s they'd tangled with yesterday—looking a great deal healthier–-trudged after him. Sparks flew as the mercenary raked the *Wolfhound* with its cannon.

The *Merlin* was sluggish, but Porter still managed to get off two laser shots that tagged the *Centurion*. One hit high on the mercenary's right arm; the other, thrown off by a ditch the *Merlin*'s wide foot didn't quite fill, slashed across the *Centurion*'s right knee.

"Let them push," he called. The *Centurion*'s cannon fire tore up the landscape but missed the *Merlin*. "They'll just run into Patterson and his boys."

"You better tell the kids to back off, then," Richard said.

Porter pushed the *Merlin* into a run to get a small bunch of trees between him and the *Centurion*. His tactical display showed the

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two 'Mechs bunched up with the tanks. He toggled to a different channel.

"Purcell, let them through."

"But—"

"Do as you're ordered, soldier!" Porter shouted. "Let the tanks rip them up for you, then hit 'em while they're busy with the armor."

"Yes, sir," the rookie said. The icons for the *Archer* and the *JagerMech* spread out a little, giving the mercenaries a seeming gap. Porter stared at the red icons, waiting.

They took the bait.

The *Snake* chasing Richard broke off and sprinted toward the gap. The *Caesar*, slower and further back, started that way. Porter grinned and brought the *Merlin* out from behind the trees. The *Centurion* would go, too, but Porter was in the way.

Another burst of cannon fire destroyed the trees where he'd been standing. The *Centurion* was barely two hundred meters away. The laser in its torso flashed, igniting the scrub behind the charging *Merlin*. Porter was too close for the *Centurion*'s missiles.

Porter fired.

The PPC hit the weakened armor over the *Centurion*'s chest and shattered the last of it. His right-arm laser scorched the armor over the *Centurion*'s right arm without doing any appreciable damage, but the other laser traced the PPC's route. It flickered into the *Centurion*'s interior. Something exploded within the medium 'Mech's frame. Something else exploded. Many more somethings.

"Ammo hit," Porter murmured. He turned the *Merlin* away as the rest of the Luxor's ammunition exploded, gutting the *Centurion*. "One down," he called.

"Here they come!" Radcliffe called. The thunder of the *JagerMech*'s autocannons shook the transmission. "All they've got left, sir!"

Porter started the *Merlin* into a run. The sixty-ton 'Mech got faster with every step as its heat sinks bled the waste heat he'd gathered during the last exchange into the air. A haze of smoke cleared as he came up over a rise and there was the *Caesar*, but something further back caught his eye.

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The *Snake* and its companion, a fifty-ton *Hunchback* that had stayed out of the fighting so far, crested the hill the tanks were hiding behind. Porter knew what the mercenary MechWarriors were thinking: all they'd seen was an LRM Carrier. They could expect to see three more of them, since it was common practice to have armor platoons use the same vehicle. The *Hunchback* led, thinking to use its big Kali Yama autocannon against the long-range vehicles.

Porter grinned a wolf's grin.

Patterson's Demolisher escorts tracked forward until their turrets bore on the *Hunchback*. Each of the eighty-ton tanks carried *two* of the same class cannon the *Hunchback* did. The *Hunchback* lurched to a halt, its torso twisting back and forth, as if trying to decide which tank to shoot at.

The Demolishers didn't hesitate. Four massive 185mm cannons blew the *Hunchback* off its feet and down the hill. The red icon on Porter's HUD flashed twice and switched to a black crosshatch— the *Hunchback* was dead.

"Purcell, Radcliffe, hit 'em now!" Porter angled around an outcropping of rocks and triggered his missiles. Only two the slender projectiles hit the *Caesar*, but it was enough to get its attention.

Patterson rolled forward enough to blanket the space behind the *Snake* with mines for ninety meters. The Demolishers traversed their turrets to bear on the medium 'Mech. Patterson's other LRM Carrier unloaded all three batteries at the *Caesar*, still about two hundred meters back.

"I've got you, you bastard," Porter whispered, too quiet for his microphone to pick up. "Target the *Caesar*, Richard!"

The *Caesar* ignored the *Merlin*. It took four steps forward and unleashed its arsenal at the tanks. The Carrier that had bombarded it a moment ago exploded as the combined power of the *Caesar*'s PPC and gauss rifle immolated the armor across its front glacis. Patterson began to track frantically backward, unwilling to expose his tank to that kind of fire. His final barrage of mines scattered wide as the tank dropped back over the hill.

The *Snake* was also quickly backing away. A half-dozen missiles popped out and struck at the left-side Demolisher. The tank's heavy armor absorbed the damage easily. The accompanying burst of cannon fire struck sparks, but it was the dense sliver that

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cut the Demolisher's left track loose that did the real damage. The already-slow tank became a pillbox. Its return fire missed to the right as the crew shook under the barrage.

Its consort blew the *Snake*'s left leg off at the hip.

"We've got them!" Purcell called.

"Hit the *Caesar*!" Porter ordered. He fired his missiles again. His hands strained at the *Merlin*'s controls, wishing he could push the 'Mech faster. The range fell, but it was still too far for his PPC.

"I'm bingo!" Purcell called. He had spent his entire load of ammunition. Porter had a passing thought to wonder if the rookie had succeeded in hitting anything, but was too busy to consider it.

