

BATTLECORPS

WHEN THE BEARS LEFT

Dan C. Duval

Axton
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Ten days to the Exodus...

Again, a blip on the very edge of his display, there and gone. The first two times, he thought it might just be a geyser of lava or something, but hours of nothing and then suddenly these blips show up.

Picketing the northwest quadrant in his *Firestarter*, Kinete Lat's zone overlapped those on both sides of him, and blips showing up at the edge of his display meant that whatever it was stood well into Charlie's zone, the northeast quadrant.

In darkness lit only by the output of the display, his 'Mech was powered down, not only to reduce its IR and electronic output, but to keep the heat sinks as cool as possible, ready for full use if needed.

Four kilometers behind his 'Mech, the bulk of the Third Battalion, 442nd Regiment—the Bears—waited at the rendezvous point, the landing zone where a DropShip from Kerensky was supposed to pick them up and take them to rejoin the *real* SLDF, not the crumbling fake that claimed authority.

Kinete glanced up through the ferroglass forward port at the flow of lava that confused his IR sensors as well as those of anyone trying to spot him.

Lava on a world mostly covered in ice. Funny. But the volcanoes of Axton were the only things keeping the planet from becoming a completely frozen ball of ice.

And a good place to hide an entire battalion of 'Mechs while hoping that the DropShip would actually arrive sometime during the window they had been told it would arrive in.

Was this blip something natural after all?

Or was it one of the assault 'Mechs of the other two battalions of the 442nd?

If natural and he called an alert, his transmission would betray their location. If he did not call, the unsuspecting *Catapults* wait-

ing at the landing zone would be caught unaware. If the blips were 'Mechs.

The only other 'Mechs on this iceball were the *Atlases* of the First Battalion—the Lions—and the *Stalkers* of the Second—the Tigers.

The only reason a heavy assault regiment like the 442nd would be on Axton was the Wangker Aerospace plant outside Barros, where they took in molten rock from the lava flows and turned out frames that would eventually become *Corsairs*, *Eagles*, or *Thunderbirds* in one of Wangker's other offworld plants. And that there had been no other regiment available at the time, when petty warlords were threatening to tear the entire Star League apart.

Why couldn't they just let the Bears go? Axton could not support the Regiment. In fact, he had heard that Colonel Mondevilov would have pulled the Regiment out on his own if the *Nautilus*—the Regiment's assigned JumpShip—and its attached DropShips had ever returned from what was supposed to have been a short refit at Kathil. Regiment had even pulled half of the Third's technical staff to help keep those broke-dick *Stalkers* running.

No one could have remained unaware when the word came through that Kerensky was calling the SLDF together rather than let it fall apart. Over the last months, one by one, the component units of the SLDF became nothing more than mercenaries for the warlords to grab more worlds with. The First and Second could have joined, too.

Instead, the Bears had had to sneak out in the dead of night, defying Colonel Mondevilov's orders, and then hide among the lava flows until the landing window arrived. Something about uncertainties in jumps, so the window was nearly a day long.

And here, only four hours into it, the blip appeared again, closer this time.

Why didn't Charlie see it? Why didn't he raise the alarm?

Was it real?

He and Charlie had been in advanced training together, training on the *Atlas* assault 'Mech, when they had been assigned to the 442nd, but the Regiment had more people rated on the big 'Mechs than they had working ones, so the two of them, as the most junior officers, had been bumped to the Third, the support battalion, and then assigned to the newest 'Mechs they had, the *Firestarters*.

Kinete, at least, had fallen in love with his *Firestarter*, the FS9-H. It was almost brand new, with the latest electronics and a small improvement in the 'Mech's main weaponry, four Purity L-series flamers. Twice as fast as the heavy assault 'Mechs and with a jump jet system that, unlike the *Catapults* of the Third, actually worked without cooking the 'Mech off.

He had named his "Sugar Bear," because she was sweet.

Charlie was not as happy with the light 'Mechs. He had had his heart set on the big machines and wanted nothing more than a transfer back into the First or Second.

On the other hand, when the chance to leave Axton came along, he went along with it like the rest of the Battalion. Major Soult had asked each of them individually, so there would be no doubt.

Why didn't Charlie send out the warning?

The blip appeared again, closer still, not more than two clicks out, before winking out again.

Charlie had to see it. How could he not?

Unless he did see it.

Unless that was Charlie's way out of the Third.

But how could the other battalions track them? It had to be a beacon of some sort.

Irrelevant. How no longer mattered.

