

COMMITMENT

Kevin Killiany

BATTLECORPS

Alamance Wastes
Andarmax
Capellan Confederation
11 August 3034

Lance Corporal Candace Lynn tipped the pitch of the rotors. The thrum of the blades above her softened to a wuffing sound that always reminded her of the sheets flapping on her grandmother's clothes line. More importantly, the sound didn't carry beyond a hundred meters.

Silence may not be an issue with half the enemy consolidating their hold on Alamance DropPort a dozen clicks away and the other half across the continent facing MacGraw's Mauraders for control of the capitol—but as Phreddi always said, good habits needed to be kept sharp. When planting static sensors, stay low and fly quiet.

Beyond her ferroglass cockpit, the blaze of Andarmax's white-hot sun turned the rocky hills rising on both sides of the ground-hugging *Ferret* into radiant ovens. Common sense dictated planting sensors at night, under the cover of darkness, but common sense didn't take the realities of modern warfare into account.

At night the temperatures on the Alamance Wastes dropped with the setting sun. Two hours after full dark the blazing stones would be cold, covered with condensation that would be frost by sunrise. Against that frigid backdrop the thermal signature of even the *Ferret's* internal combustion engine would stand out like a beacon—visible for kilometers.

Now, two hours before noon, with the temperature of the stones rivaling the exhaust manifold, the VTOL was invisible to infrared scans. Flying low enough, below the peaks of most hills in the tumbled terrain separating the low desert from the table land, it was possible to lose the chopper in the ground clutter. The *Ferret's* lack of armor made it difficult for scanners calibrated for heavy metal to detect, particularly among the hash of sensor noise reflecting off the iron-rich ores of the hills. Their sand-brown camo paint job might not be as effective against a good pair of human eyes looking in the right direction, but everything was a trade-off.

Like the extra ton of armor her *Ferret* had gained at the cost of its machine gun and ammo. Some could argue—some had argued—that the additional armor would make no difference if she took

heavy fire. She'd pointed out that the machine gun and half-ton of ammo were of no use to a recon/spotter—scant as it was, the armor was more likely to help keep her alive.

One eye on the layout grid and one on the long range sensors, Candace brought the chopper within a meter of the stony ground and hovered. There was a clunk and bump from behind her as First Ranker Jerry Osborne—on loan as tactical tech for this mission—broke another sixty-kilo static sensor out of its bracket. She watched the roiling clouds of dust kicked up by her rotors. The book said twenty-four seconds to drill and place a static, but Jerry usually did it in --

Tap, tap, against the bulkhead behind her helmet.

—eighteen.

She dialed the Lantirn IsBM targeting system to external number four and was rewarded with a detailed image of the *Ferret's* underbelly. She opened the throttle and the VTOL climbed a half-dozen meters before moving forward.

Normally the chopper deployed remote sensors from high altitude—dangling from parachutes they transmitted everything they saw to the IsBM as they descended. How useful these sensors were on the ground usually depended on how they landed. The static sensors Jerry was placing were identical to their sky-diving cousins minus the chute assemblies. Placed upside-down in narrow holes, with their upward-pointing sensor array concealed by a plastic dome meant to resemble a stone, static sensors were designed to transmit detailed information about any movement in their immediate proximity.

The Second Canopian Cuirassiers hadn't needed remote sensors a year ago. Colonel Centrella had rolled over the Andarmax Planetary Militia—her squadron of aerospace fighters clearing the skies and her heavy and assault 'Mechs reducing the Cappie ordnance to scrap almost without casualties.

But the aerospace fighters and BattleMechs had moved on to Drozan, leaving the Second Magistracy Armed Forces Militia Armor Guard to garrison Andarmax. A fine arrangement as long as the Killer Bees were providing aerospace and 'Mech support. Now....

Two platoons of choppers—one unarmed—and a mix of tanks and mobile guns wasn't going to last long against the heavy

BattleMechs of Rob's Renegades. Even if—as rumored—only a single battalion had landed.

There was no guarantee a chopper trying to stay out of range could have stayed out of range long enough to report anything useful before being swatted out of the sky. Not to mention their rumored aerospace assets. No hard intel there, but one fast fighter would be enough to ruin the VTOL recon platoon's day.