"Then mind the tanks!" Porter said. He snap-fired the PPC as soon as the indicator turned green. The *Caesar* absorbed the shot without visible effect and twisted its torso. Even from a distance Porter saw the white flash of the gauss rifle firing. The *Merlin* shook with a massive impact, throwing Porter against his restraints. He saw the azure lightning of a PPC bolt as the *Merlin* fell beneath more fire, and then his head smacked the inside of his helmet.

And then it was dark.

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The Colonel offered him a drink, but Porter shook his head. His fingers turned Isobel's bracelet over in his hand. The Colonel set the empty glass on the edge of his desk and sat down.

"Isaac," he said. "I don't want this turning into a revenge thing." He took a sip of his whiskey and then set the glass on the immaculate blotter. "For anyone."

"Isobel wasn't the only dependent on that train," Porter said. The bracelet was warmer than it had been at the terminal. It had been in his pocket.

"That's why I'm talking to you. Stark is out." He frowned and stared at his glass. "His wife died on the train. He can hardly stand up, and he's got two girls on his own now. I'm putting Reeves with the cavalry. I need some heavy firepower with the scouts, as a reaction force."

Porter closed his eyes. "Who am I getting, then?"

"Purcell and Radcliffe."

Porter snorted. "You'd do better to give me Stark back, Colonel." He fingered the bracelet and then slipped it back into his pocket. "I can hack it."

"I can't have officers out chasing vendettas."

Porter looked up from the desk. "I won't," he lied.

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The *Hunchback* was down.

The *Centurion* was down.

The *Snake* was down and thrashing.

The *Caesar* was backing away from the line.

Porter's fingers trembled on the controls. He maneuvered the *Merlin* around a shell crater and kept on toward the orange *Caesar*. The indicators for all of his weapons were green. His lips pulled back from his teeth. He looked to Isobel's bracelet.

Static crackled for a moment in his helmet. "All militia units, pull back!" The Colonel's voice was high. "I repeat, pull back!"

Porter cursed and slapped his com board. "But we've got them!"

"Porter! Get back here *now*! We need to regroup. Kirkpatrick's pulling out! That bastard is running. We just got confirmation from the Port. His DropShips are already outbound. He didn't even land! We need to get everyone together and get ready for the rest of the Mariks."

Red crept into the edges of his vision. He twisted his controls, holding so tightly that the friction burned his calloused palms. The *Merlin*'s weapons beeped readiness.

He shoved the controls forward, kicking the *Merlin* into a run. "We're coming," he said. "As soon as we're finished here." Porter stabbed the circuit closed.

The *Caesar* shifted slightly to face him. The orange-painted, seventy-ton 'Mech backed away, keeping its weapons and armor facing its harrowers. Porter stared at it, ignoring everything else.

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The roar of his LRMs firing shook Porter out of his fugue. He watched the missiles spiral close but miss to the left, exploding harmlessly among the scrub. The range fell slowly, too slowly. The *Caesar* could back up almost as fast as the *Merlin* could run.

Orange-white tracers flew past the *Merlin*. Radcliffe had his *JagerMech* pacing the *Merlin*. Porter felt a moment's guilt at the low opinion he'd held of the rookie. The kid knew what was important.

The light cannon fire scratched the *Caesar*'s armor but lacked the mass to penetrate. The *Caesar* shifted slightly on its torso ring again, this time to face the *JagerMech*. It fired.

The blur of the gauss round flashing past made Porter jerk in his seat. The heavy slug smacked the *JagerMech* in the dead-center of its barrel chest. The armor held, but only just. The *Snake* had done some damage before it died. Radcliffe kept the balky 'Mech on its feet, its barrel-arms leveled while the cannons cycled.

The *Caesar*'s PPC reached across the field and punched the already-distressed armor, almost exactly where the gauss round had struck. The *JagerMech*'s chest plate shattered, staggering the machine. Radcliffe screamed in pain, his voice distorted by the circuit and the electric feedback tingle of ammunition exploding within his 'Mech. The *JagerMech* disintegrated.

"*God damn you!*" Porter shouted. He leaned the *Merlin* away from the falling *JagerMech* and triggered his missiles again. This time the five warheads all struck true, blasting the thick armor on the *Caesar*'s legs. The heavy 'Mech stumbled but didn't fall.

Porter watched the range counter. 550 meters. 545.

540.

He squeezed the PPC trigger savagely. The hellish beam coalesced meters from the weapon's barrel and slammed into the *Caesar*'s right chest. The 'Mech staggered. Blue-white tendrils of electricity skated around the 'Mech, reaching their fingers deeply into the rents in the *Caesar*'s armor.

The gauss rifle exploded.

The *Caesar* fell, and didn't move.

Richard and Purcell reached him a short time later. He was leaning the *Merlin* over the quiet form of the *Caesar*. The destruction

of the gauss rifle had been violent enough to destroy the shielding for the 280 extra-light engine, forcing the *Caesar* to shut down.

"Hauptmann?" Richard asked. "We've been recalled."

Porter watched the *Caesar*. The cockpit hatch was still sealed. Either the mercenary MechWarrior was unconscious, or he was unwilling to exit. It hadn't taken the *Merlin* long enough to get there that he could've slipped away.

The *Merlin*'s right arm moved. He trained the medium laser on the *Caesar*'s cockpit canopy. He fired. The cockpit armor held, but the ferroglass was cracked and melted.

He fired again. Blood-red light reflected from Isobel's bracelet.

"It's done," he whispered. He turned the *Merlin* away and limped back toward Summerville. "It's just us, now."