Kinete slapped at the bar he had glued across the main power-ups on his right hand panel. Around him, the dimness of the cabin lit with telltales lights going from red to yellow to green as systems passed their diagnostics and came online.

On the panel to his left, he watched a particular light, the comm system, counting the slow seconds as it changed from red to yellow. The tiny cabin filled with the sounds of the 'Mech's systems coming alive, including various pings and pops as the shell began to warm. Lava or not, the air on Axton was *cold*.

At last, the comm systems turned green and he fingered the transmit key.

"Sugar Bear to Batt Three. Grounded bogeys bearing 025 true. Incoming."

Whether the blips were hostile or not, he had just tipped any satellite that happened to be over them where he was and, therefore, where the rest of the Bears were likely to be. Right or wrong, he had just dropped the Battalion's pants.

Keying the comm system again, he called, "Sugar Bear to F3." Charlie had never named his *Firestarter*, sticking with the default designation. "Come on, Charlie, give us a read on this. What are we looking at?"

His sensor display suddenly washed out. For the most part, he had been using IR, keeping everything passive to stay hidden as much as possible.

At first he thought it might be under fire, but in moments realized that it must be the wash from the DropShip, finally arrived, though maybe at the worst possible moment. The *Catapults* would need a good ten minutes to load, about the amount of time it would take the picket *Firestarters* to cover the distance to the landing zone.

With maybe two battalions of assault 'Mechs on their heels.

One thing they emphasized in advanced training was that DropShips were sitting ducks on the ground and little better while still in atmosphere.

Over his comm, Major Sault's voice said, coolly and calmly, as if he had no cares in the world, "Batt Three to all units. Recall. Recall."

Kinete glanced across the readouts on his panels. Sugar Bear was ready to move.

The recall order meant best speed to the landing point, to arrive just as the last *Catapult* completed loading.

But what of Charlie? Kinete could not really think of him as a friend, but then again he hardly knew anyone in the Regiment at all, and at least he knew Charlie casually from the training school.

Had Charlie been jumped?

His radar detectors started ringing, jangling coming from several points in the cabin. Now that the jig was up, lots of units were going active, many frequencies being lit up as everyone tried to figure out the tactical situation.

Charlie was nearly six clicks east of Kinete's position, the rest of the Third four clicks southeast.

His orders, though, were to rejoin the rest of the battalion. If he waited too long, they would leave him behind. Regardless of what Major Soult might do, the DropShip pilot would not be willing to trade his ship for a single *Firestarter*. Or even four of them.

Since arriving on Axton, Kinete had spent every free minute he could in Sugar Bear, so he pivoted easily on one of the 'Mech's two feet. It felt as natural as dancing. OK, maybe more natural than dancing. He had always been self-conscious about that.

When he had taken his station, he had checked his path back to the landing point and it had been clear. Now, though, he saw that part of the hard crust had collapsed, and the deep red glow of lava lit the edges of a rift that ran for nearly a hundred meters to his left and right.

Of course, he could jump it. The rock on the far side should be able to take the impact, especially if he was moving at flank speed, just laying a foot down long enough to push off. At Sugar Bear's top speed, he would hit the ice on the far side within seconds.

Instead, he set out at a fast cruising speed to the east.

Charlie might be in trouble. He might need help. There had not been a peep out of him.

If he only saved himself, Kinete would never sleep again. He *had* to find out.

In half a klick, he reached the edge of this particular lava flow, carefully placing a foot on the ice. The techs had modified the Regiment's 'Mechs for operation on Axton, and Kinete flicked a switch that extended Sugar Bear's ice cleats. He barely slowed as he sped across the ice.

Two klicks along, his comm system opened again. "Batt Three to Sugar Bear. Recall. Recall. Expedite." One of the radars operating must be coming out of Battalion.

And there it was. A direct order. If he did not turn now, he was disobeying orders and no way to explain his way out of it.

He plowed on, checking his heat sinks. The one nice thing about the cold, he could kick up the speed a bit and not overload his 'Mech.

So he did. Cruising across the ice at almost eighty kph, it almost felt like flying, smooth movements of his body translated

into the *Firestarter's* smooth, gliding stride across the flat icefield, illuminated only by the glow of nearly volcanoes reflecting off the low-lying clouds.

For a moment, Kinete lost himself in the motion, the easy swing across the flat expanse of ice as the darkness started to give way to dawn.

Ever since his parents had died when he was young, he had been shuffled from relative to relative and even into an occasional foster home, always ducking and wondering what they expected of him next. At his first chance, he had joined the SLDF, hoping to feel as if he belonged to something, but the level of expectations did not change there, either.