Of course, they shouldn't have to worry about hostile aerospace. The Killer Bees had a squadron of their own fast fighters—more than enough to keep the air above the Andarmax bogie-free. And even if they only fielded light 'Mechs, their assault choppers packed enough punch to give even assault 'Mechs pause.

Maybe—almost certainly—the Killer Bees and one battalion of MAF armor weren't enough to push the Renegades off Andarmax, but they should be able to hold out until Emma Centrella brought the rest of the Cuirassiers back.

Of course, they'd never know because—citing a stupid clause in their cadre contract—half their mercenary support was pulling out. The Killer Bees were abandoning them.

Second MAF Armor Guard Base
Alamance Mountains
Andarmax
Capellan Confederation

Lieutenant Alphreda McGowan stood in the center of their quarters, sorting laundry. An easy task—Killer Bees wore desert cammo while MAF wore black over turquoise. Candy watched her roll tan trousers and put them into her duffle, then fold a turquoise singlet and put it in Candy's stack. The bright blue-green was vibrant against Phreddi's dark hands.

"Just like that you're leaving?" Candy demanded.

Phredi rolled another of her T-shirts tightly, the force with which she jammed it into her duffle the only indication she had heard.

"The Killer Bees never signed on to throw everything away on a losing fight," Phreddi said, three tan shorts later.

"I mean you're leaving me."

Phreddi moved the stack of Candy's folded clothes to the top of her chest of drawers. One of six pieces of furniture in the Spartan junior officers' quarters.

"You said yourself we got a lot more respect on Canopus," Candy pointed out. "A lot more opportunity. You were talking about staying on after the contract, when the Bees left. Building a life."

"Building a life on Canopus, not dying for no reason on Andarmax." Phreddi stopped packing and met Candy's gaze directly. "This isn't a choice between keeping my job with the Bees or staying with you. This is life and death. Staying here is death."

"I have to stay."

"You don't," Phreddi countered. "Come with me. One less *Ferret* isn't going to make a hell of a lot of difference when the Cappies roll over this place."

Candy focused on putting the clothes Phreddi had folded into their proper drawers. There was more room than there should have been. She did not look at Phreddi's reflection in the mirror above the chest.

"I'm serious. We've got room on the roster and you've got the numbers to make the cut—you could have a job with the Killer Bees. A future."

"As a deserter?" Candy slammed the last drawer. "No one would trust a coward in combat.

"And they'd be right. I can't live as a coward."

"Not a deserter and not a coward," Phreddi moved toward her, but Candy turned away—moving without purpose to the closet.

"As a chopper jockey who made the right choice," Phreddi said to her back.

"I don't have a choice. *You* have a choice." Candy felt her voice rising and fought to keep from shouting.

"You're a merc hired to train pilots," she said, her throat tight. "Your only obligation is to your contract, your only loyalty to your pocket and your skin. If a situation's not worth the money, you can pull out any time.

"Me? I'm a volunteer fighting for my home. I can't cut and run just because I don't like the odds."

"You're not fighting for your home," Phreddi's voice was pitched to sooth, sounding to Candy like she thought she was reasoning with a child. "You took the Capellans' home away from them and now you're fighting to keep them from taking it back.

"That's got a lot more to do with greed than me expecting just compensation for my work."

Candy said nothing. There was nothing to say. She was right and if Phreddi couldn't see it, there was no way to make her. Finding a window, Candy stared at the wall of the neighboring barrack while Phreddi finished packing.

"Look," Phreddi said finally.

Candy didn't, continuing to stare at the rippling shape of the next building.

"If staying here and fighting would make a difference, I'd do it," Phreddi said to her back. "I would fight for you, risk death for you.

"But this is not *risking* death. This is throwing your life away for no damn reason."

Their door clicked shut for the last time.

BATTLECORPS

Alamance DropPort
Andarmax
Capellan Confederation

A single ray from the setting sun penetrated the window, spotlighting the Renegade sergeant's shoulder patch. A black lance sticking through a jagged yellow ball Phreddi suspected was probably meant to be a sun. The man's uniform was grey; his hands, slipping her identification chit into his noteputer, were hairy and his last meal had been heavy with garlic.

Phreddi pulled her attention away from the Renegade.