Except for those times when he was alone in his 'Mech, in motion from point to point, where his mind could disengage from his reflexes as he pushed the 'Mech forward. When he could take a breath and relax for a few moments.

His tactical display flared alive again, false-color topo map overlaid by black squares representing enemy units and red circles friendlies. It must have come from Battalion, because he had not turned on his own radars—no reason to let the entire world know where he was. If someone did not have him in line-of-sight, there was no reason to tell them where he was.

Each square and circle had an arrow of the same color pointing in that unit's direction of travel, its speed indicated by the length of the arrow.

A line of eight black squares ran parallel to his line of movement, south to north, their arrows about medium length and pointing straight at the landing zone.

And only two klicks out.

He should have been able to see them himself, by their thermal signature if nothing else.

On his thermal display, he saw a long wavy line to his left, apparently a lava flow that he was running along, about a klick closer to those black squares. That was what blocked them from his view, and him from theirs.

For a very short time. At fifty kph, they would clear the lava flow in about a minute, then another thirty seconds to close to missile range, and Sugar Bear would be dodging salvos of those Jackson

LRMs. The *Stalkers* may be mechanical nightmares, but they carried top of the line fire control. Sugar Bear would not last long.

He had to turn away from them now and head for the landing zone, use his speed to stay out of missile range. But he was still three minutes from Charlie's position.

There was a red circle on the tactical he had received from Battalion, and he focused on that display again.

It was frozen in the last image it had received, nothing moving but a timer in one corner ticking off the seconds since the image went stale. And there, near the northern end of the map, was the red circle that had to be Charlie. Yes, it had Charlie's designation, but...

But it was *behind* the line of oncoming assault 'Mechs.

And its arrow showed it moving fast *away* from the landing zone.

It had to be Charlie. He had betrayed them.

He did not have to come with the Third. He could have just let them go.

But no. He had to turn his coat. Hang them all out to dry.

His tactical display flashed, trying to get his attention.

Black squares had appeared all along his left flank. The Second Battalion was on him.

He glanced left and was startled to see not the *Stalkers* of the Second, but the ugly skull-faced *Atlases* of the First Battalion. And his detectors began to shrill as radar, IR beams, and UV lasers painted him, fixing his position, direction, and speed.

Within seconds, the air would be full of missiles.

It was almost too much, his ears ringing with the whoops, shrills, and clanging of the various threat warnings.

He had to turn, but he could not keep his mind on it, and Sugar Bear stumbled as he lost the rhythm of his movement.

The clanging radar alarms suddenly cut off.

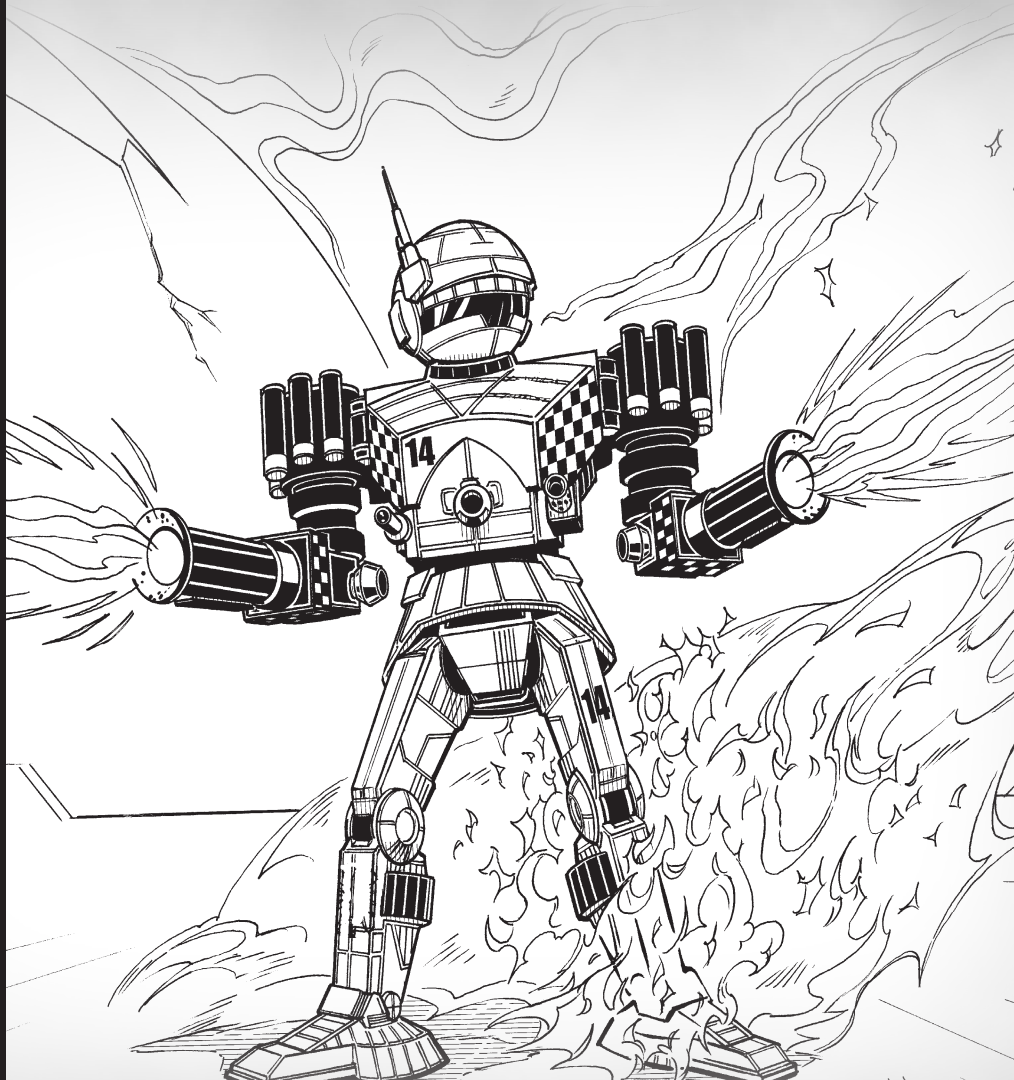
Training kicked in and told him why. Battalion had kicked in their electronic countermeasures, counterpoint pulses of microwaves

to match the frequencies of the *Atlas*' radars. He had not been abandoned yet.

And since these were not *Stalkers*, he had some hope they might miss. The First did not have the best fire control. The *Atlas* made up for that in just having lots and lots of firepower.

But he knew something they could not teach him in training—since they had no idea he would be sitting in the control chair of a *Firestarter*. Major Soult had once piloted a *Flashman*, and knew flamers. He had spent a lot of time with his four *Firestarter* pilots.

Getting his feet under him again, Kinete turned toward the landing zone, put on some speed, and pointed the 'Mechs arms down and behind him, touching off the Purity flamers in each one.



Behind him, ice exploded into steam. Kinete knew that the steam turned to fog as soon as it billowed up into the cold air, scattering ranging lasers and just plain blocking IR. He waved his arms, expanding the cloud as large as he could while concentrating on maximizing his speed.

Cleats or not, the ice was treacherous, sometimes so soft that a leg would sink into it and the gyros whined trying to keep the 'Mech upright, other times so hard the cleats skittered across the top, threatening to dump the 'Mech, gyros or not.

Four clicks to go, three minutes max to reach the landing zone.

Assuming the DropShip had landed where it was supposed to.

The clouds he made also blocked his IR detectors and he doubted that his own radar would do anything but pinpoint his position, so he just ran, hoping he was opening the range from the line of *Atlas* 'Mechs.

At three clicks, he stopped the flamers and let the 'Mechs arms swing in step with the pounding legs, a more natural motion for Kinete, one that made it easier to pay attention to the feedback the systems gave him about the ice he was running over.

He tried not to think about what would happen if a flow of lava had rotted the ice right where he put a foot. Sugar Bear would not survive that hot foot.

Neither would he.

At one klick from the landing zone, he started to slack off on his speed. Near the DropShip he would need control, and he had to have put another good klick between himself and the advancing First.

Of course, with their FarFire LRMs, they could hit the DropShip more than six hundred meters out.

His comms sputtered to life.

"Keep up the speed, kid. Full max. Get ready to jump when I tell you."

Major Sout, still calm as if they were in the middle of a training exercise.

But the order made little sense. Was he supposed to ram the DropShip?

“Come on, Lat. Keep it coming.”

On the other hand, they were still here. Kinete was already three minutes late—the DropShip should have already been lifting with whatever ‘Mechs of the Bears that had managed to climb into the cargo bays.

In front of him, less than a klick away, the horizon lit brightly, the bulging dome of a huge DropShip starting to lift into the sky. Kinete had seen diagrams of one once, an *Overlord*, about the biggest thing that ever landed on a planet. An *Overlord* raising billowing clouds of steam rising into the air, until it almost disappeared in them.