Captain John Smith himself stood at the final checkpoint, ready to speak for any of his people should the need arise. His ice-grey eyes looked pointedly at the empty space next to Phreddi then back to her face.

"She chose to stay and fight," Phreddi said.

"They all did, Lieutenant," Smith answered, a note of something Phreddi couldn't quite place in his voice. "We're leaving some good people behind."

The Renegade officer's eyes flickered at the words, but he said nothing. Pulling her ID crystal out of the 'puter, he gave Phreddi a one-pro-to-another nod and passed her on to the DropShip's personnel ramp.

It would take the *Leopard*-class *Honey Bee* four days to reach the *Queen Bee*—their *Invader*-class JumpShip parked at the zenith jump point. Phreddi didn't anticipate a pleasant journey.

Foothills, Alamance Mountains ***12 August 3034***

Candy felt Phreddi's hand over hers as she jiggled the stick left, then right.

Not much, but enough to throw off the *Vindicator's* aim. The blue bolt, pale against the white sky of Andarmax, cut a jagged path to her left.

Pulling the yoke back, she gunned the throttle. The *Ferret* stood on its tail as the BattleMech's follow-up flight of long range missile swarmed through the empty air where she should have been.

No need to risk the platoon of light tanks covering this arc of the perimeter against the medium 'Mech. Candy banked, clearing the line of fire for the Second's pair of Long Toms.

"Eyeball One to Long Shot," she broadcast as she climbed for height. "Tally two *Catapults* in grid gamma-sixteen. They've got a *Vindicator* riding shotgun. This one's yours."

A kilometer to her right an orange fireball blossomed—almost a shadow against the white sky glare.

"Parker, damn it."

Banking right, Candy skimmed back toward the deck as she shifted to cover the hole in the Second's umbrella. She was aware of Xuan swinging her chopper in from the other direction. The *Ferret* was eager to the touch, leaping beneath her hand. She was running light—no cargo, no tech. Just her and her bird.

Coming on faster than they'd imagined, the Renegades had overrun the static sensor net before the scanners could report anything more than heavy metal moving. Now the Armor Guard was barely holding the Capellan mercenaries back—Candy expected the order to bug for the fallback position at any moment.

Hopping over the top of a fold of stone, she skipped above a matched pair of grey and blue heavy 'Mechs. She was over the next ridge before either machine could react.

"Eyeball One to ground command." She didn't know enough about the assets were covering Parker's quadrant to call in a specific fire solution. "Tally two *Jagermechs* in the arroyo, grid phi-eighteen, bound for grid phi-seventeen."

Candy replayed the image of Parker's final fireball in her mind's eye. She'd been too high for the *Jagermechs* to hit her with their autocannon; well out of range for their medium lasers, too. That meant—

Phreddi's hand jerked hers. The *Ferret* nosed down as Candy opened the throttle wide. The ruby beam of a large laser scorched the air behind her. No target lock—whoever was shooting was doing it freehand.

"Eyeball One to Eyeballs T— Eyeballs Three and Four." Candy pulled her chopper in a tight circle, scanning the broken terrain below. "Be advised the Cappies have a sniper with a big laser on anti-chopper duty."

And you're standing on your nose looking for him, Phreddi's voice said in her ear.

Goosing her throttle, Candy jumped her machine forward as another ruby beam sliced upward. The flare of the near miss all but blinded her.

"*Hussar,*" she reported. "Our sniper is a *Hussar* shooting freehand. Be alert, ladies, they've got to have more than one."

"Command to Eyeball One."

"One here."

"We're taking heavy fire from your arc, we need eyes."

"On it."

Arcing wide around the Second's lone *Manticore*—supported by a brace of *Vedettes* and a damaged SRM carrier—trading shots with the twin *Jagermechs*, Candy kicked her *Ferret* to two hundred forty kilometers per hour, arrowing toward gamma-sixteen.

The Long Tom had accounted for one *Catapult*, she saw as sht throttled back. The broken machine looking like a cast-aside toy. The *Vindicator*... The first arc of her spiral search discovered the damaged medium limping back toward the desert.

It took her three orbits to find the second Renegade heavy in grid delta-fifteen. Positioned tight against a thirty-meter tower of stone, the BattleMech was canted back on its bird-like legs, angling its missile launchers for maximum range.

As Candy closed, the *Catapult* disappeared in a cloud of smoke. Her momentary hope the machine had been hit evaporated as the wind blew the obscuring cloud away.

“Siege variant.”

The BattleMech had just launched a salvo of forty long range missiles.

Rising to circle, Candy called in the numbers.

Moments later explosions walked their way up the stone outcrop—on the side opposite the ‘Mech. The Long Toms couldn’t target.

Candy dove in, bringing her chopper as close to the rocks as she dared, and buzzed the Renegade BattleMech.

The *Catapult* made no move to track her. Mounting armor that out-massed the VTOL, the ‘Mech jockey knew the *Ferret* couldn’t carry enough ordnance to pose any sort of threat—and as a target, the tiny aircraft wasn’t worth the effort. Staying in the shadow of the iron-rich ore, it fired another volley.

Forty missiles her radio told her had hit true, wrecking havoc with the evacuation caravan.

Candy climbed high, scanning the wild terrain around grid delta. Nothing.

Another cloud of smoke; a third flight of missiles away.

Candy pounded her canopy with the edge of her fist. The problem with being a damn observer was all she could do was *observe*. Even if her chopper still had its gun, she would have been not threat to *Catapult*. It mounted ten tons of armor....

And a canopy just like hers.

Before the thought was fully formed, Candy had her *Ferret* on the deck. Lining up on the BattleMech, she pushed the throttle wide open.

Too late, the Renegade jockey realized what was happening. Calibrated for indirect fire at range, the *Catapult*’s targeting computer was unable to lock onto an all but unarmored target closing at two hundred kilometers an hour. Forty long range missiles corkscrewing uselessly into the iron mountainside.

Committed to impact, Candy ticked the rudder left, dipping her rotor to clear the sheer wall of rock.

DropShip Honey Bee
outbound, Andarmax system
Capellan Confederation
13 August 3034

Phreddi felt the air pressure pop as someone cycled through the light-tight vestibule into the observation gallery. Andarmax was a brown and grey crescent, barely visible as a shape at the right edge of the ferroglass view port.

She didn't turn her head as whoever had entered pulled himself to a handhold at the far end of the shallow cabin.

"Lieutenant."

Phreddi jumped at the sound of Captain Smith's voice. She could barely make out his form, ghostly in the darkness. Part of her mind realized she would be completely invisible to him.

"Sir?"

"I wanted to tell you personally. The Second Armor Guards have taken heavy casualties. They're holed up in their fall-back stronghold, but it looks like a matter of time."

"Yes, sir," Phreddi said slowly. "Is there any word on their VTOL assets?"

Captain Smith sighed. A shroud of ice settled over Phreddi's heart.

"To the best of our knowledge, they have none," Smith answered. "Though we have no word on their pilots."

"Yes, sir," Phreddi repeated. "Do we know when Colonel Centrella and the rest of the Second will make planetfall?"

"They won't," Smith's tone was bitter. "A combined force of House Dai Da Chi and Kincade's Rangers hit them hard. Drove them off Drozan. Wherever they end up, they won't be in any condition to help anyone."

"Sir. I'd like—"

"We all would," Smith cut her off.

Phreddi looked away from the ghostly form of her commander, blinking toward the ferroglass.

“We’re taking a recon contract in Lyran Commonwealth space,” Captain Smith said quietly behind her. “The Tamar region, on the Draconis Combine border.”

Phreddi imagined the brass had put a lot of effort into finding an employer as far from the Magistracy as possible. Receding behind them, the crescent shape of Andarmax seemed forlorn.

“If that had been Canopus,” Smith said, his thoughts echoing her own, “This would have ended differently.”

“We wouldn’t abandon people who counted on us?”

“Choosing not to share a suicide is not abandonment, McGowan.” Smith’s voice was oddly gentle.

“We’re professional soldiers, our commitment is to do everything in our power to ensure the safety of our employers,” he said. “And part of being professional is knowing the limits of that power.

“We didn’t abandon the Magistracy Militia. We the failed the Magistracy Militia—the people depending on us—when we didn’t teach them how to choose their battles.”

“So we just count this as a failure to communicate and move on?”

“We commit ourselves to making sure we never fail again.”