Kerensky had sent an *Overlord* to fetch the Bears.

“Ninety-two kph, Lat. That’s fine. On my mark, maximum height-jump. Five.”

Oh, dear God. Soult wanted him to jump into the DropShip.

At full speed.

“Four.”

Kinete concentrated on the steady beat of his legs, feet giving sometimes to the softer snow and other times slipping on the hard ice before he caught himself. Trying to keep the speed up.

The *Overlord* lifted higher, until all of it was clear of the steam clouds.

“Three.”

None of the bay doors was open. Kinete almost panicked. If he did not embed himself into the skin of the DropShip, he would have no way to hang on.

“Two.”

As it climbed, the *Overlord* began to rotate.

Kinete kept on, dreading the jump.

“One.”

An open bay door appeared on one side of the *Overlord* as it turned, sliding slowly around the circumference of the ship.

It was not coming around fast enough.

“Mark.”

Kinete slammed his feet down on the jump jet controls, knowing that they would burn off their fuel in seconds and the overrides would prevent pumping more fuel in until the reaction chambers cooled.

There was nothing he could do now but watch the *Overlord* climb into the sky faster and faster as Sugar Bear’s rise began to fall off.

And that open bay door was not coming around fast enough.

He braced for the impact, just in case the DropShip did not climb out of the way, which it what it looked like.

Until the fusion drives of the ship faltered, cut off for a moment, then cut in again.

And Kinete’s view filled with the white wall of the *Overlord*.

He gritted his teeth as that wall rushed at him at what looked like a hundred kph.

At the last moment, just as Kinete was going to squeeze his eyes shut, the white wall turned black and the bay opening was right in front of him.

Instinctively, he drew in his arms and legs, hoping that he did not catch something on the rim of the open bay.

He did not even feel it when he hit.



He woke with a start, tensed with the pain from...from everywhere.

His eyes shot open, but he saw nothing but sparkling colors as he flinched from one stab of pain, which caused another one until he felt as if he were being electrocuted.

“Relax, son. You’re safe.”

Major Soult. Calm and easy, as usual.

Kinete forced his eyes open. He was in an infirmary, a double line of beds against the walls of a long, narrow room. The Major, in undress greens, sat on the edge of Kinete’s bed.

They were the only two in the room, as far as Kinete could see.

“Hurts everywhere, doesn’t it?” The Major looked like he was struggling to keep a smirk off his face. “Medicos say you’re fine, nothing too badly broken. A couple of ribs. Cracked pelvis. A few weeks in bed.”

Kinete tried to sit up and groaned.

Soult chuckled. “You should see yourself. Nothing but purple where the bandages don’t cover you.”

“Sugar Bear?” The words sounded half muffled even to Kinete.

The Major stood up, rubbing his chin. “Yeah, well you might want to stay away from the *Kiwi* for a while. The crew is still trying to figure out where Sugar Bear ends and their bulkheads start. They might be a little, um, sensitive for a bit.”

Kinete turned his head away. Pain shot up his neck until he thought his head would explode from the pressure and hurt.

Soult put a hand on Kinete’s shoulder. “Relax. Even if we have to part her out, we’ll find something for you. You did good, kid. We saved all the *Catapults* and even some of the support vehicles.”

Careful not to move his head suddenly again, Kinete asked, “And the other flammers?”

“Yours was the only one. The others all ran to join the rest of the Regiment.”

“Bastards,” shot out of his mouth before he remembered who he was talking to.

But Soult was calm and cool as always. “No, just doing their duty. As they saw it. In some ways, they made the correct choice, showing loyalty to the Regiment, a higher level of command than the Third. I can’t fault them for that.”

Soult straightened. “I have to get back.” He tugged the hem of his tunic down. “The thing to remember is that we want to save the men, the ones worth saving. The ‘Mechs are just machines. The pilots are the soldiers. Soldiers are worth saving.” He punched Kinete lightly on the shoulder. “The good ones, anyway. Get some rest.”

Kinete stared at the wall. Anger and disappointment roiled around in him.

Sugar Bear gone, maybe never to be rebuilt. Charlie back on the iceball, smugly thinking that he did his duty, rather than that he betrayed all his mates. And every part of Kinete ached.

But he had remained loyal to what mattered, his unit, his people. Even if he barely knew them.

Yes, they would need good soldiers, wherever they were going.

But *loyal*, too. Loyal to the point of never even considering betrayal of their unit.

Loyal forever.